ISSN 1753-2396 (Print)
ISSN 2753-328X (Online)

Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

Scottish Poetry in the South Seas: John Barr at the Edge of the Map

Author: Liam McIlvanney

Volume 8, Issue 1
Pp: 5-31
2014
Published on: 1st Jan 2014

1495
ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Scottish Poetry in the South Seas: John Barr at the Edge of the Map

Liam McIlvanney

'I live at the edge of the universe, / like everybody else.'[1] These lines from 'Milky Way Bar' by the New Zealand poet Bill Manhire rehearse a gesture that resonates with Scottish and Irish as well as New Zealand experience. That confession of remoteness and isolation – 'I live at the edge of the universe' – is countered, after the line-break, by a consolatory punch-line: 'like everybody else'. Viewed from the cosmic perspective, the poem suggests, we are all in the same boat ('all earth one island', as Allen Curnow has it), and the marginality of small peripheral nations becomes – on this view of things – representative, exemplary, central.[2]

Manhire's perspective is not a new one in New Zealand poetry. Indeed, his 'Milky Way Bar' is in dialogue with an earlier New Zealand poem, R. A. K. Mason's 'Sonnet of Brotherhood', in which Mason founds a precarious human solidarity on the perception of a hostile cosmos, with the earth envisaged as

> … this far-pitched perilous hostile place
> this solitary hard-assaulted spot
> fixed at the friendless outer edge of space.[3]

A sense of a cosmic isolation and marginality is, we might argue, something that comes naturally to the poet of New Zealand, a country that occupies the ends of the earth, the margins of the map. On the brink of the vast inhuman blue of the Pacific and the blank white page of Antarctica, New Zealand stands at the historical edge of European New World settlement (its founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, dates from 1840), and indeed of human settlement: as Michael King observes, 'no direct evidence has been found of

---

[1] Bill Manhire, *Collected Poems* (Manchester, 2001), 146.

[2] Allen Curnow, 'Discovery', *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems, 1941–1997* (Manchester, 1997), 217.

[3] R. A. K. Mason, *Collected Poems* (1962; repr. Christchurch, 1971), 35.

a human occupation of New Zealand … earlier than the thirteenth century AD'.[4] As the events of recent years in Christchurch have reminded us, New Zealand is geologically on the edge, at the meeting of the earth's tectonic plates. It is perhaps tempting to read New Zealand's post-*Hobbit* eagerness to rebrand itself as 'Middle Earth' as an attempt to evade its precariously edgy condition.

Implicit in the two poems I have quoted is the suggestion that living on the edge, living with remoteness and distance, enables a perspective in which neglected connections become apparent. This is a lesson that has been absorbed not just by New Zealand's poets but by at least one of that country's historians (and exchanges between poetry and historiography remain vigorous in a country where so many of the historians have been poets – or so many of the poets, historians). It was the *New Zealand Journal of History* that first published what has been called the Magna Carta of the new British history: J. G. A. Pocock's 1974 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', with its call for a more expansive, pluralist and disaggregated approach to the subject.[5] Over the past four decades, Pocock's manifesto has transformed the writing of British history, effecting – as he hoped – a 'revolution in perspectives'; still, it would be fair to say that some of his recommendations have been more attentively heeded than others.[6]

Pocock's call for a less anglocentric and more archipelagic focus has underwritten the four nations and three kingdoms approaches of the new British history. His reminder that the peripheral cultures of the archipelago have interacted with each other as well as with the metropole has given impetus to the development of comparative Irish-Scottish Studies.[7] What has been *less* enthusiastically taken up – at least in the field of Scottish Studies – is Pocock's proposal that a new British history should attend closely to the interactions between the Atlantic archipelago and the 'neo-Britains' established by settlement in the southern hemisphere. In Pocock's terms, the archipelagic

---

[4] Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (North Shore, 2003), 18.

[5] J. G. A. Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 8.1 (1974), 3–21; reprinted in *Journal of Modern History*, 47 (1975), 601–24, and in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge, 2005), 24–43. The reference to Pocock's essay as a 'Magna Carta' occurs in Donald Harman Akenson, 'What did New Zealand do to Scotland and Ireland?' in Brad Patterson (ed.), *The Irish in New Zealand* (Wellington, 2002), 189.

[6] Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands*, 28.

[7] Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan (eds), *Ireland and Scotland: Culture and Society, 1700–2000* (Dublin, 2005), 11–22.

perspective has overshadowed the oceanic perspective.[8] I want to suggest that, for Scottish Studies – and, quite possibly, for Irish – the oceanic perspective may pay significant dividends.

For New Zealand Studies, too, there are unheeded lessons of Pocock's project. Fifteen years ago, at a conference on the Irish in New Zealand, Donald Akenson observed that New Zealand historians, including James Belich, have tended to homogenise the identity of Pākehā – that is, of those New Zealanders of European, mainly British, descent.[9] Akenson suggested that two developments – the historiographical disaggregation of Britishness by the new British history, and the constitutional reconfiguration of the United Kingdom via devolution – have rendered this view of a monolithic Pākehā identity archaic and untenable. He predicted that the work of the next generation of New Zealand historians would be 'disaggregative', exploring the 'factionalism, the tessellation, and … the ethnic and religious fractures' within Pākehā identity.[10]

To some extent, the 'disaggregation' predicted by Akenson has taken place. The *New Oxford History of New Zealand* (2009) sets out explicitly to 'complicate' its subject, dissolving 'national identity' as an organizing concept, and exploring how history and identity have been 'made (and remade) along the lines of culture, community, family, class, region, sexuality and gender, among other factors'.[11] Similarly, accounts of migration to New Zealand have attended closely to the varieties of Pākehā experience.[12] More, however, remains to be done, not least in studies of literature and culture. My aim in this essay is to bring into focus a body of imaginative writing that combines the two perspectives I have attempted to outline. First, it connects Scotland with

---

[8] Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands*, ix-x.

[9] For his view of Pākehā identity, see James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders: From Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (1996; repr. North Shore, 2007), 313–37.

[10] Akenson, 'What did New Zealand do to Scotland and Ireland?', 187–9.

[11] Giselle Byrnes (ed.), *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* (South Melbourne, 2009), 1, 2.

[12] See, among others: Tom Brooking and Jenny Coleman (eds), *The Heather and the Fern: Scottish Migration and New Zealand Settlement* (Dunedin, 2003); Jock Phillips and Terry Hearn, *Settlers: New Zealand Immigrants from England, Ireland and Scotland* (Auckland, 2008); Angela McCarthy, *Scottishness and Irishness in New Zealand Since 1840* (Manchester, 2010); Lyndon Fraser and Angela McCarthy (eds), *Far From Home: English Migration and New Zealand Settlement* (Dunedin, 2012); Brad Patterson, Tom Brooking and Jim McAloon, *Unpacking the Kists: The Scots in New Zealand* (Dunedin, 2013); Rebecca Lenihan, *From Alba to Aotearoa: Profiling New Zealand's Scots Migrants, 1840–1920* (Dunedin, 2015).

New Zealand, the northern part of the Atlantic archipelago with one of the 'neo-Britains' in the south; and, second, it points up some of the faultlines in Pākehā identity. And that body of writing is the Scottish verse tradition in colonial New Zealand.

In January 1848, the Reverend Thomas Burns – the man for whom the Arts Building in my own university is named – recorded the following vignette in his shipboard journal, on board the *Philip Laing*, bound for Otago:

> [Q]uite cheering to see the Emigrants all looking so like health & in such good spirits & particularly the children in their boisterous glee… In the evenings on Deck we have songs in which they all join – such as Auld Lang Syne, Banks & Braes o' Bony Doon…[13]

The songs of Thomas's uncle Robert no doubt helped the Scottish emigrants feel connected to their homeland as they made their way to the edge of the map. But Burns's poetry and song, as imitated, customised, adapted by poets in the new colony, also allowed Scottish emigrants to come to terms with their new environment. There is a significant body of Scottish poetry – much of it Burnsian in mode – written in colonial New Zealand. However, this is a body of poetry that has itself, at least since 1960, been pushed very much to the edge of the available maps of New Zealand verse (and remains pretty much *terra incognita* on the maps of Scottish verse). I want, therefore, first to explain how and why the Scottish tradition in New Zealand poetry has come to be marginalised, before going on to consider some examples of Scottish-New Zealand poetry, focusing principally on the writings of John Barr (1809–89). And along the way I hope to provide reasons *why* we might wish to rescue at least some of this poetry from the enormous condescension of Allen Curnow.

The most lastingly influential attempt to establish a canon of New Zealand poetry was undertaken by Curnow in *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, published in 1960. Curnow's selection and his substantial introduction 'set the tone' for postwar cultural criticism in New Zealand.[14] Four years earlier, however, in 1956, a now largely forgotten *Anthology of New Zealand Verse*, edited by Robert Chapman and Jonathan Bennett, was published by Oxford

[13] Diary of Reverend Dr Thomas Burns, Toitū Otago Settlers Museum, accession number 1924/95/1, Manuscript Diary Collection M-08.

[14] Jane Stafford and Mark Williams (eds), *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland, 2012), 3.

University Press.[15] Like Curnow's Penguin book, the Oxford anthology devotes much space to the remarkable efflorescence of New Zealand poetry since the 1930s, in the work of R. A. K. Mason, A. R. D. Fairburn, Denis Glover, Robin Hyde and other poets associated with the Caxton Press and *Phoenix* quarterly. But it also offers a profile of the colonial period in New Zealand verse that is significantly more inclusive than the version canonised in Curnow's Penguin book. I want to begin, then, by looking at the opening section of the Oxford anthology as a kind of 'road not taken' in New Zealand literary studies.

The Oxford book opens – rather safely, we might argue – with a sonnet on 'The Avon' written by Henry Jacobs, the Oxford–educated Anglican Dean of Christchurch Cathedral: 'I love thee, Avon! Though thy banks have known/ No deed of note'.[16] Jacobs praises the river Avon in Christchurch for recalling its Warwickshire namesake ('I love thee for thy English name'), and because 'England's sons' have settled on its shores. Using the venerable, 'Old World' form of the sonnet, Jacobs anticipates a time when the vacant and formless 'new' society will have been disciplined into the familiar, regular patterns of English life. He looks forward (or in some ways looks backward) to the day when an English landscape of 'verdant meads', 'fields of waving grain' and 'Heaven-pointing spires' will have replaced the 'wastes' on Avon's banks. The sentiment of the poem is perhaps best expressed in the concluding line of another Jacobs sonnet: '*'*Tis England, where an English spirit dwells'.[17]

Following Jacobs's opener, the Oxford anthology changes tack with a group of five poems in fairly dense vernacular Scots, using traditional Scots forms (the Christis Kirk stanza and the Burns stanza), by the Renfrewshire poet John Barr, an Otago farmer. Where Jacobs's sonnet looks longingly back to a mythologised England, or forward to Canterbury as it might become, the first Barr poem in the selection celebrates Otago as it already is, and on account of its *difference* to Scotland:

---

[15] Harvey McQueen describes the Chapman and Bennett book as 'the "forgotten anthology"' in his introduction to McQueen (ed.), *The New Place: The Poetry of Settlement in New Zealand, 1852–1914* (Wellington, 1993), 13.

[16] Robert Chapman and Jonathan Bennett (eds), *An Anthology of New Zealand Verse* (Wellington, 1956), 1.

[17] These two sonnets were first published in a sequence of seven 'Sonnets of the Old Pilgrim Days of the Canterbury Settlement, New Zealand' (a title that evokes the 'Merrie England' of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*), in Henry Jacobs, *A Lay of the Southern Cross and Other Poems* (London, 1893), 83–7. The sonnet that refers to 'an English spirit' is entitled 'Patriotism'.

There's nae place like Otago yet,
  There's nae wee beggar weans,
Or auld men shivering at our doors,
  To beg for scraps or banes.
We never see puir working folk
  Wi' bauchles on their feet,
Like perfect icicles wi' cauld,
  Gaun starving through the street.[18]

Where Jacobs's Canterbury is an imagined replica of England, Barr's Otago stands only for itself: there is 'nae place' like it. Where Jacobs deploys archaic or poetic diction ('verdant', 'beautify', 'ere long', 'Henceforth') to signal his allegiance to an English idyll, Barr uses Lowland Scots in a repudiation of the Old Country's poverty, destitution and class stratification. Where Jacobs invokes the 'bard of Avon', Barr's poems echo the Bard of Ayrshire (Robert Burns's animal poems inform Barr's 'To My Auld Dog Dash', and the accents of Burns's political verse are audible in Barr's denunciation of the 'purse-proud, upstart, mushroom lord' in 'There's Nae Place Like Otago Yet').

There is, however, a less overt connection between the opening two poems in the Chapman and Bennett anthology. Though it has stood for over a century as a paean to the 'Englishness' of Christchurch, Henry Jacobs's poem is in fact founded on a misconception. The River Avon in Christchurch is not, as Jacobs assumed, named after the river in Warwickshire: 'No bard of Avon hath poured forth in song / Thy tuneful praise'. Instead, the river was named by the pioneering Deans brothers after the River Avon – or Avon Water – in their native Ayrshire.[19] The Jacobs poem therefore has a kind of subterranean connection to those poems of Robert Burns that celebrate Ayrshire's rivers: 'While *Irwin*, *Lugar*, *Aire* an' *Doon*, / Naebody sings'.[20] The New Zealand poem that seems most overtly to celebrate England pays an unconscious tribute to the patriotism of the Scottish pioneers.

Following Barr's five poems, Chapman and Bennett offer extracts from *Ranolf and Amohia* (1872), the vast and 'devastatingly predictable' epic written

[18] Ibid. To 'starve' in Scots ('Gaun staving through the street') can mean to perish of cold as well as hunger.

[19] Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, 'The High Arts in a Regional Culture – From Englishness to Self-Reliance', in John Cookson and Graeme Dunstall (eds), *Southern Capital: Christchurch, Towards a City Biography* (Christchurch, 2000), 300.

[20] Robert Burns, 'To W. S*****n, Ochiltree' in James Kinsley (ed.), *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (3 vols; Oxford, 1968), I, 94.

by Alfred Domett, the former New Zealand premier, and a single poem by Frederick Napier Broome, before another group of 'Scottish' poems by Jessie Mackay.[21] Born in the Canterbury hill country to Scottish parents, Mackay worked as a schoolteacher and journalist, and distinguished herself not only as a poet but as a strenuous advocate of causes as diverse as women's suffrage, prohibition, Scottish and Irish nationalism and vegetarianism. Her oeuvre encompasses poems on Scottish themes and imaginative reworkings of Māori mythology. In the Oxford anthology she is represented by two poems in Scots: the balladesque 'Maisrie' ('Maisrie sits in the Gled's Nest Tower, / A' her lane in the fine June weather'); and the stirringly indignant 'For Love of Appin' ('They tore us oot o' Scotland, they flang us in the west, / Like a bairn's thread o' beads, an' we downa look for rest'), as well as 'The Burial of Sir John Mackenzie', in praise of an eminent Scottish New Zealander. The Mackay poems are followed, in the Oxford book, by a selection of similar size from William Pember Reeves, the statesman and historian, including his classic rumination on the shifting co-ordinates of 'home', 'A Colonist in His Garden'.

In its accommodation of Scottish and English colonial verse on something like equal terms, the Oxford anthology stands as a kind of literary embodiment of the 'Better Britain' that New Zealand so often aspired to be, a place where the Scots are more equally represented than in Britain itself and contribute on more equal terms to a common endeavor.[22] In their selections, Chapman and Bennett make no attempt to enforce a singular idiom of New Zealand poetry: rather, the English and the Scottish traditions are presented as complementary modes of New Zealand verse. This is an anthology in which we can move from William Stenhouse's 'The Empty Jar' ('Parritch, pease-brose, an' whusky bauld, / Tae fend us frae the bitin' cauld') to Katherine Mansfield's elegantly menacing 'Sanary' ('Her little hot room looked over the bay / Through a stiff palisade of glinting palms') with no implication that these are warring modes or that one must in time supplant the other.[23]

Tellingly, the inclusion of Scots-language poetry by Chapman and Bennett is no innovation. The first anthology 'devoted to surveying New Zealand verse from its beginnings'[24] was W. F. Alexander and A. E. Currie's *New Zealand*

[21] MacDonald P. Jackson, 'Poetry: Part One: Beginnings to 1945' in Terry Sturm (ed.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* (2nd edn; Auckland, 1998), 414. For a more sympathetic reading of Domett, see Jane Stafford and Mark Williams, *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature, 1872–1914* (Wellington, 2006), 23–56.

[22] On 'Better Britain', see, among others, Belich, *Making Peoples*, 297–312.

[23] Chapman and Bennett (eds), *An Anthology of New Zealand Verse*, 59–61.

[24] Robert Chapman, 'Introduction' in ibid., xix.

Verse, published in 1906 in the popular 'Canterbury Poets' series, with a second edition in 1926. In this, the 'first national anthology', Scots-language verse by John Barr, Jessie Mackay, Catherine H. Richardson and William Stenhouse is interspersed with the 'English' poetry of Reeves, Domett, Broome and others.[25] In their introduction, Alexander and Currie observe that the specific circumstances of New Zealand poetry – the fragmentation of literary culture among a dispersed and isolated population, the absence of literary coteries, the lack of an acknowledged leader – has prevented the emergence of a 'distinctive school' of New Zealand poetry and that, in consequence, 'each writer is a law unto himself in the choice of models, and responds to influences flowing anywhere out of the whole corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature'. The use of Scots language and forms in New Zealand verse reflects not simply the geographical origins and influences of the new country's poets but their engagement with local materials and themes; among the most successful versifications of Māori myths and legends, according to Alexander and Currie, have been those 'modelled … on the old English or Scottish folk-ballads'.[26]

That Scots verse should form an integral part of the New Zealand canon is no surprise. Arguably the 'first New Zealand poem in English' is Thomas Campbell's 'Song of the Emigrants to New Zealand', written half a world away as a 'fantasy portrayal' of the new colony.[27] More importantly, the first book of poetry published in the country – and one explicitly conceived as a contribution towards a new 'national' literature – was William Golder's *New Zealand Minstrelsy* of 1852, written by an immigrant from Strathaven, and consisting largely of 'colonial' lyrics set to old Scots melodies.[28] There is often an intriguing blend of 'here' and 'there' in the titles and the tunes of Golder's songs: 'Erratonga' (Tune – *Maid of Islay*); 'A Bushranging' (Tune – *Come O'er the stream, Charlie*), and indeed in his customising of Scottish lyrics: 'Will ye come

[25] Jackson, 'Poetry: Part One: Beginnings to 1945', 405.

[26] W. F. Alexander and A. E. Currie (eds), *New Zealand Verse* (London, 1906), xx, xxviii; idem, *A Treasury of New Zealand Verse, Being a New Edition of "New Zealand Verse"* (Auckland, 1926). On Alexander and Currie, see Alan Mulgan, 'The Anthologists', *Great Days in New Zealand Writing* (Wellington, 1962), 41–52.

[27] Jane Stafford, '"No cloud to hide their dear resplendencies": The Uses of Poetry in 1840s New Zealand', *Journal of New Zealand Literature,* 28 (2010), 13, 15.

[28] On the 'national' dimension to Golder's project, see Brian Opie, '*The New Zealand Minstrelsy* (1852): William Golder and the Beginnings of a National Literature in New Zealand', *Victorian Poetry*, 44 (2006), 273–92. On Golder more generally, see the biographical essay in Brian Opie's electronic edition of *The Poetry of William Golder*, http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-corpus-golder.html [accessed 21 April 2013].

to Waiwetu, bonny lassie, O'; 'Let's go a bushranging, thou fairest of lassies'. As John Barr and Dugald Ferguson would later do, Golder transposes Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' to New Zealand in 'The Bushman's Harvest Home'. There are poems in Scots dialect – 'Colonial Courtship' and 'An Old Bachelor's Soliloquy on His First Honeymoon' – and the *Minstrelsy* reprints a selection of poems from Golder's earlier volume, *Recreations for Solitary Hours*, published while the author was still resident in Scotland. The first book of New Zealand verse, then, carries an appendix of Scottish poems, including a vernacular ballad called 'Donald's Return', 'A Translation of an Episode in Ossian', 'The Flowers of Clyde', 'Sweet Home' ('All hail! Caledonia, dear to my breast; / Sweet land of my fathers, in thee how I'm blest'), and an ode celebrating the passing of the 1832 Reform Bill in which Golder echoes Burns's 'Scots Wha Hae' ('And rather choosed the gory bed, / Than yield to abject slavery'). And this 'Scottish' New Zealand book did not lack the seal of official approval: Golder's subscription list is headed by 'His Excellency SIR GEORGE GREY, K.C.B.' (Governor of New Zealand), and 'A. Domett, Esq., Colonial Secretary'.[29]

And Golder was not alone. Among the poets who, as E.H. McCormick says, flourished like imported weeds in colonial New Zealand, Scots were strongly represented.[30] Taking 'New Zealand Scottish poetry' to encompass the work of New Zealand poets who were born in Scotland, or whose Scottish ancestry is pertinent to their poetry, and who deploy some degree and variety of the Scots language in at least some of their work, the roster of such poets would include, alongside Golder, figures like John Barr, William Hogg, Alan Clyde, John Blair, Dugald Ferguson, John MacLennan, Andrew Kinross, Jessie Mackay, Catherine H. Richardson, William Stenhouse and Hugh Smith.

The 'Scottishness' of this body of verse is evinced through its themes (panegyrics on Wallace, Bruce, Knox and Burns, blustery incarnations of 'Unionist Nationalism'), through its use of the Scots language, traditional Scottish stanza forms (especially the Burns stanza and the Christis Kirk stanza), and characteristic Scottish genres like the last testament and the mock elegy, as well as in its frequent allusion to the works of Burns and Scott.[31] The

[29] William Golder, *New Zealand Minstrelsy: Containing Songs and Poems on Colonial Subjects* (Wellington, 1852).

[30] E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (Wellington, 1940), 51.

[31] On 'Unionist Nationalism', see Graeme Morton, *Unionist Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland, 1830–1860* (East Linton, 1999); for examples of the mock elegy, see John Barr's 'Otago's Misfortune', *Otago Witness*, 13 July 1861, and John Blair's 'Dr S[tuar]t', *Lays of the Old Identities* (Dunedin, 1889), 80–2.

connection to Scotland is also evident in matters of publication. John Barr's *Poems and Songs, Descriptive and Satirical* (1861) was published in Edinburgh; William Stenhouse's *Lays from Maoriland* (1908) was published in Paisley; some of John MacLennan's work appeared in the *Ross-shire Journal*, while Jessie Mackay's poems featured in Glasgow's *Celtic Monthly*.

Alongside this Scottish dimension, these poets enjoyed a celebrity that was intensely local. As McCormick observes, many of these early poets were community bards or 'poet-entertainers' who wrote topical occasional verse on local themes, read them at social gatherings, and published them in local newspapers.[32] As with the 'Rhyming Weavers' of Ulster, placenames tended to affix themselves to these poets, John Barr of Craigielee being the most notable instance. And their title pages often emphasise community affiliations: Barr appears as the 'Poet to the Caledonian Society of Otago', William Stenhouse as 'President of the Dunedin Burns Club'. Tellingly, however, neither the Scottishness of this poetry, nor its localism, prevented its absorption – at least in the case of John Barr and Jessie Mackay – into the canon of New Zealand poetry as formulated in the country's early anthologies.

So what changed? To a large extent, the eclipse of the Scottish verse tradition in New Zealand can be related to the rise of cultural nationalism in the mid-twentieth century, and specifically to the work of Allen Curnow. Born in 1911, educated in Christchurch, Curnow became one of New Zealand's most accomplished poets (winner of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry) and cultural arbiters. He worked as a journalist in the 1930s and 1940s, having abandoned his training for the Anglican priesthood, and then, between 1951 and his retirement in 1976, he taught in the English Department at Auckland University. Curnow was one of a group of mid-century writers and intellectuals who aimed to forge an autonomous national literature in a postcolonial New Zealand emerging as an independent Pacific nation. 'New Zealand doesn't exist yet,' Curnow wrote in 1945, 'though some possible New Zealands glimmer in some poems and on some canvases. It remains to be created – should I say invented – by writers, musicians, artists, architects, publishers …'[33] Some of the impetus for this cultural nationalism came from New Zealand's centennial in 1940, and key developments around this period would include: the publication of E. H. McCormick's *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (1940); the emergence of the Caxton Press poets in the 1930s and 1940s; the estab-

[32] McCormick, *Letters and Art*, 52–3.

[33] *Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand*, 1945.

lishment of the literary journal *Landfall* in 1947; the New Zealand Writers Conference in Christchurch in 1951; and Keith Sinclair's 1959 *History of New Zealand* with its determination to 'bring home to New Zealanders a fact which they have not always seemed to regard as important: New Zealand is in the Pacific'.[34] Curnow's own contribution – in addition to his original poems on national identity – was his nation-building anthologies: *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923–45*, published by the Caxton Press in 1945, and, more pertinently, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, published in 1960. The selections and the substantial introductions to these two anthologies did more than anything else to establish the canon of New Zealand literature for the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

It is widely acknowledged that Curnow savagely winnows the colonial period in his Penguin anthology, ruling that a 'handful of poems – not poets' – are all that can be 'salvaged' (his word) from the decades before the 1930s, helping to ensure that the colonial period in New Zealand literature – unlike the colonial period in Canadian or Australian literature – suffers a 'critical eclipse'.[35] What has *not* been widely noted is that the colonial poets saved by Curnow happen to be Canterbury Anglicans like Curnow himself, while the poets who vanish include all of New Zealand's Scottish poets. In effect, Curnow excises a whole mode – that of Scottish vernacular verse – from the New Zealand poetic canon. Even if later commentators seem unaware of this gambit, Curnow himself is conscious that jettisoning an entire strand of the colonial tradition represents a radical departure, and he takes time in his introduction to justify his exclusion of the Scottish poets.[36]

Curnow distinguishes between educated English 'colonist-poets' like Edward Treagar and Alfred Domett, and vulgar Scottish 'colonist-versifiers' like Barr and Mackay. Barr he describes as a purveyor of cheap sentiment, a local bard whose 'Scots-colonial *parritch* is watery gruel at the best'. He attacks Jessie Mackay for her 'graceless botching of Scots and English locutions' and both Barr and Mackay for 'affected' use of Scottish dialect. He seems determined not merely to dismiss but to anathematise Scots poetry and clearly intends his exclusion of the Scots vernacular mode to be conclusive: 'It is schizoid writing,' he says of the poetry of Barr and Mackay, 'and I call it

[34] Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand* (Harmondsworth, 1959), 295.

[35] *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature*, 3.

[36] Oddly, at the same time as he was excising the Burns tradition from the canon of New Zealand verse, Curnow was proofreading the great monograph on Robert Burns written by his Auckland colleague, Tom Crawford; see Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (1960; repr. Edinburgh, 1994), v.

ghost-poetry, as we speak of the ghost-towns of long abandoned goldfields, husks without a past or a posterity'.[37]

Curnow is effectively declaring that the Scottish vernacular mode is no longer fit for habitation by New Zealand poets. It is a historical relic, a 'ghost-town' that can support no life. To argue that the Scottish poetry of New Zealand is 'without a past' is, of course, demonstrably wrong, as that poetry draws on a tradition of lowland vernacular verse stretching back to the Middle Ages; to declare that it lacks a 'posterity' overlooks the series of vernacular poets – including John MacLennan, Alan Clyde and John Blair – who emerge in Barr's wake. In one important respect, however, Curnow *was* able to influence posterity. The prestige of his Penguin anthology effectively excised Scottish voices from the New Zealand canon. When Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen edited a new *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1985, the exclusion of the Scots vernacular tradition, which Curnow at least felt compelled to justify, was now silently assumed.[38] There may be *99 Ways into New Zealand Poetry*, to quote the title of Paula Green and Harry Ricketts' lively 2010 handbook, but the Scots language and the Scottish verse tradition are apparently no longer among them.[39] And even the massive new *Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature* (2012), which explicitly aims to redress the 'critical eclipse' of the colonial period, finds room for only a single poem by Barr.[40]

It would be wrong to suggest that Curnow's verdict on colonial literature has gone completely unchallenged. 2006 saw the publication of *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature, 1872–1914*, a seminal reassessment of the colonial period,

---

[37] Allen Curnow (ed.), *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1960), 26, 31–2.

[38] Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen (eds), *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (Auckland, 1985). The omission of Scots is all the more striking since Ian Wedde opens his introductory essay with the observation that '[t]he history of a literature with colonial origins is involuntarily written by the language, not just in it'; ibid., 23. Wedde's co-editor does, however, include a generous selection of eight Barr poems in his more specialised anthology, McQueen (ed), *The New Place.*

[39] Paula Green and Harry Ricketts, *99 Ways into New Zealand Poetry* (Auckland, 2010). While there are a handful of references to Jessie Mackay, her Scots idiom is not discussed. John Barr, the most accomplished exponent of Scots vernacular verse in colonial New Zealand, does not even feature in the index, and the editors' prefatory remark that they 'have only explored poems written in English as neither of us are experts on the other languages of New Zealand (in particular Māori)' forecloses an engagement with – or even recognition of – Scots as one of the idioms of New Zealand poetry. Ibid., 7.

[40] *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature,* 3. The Barr poem included is 'New Zealand Comforts', 59–60.

written by Jane Stafford and Mark Williams (the editors of the new Auckland anthology). Stafford and Williams take issue with the notion of a homogenous or 'consolidated settler identity', pointing to important cultural faultlines between English, Scottish and Irish settlers. However, though *Maoriland* contains a chapter on Jessie Mackay, in which the authors present Mackay's 'Celtic nationalism' as a challenge to perceptions of a monolithic Pākehā identity, they ignore the more radical challenge posed by the Scottish vernacular tradition.[41] *Maoriland*'s starting date of 1872 is too late for Barr, who does not feature in the index. Even in this extensive reassessment of colonial literature, Curnow's exclusion of the Scottish vernacular mode holds good.

Why, then, did Allen Curnow expel the Scots from the garden of New Zealand verse? Given his sniffy reference to 'Scots-colonial *parritch*', it may be tempting to convict Curnow – son of an Anglican clergyman, raised in the 'English' city of Christchurch by an English mother and grandmother, and given to describing England as 'the other island' – of vulgar Scottophobia, but there is more to Curnow's exclusion of the Scots than simple 'national' jealousy.[42] Rather, in conformity to Curnow's 'essentially programmatic' conception of New Zealand poetry, the colonial poets in the Penguin anthology articulate a particular vision of New Zealand and of the colonial experience: that of man alone, confronting a hostile and unfathomable wilderness.[43] The poems that open Curnow's anthology dwell obsessively on the dreadful quiet of New Zealand ('All still, all silent, 'tis a songless land'), what Edward Treagar in 'Te Whetu Plains' calls the 'awful Silences' and 'ghastly peace' of the new land. There is a kind of Colonial Gothic concentration on eerie moonlit landscapes, of which Charles Bowen's 'Moonlight in New Zealand' is only the most overt instance.[44] This morbid, sometimes 'uncanny' landscape dominates the poems in Curnow's selection, as in the 'endless, fading plain, how white and still' of William Pember Reeves's 'Nox Benigna', or in Arthur H. Adams's bleak rewriting of 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', 'The Dwellings of our Dead':

> They lie unwatched, in waste and vacant places,
> In somber bush or wind-swept tussock spaces,

[41] Stafford and Williams, *Maoriland*, 15–16, 57-84.

[42] Alan Roddick, *Allen Curnow* (Wellington, 1980), 59.

[43] William Broughton, 'Curnow's Anthologies and the Strange Case of Walter D'Arcy Cresswell', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 15 (1997), 27.

[44] On the landscape as the locus of the 'New Zealand uncanny', see Edmund G. C. King, 'Towards a Prehistory of the Gothic Mode in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand Writing', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 28 (2010), 39.

Where seldom human tread
And never human trace is –
The dwellings of our dead![45]

This vision of New Zealand's awful stillness, silence, emptiness, deadness, chimes with Curnow's own mythology of New Zealand, embodied in a poem like 'House and Land' from 1941, where Curnow's devastating portrait of a stagnant Kiwi homestead ends by observing

. . . what great gloom
Stands in a land of settlers
With never a soul at home.[46]

'Never a soul at home': this trope of homelessness is Curnow's master image of the settler condition. Curnow's argument, in both the Caxton and the Penguin anthologies, is that the nineteenth-century colonists 'achieved their migration bodily, but not in spirit'. The trauma of the move to so distant a clime, and the shock of confronting an alien scene, led to a 'recoil of imagination from realities'.[47] Increasingly divorced from the actuality of the old country, the settlers 'clung to the England of colonial figment and fantasy'. It took up to four generations for New Zealand poets to begin to see, record, imagine the world at their feet, and they could only do so by decisively breaking with the mother country. Until that happened, until poets learned the 'trick of standing upright here' (to quote another Curnow poem), all that the nineteenth-century poet could offer was the 'colonist's nostalgia for home'.[48]

Now, putting the matter as charitably as possible, one would have to conclude that Curnow's depiction of the colonial poet as nostalgic, alienated and solitary rather fails to meet the case of New Zealand's Scottish poets, whether we are dealing with the 'communitarian lyrics' of William Golder, the

[45] *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1960), 112.

[46] Allen Curnow, 'House and Land', *Island and Time* (Christchurch, 1941), 21.

[47] *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1960), 20. Intriguingly, Keith Sinclair, in a lecture delivered the year Curnow's Penguin anthology was published, uses a similar formulation in describing colonial New Zealand: 'The life of New Zealand Europeans was lived here physically, but mentally they acted as though Wellington or Canterbury was an English county and not a Province of New Zealand'; Keith Sinclair, 'Life in the Provinces' in Keith Sinclair (ed.), *Distance Looks Our Way: The Effects of Remoteness on New Zealand* (Auckland, 1961), 41.

[48] *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923–45*, 21, 37.

vigorous regional verse of Alan Clyde, the political ballads of Jessie Mackay, the documentary anecdotes of John Blair, or the songs and satires of John Barr.[49] Settling blithely into a landscape that often seemed familiar – the 'Otago hills and sea coast are not unlike the hills and sea coast of Argyllshire' – and participating in a lively associational culture of Burns Clubs, Caledonian Societies and Highland Games, poets like John Barr simply bear no relation to Allen Curnow's 'deeply held personal fiction of the spiritual isolation of New Zealanders'.[50] And it is to the poetry of John Barr that I now wish to turn.

Born in 1809 in the manufacturing town of Paisley in the western lowlands, a burgh noted as a centre of handloom weaving and political radicalism, John Barr trained as an engineer and established the Clydeside shipbuilding firm of Barr and McNab. When the firm folded following 'contract failures', Barr, then in his mid-forties, emigrated with his family to Dunedin, landing in 1852, and reinvented himself as a farmer, first at Halfway Bush and then at Kaihiku near the Clutha River where he named his property 'Craigielee' after the wood north-west of Paisley.[51] 'You can't fell timber with one hand and write a tale with the other,' says Kipling in his New Zealand story, but you *can* write poetry.[52] The bulk of Barr's poetry appears in the 250 pages of his *Poems and Songs, Descriptive and Satirical*, published in Edinburgh in 1861, though he also published a short pamphlet of *Poems*, mainly written for the Caledonian Society, in 1874. Barr's often topical and satirical verse, some of it published first in the columns of the *Otago Witness*, won him a local celebrity and a recognised place in Otago's public life. He is, in Ronda Cooper's words, the 'poet laureate of early Otago'.[53]

Barr's poetic stock has fallen rather precipitously since the days when his fellow townsmen feted him as the equal of Burns, and T. M. Hocken rhapsodised about his 'perfect versification'.[54] Modern commentators have been

---

[49] Opie, '*The New Zealand Minstrelsy* (1852)', 281–2.

[50] James K. Baxter, *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry* (Christchurch, 1951), 7; idem, *Aspects of Poetry in New Zealand* (Christchurch, 1967), 16. On Scottish associational culture in New Zealand, see Tanja Bueltmann, *Scottish Ethnicity and the Making of New Zealand Society, 1850–1930* (Edinburgh, 2011).

[51] Ronda Cooper, 'Barr, John', from the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand,* updated 30-Oct-2012: http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/1b7/barr-john [accessed 20 April 2013]; Jenny Robin Jones, *Writers in Residence: A Journey with Pioneer New Zealand Writers* (Auckland, 2004), 177–9.

[52] Rudyard Kipling, 'One Lady at Wairakei' (1892) in *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature*, 201.

[53] Cooper, 'Barr, John'.

[54] Thomas Morland Hocken, *Contributions to the Early History of New Zealand* (London,

more muted in their approval. Even those who question Curnow's patrician dismissal of Barr tend to damn the 'Craigielee' with faint praise. For Keith Sinclair, Barr is the best of the local bards who flourished in the early colonial settlements.[55] E. H. McCormick approves of Barr's 'neat' verses, with their 'muscular quality' and their 'vivid and concrete' dialect phrases.[56] J. C. Reid suggests that Barr's 'simple, homely verse' represents the 'first successful use in New Zealand of the Scots dialect'.[57] Robert Chapman credits Barr's poems with 'energy and relevance'.[58] And Mac Jackson considers that the 'rough struggles of pioneering life are caught in [Barr's] rhythms and diction', and finds that Barr's 'demotic' poetry remains more readable – though not, we should add, more read – than the 'hieratic' verses of Charles C. Bowen and Frederick Napier Broome.[59] All commentators on Barr concur, quite properly, that his most successful work is in his satires.[60]

How, then, does Barr measure up to Curnow's description of the colonial poet? Certainly, Curnow's presumption that the colonial poet must be mired in nostalgia still colours the reception of Barr. In a 1997 issue of the Hocken Library's *Bulletin* devoted to Scottish resources, the writer briefly discusses *Neptune's Toll* by John Maclennan, before introducing a list of Scots poetry volumes with the words: 'other collections of nostalgia and dialect include…'[61] The first item in this list is Barr's *Poems and Songs*. Similarly, the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (1998) presents Barr as one of a 'whole school of homesick Otago settler poets' inspired by Burns, while a major new study of the Scots in New Zealand places Barr among a school of 'local poets' concerned with 'purveying sentimental nostalgia'.[62]

As we saw in 'There's Nae Place like Otago Yet', Barr's vision of the industrial lowlands from which he fled is infernal rather than idyllic. His enthusiasm for Otago, as Ronda Cooper notes, is often 'grounded in a grim retrospection'.[63]

1898), 200.

[55] Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, 4th edn (Auckland, 1991), 106.

[56] McCormick, *Letters and Art*, 55–7.

[57] J. C. Reid, *Creative Writing in New Zealand: A Brief Critical History* (Auckland, 1946), 13.

[58] Chapman, 'Introduction', xx.

[59] Jackson, 'Poetry: Part One: Beginnings to 1945', 412.

[60] McCormick, *Letters and Art*, 56; Reid, *Creative Writing in New Zealand*, 13; Jackson, 'Poetry: Part One: Beginnings to 1945', 411.

[61] 'Memories of Auld Scotland', *Bulletin of the Friends of the Hocken Library*, 21 (1997), 4.

[62] Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie (eds), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (Melbourne, 1998), 80; Brad Patterson, Tom Brooking and Jim McAloon, *Unpacking the Kists: The Scots in New Zealand* (Montreal & Kingston, 2013), 252.

[63] Cooper, 'Barr, John'.

This is certainly the case in 'New Zealand Comforts', where Barr speaks in the voice of an emigrant handloom weaver contrasting his present felicity with the bad old days at home:

> Nae mair the laird comes for his rent,
> For his rent, for his rent,
> Nae mair the laird comes for his rent,
> When I hae nocht to pay, sirs.
> Nae mair he'll tak me aff the loom,
> Wi' hanging lip and pouches toom,
> To touch my hat, and boo to him,
> The like was never kent, sirs.
>
> But now it's altered days, I trow,
> A weel I wat, a weel I wat,
> The beef is tumbling in the pat,
> And I'm baith fat and fu', sirs.
> At my door cheeks there's bread and cheese,
> I work or no', just as I please,
> I'm fairly settled at my ease,
> And that's the way o't noo, sirs.[64]

What is notable here is the way Barr takes that familiar elegiac refrain, 'No more', a staple of poetic lamentation that goes back at least to Lucretius's 'non iam domo …' ('No more now will your happy home welcome you …'), and uses it not to mourn a vanished world, but rather to consign it to happy oblivion.

The Otago celebrated by Barr is not a transplanted Scotland, but a place where a popular Scottish ideal – the Burnsian idyll of a 'quiet competency, a moderate independency' secured by wholesome labour – is more readily achieved than in the Old Country.[65] This is why, when Barr comes to write his New Zealand version of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' – 'There's Nae Place Like our Ain Fireside' – there is no backward glance to Burns's Scotland. Barr

---

[64] John Barr, *Poems and Songs, Descriptive and Satirical* (Edinburgh, 1861), 226–7.

[65] The phrase is from the Rev. Thomas Burns, *A Discourse, Delivered in the Church of Otago, On Friday, the 23rd of March, 1849, Being a Day of Public Thanksgiving, Humiliation and Prayer, and the Anniversary of the Arrival of the First Party of Settlers* (Dunedin, 1849), 5; but the sentiment is common in the poetry of his uncle.

describes the familiar domestic idyll – the toil-worn patriarch in his 'humble cot', his fireside armchair surrounded by playing children and his 'kind and braw' wife – but set in the 'fragrant bush' of Otago.[66] The poem is much shorter than its model – four stanzas to Burns' twenty-one – as if the virtues of southern New Zealand do not require to be laboured:

> Otago boasts her valleys green,
> Her hills and fertile plains,
> Where scenes like this are often seen,
> Spread o'er her wide domains;
> Where happy hearts make happy homes,
> Where plenty reigns supreme,
> 'Tis worthy of the painter's eye,
> And of the poet's theme.

It is not that the nostalgic note is entirely absent from Barr's verse. In songs like 'Grub Away, Tug Away' or 'The Grubbin o't', the backbreaking labour involved in clearing a section of bush can make Scotland look like a lost Eden.[67] So too there are songs in which the memories of 'youthfu' days' produce the usual lachrymose issue: 'Thy very name, O Scotia dear, / Brings saut tears to my e'e'.[68] What is remarkable, however, is how comparatively rare such moments are in Barr's oeuvre – much rarer, for instance, than in the work of Barr's near-contemporary and fellow-Renfrewshire exile Alexander McLachlan, 'the Burns of Canada'.[69] And even where Barr does bemoan his absence from Scotland, as in 'The Yellow Broom', he also celebrates the landscape before his eyes: 'O weel I lo'e the woody glen / Whaur pours the roarin' linn', are lines that – despite their Scottish topographical vocabulary – refer to Otago, not Scotland.

And Scottish vocabulary is very much to the point in these poems. The lazy coupling of 'nostalgia and dialect' by certain commentators masks the extent to

---

[66] Barr, *Poems and Songs,* 18–19.

[67] Ibid., 149–50; 164–7.

[68] 'The Yellow Broom' in ibid., 82–3.

[69] On McLachlan, see: Edward J. Cowan, 'Alexander McLachlan: The "Robert Burns" of Canada' in Patrick Scott and Kenneth Simpson (eds), *Robert Burns and Friends: Essays by W. Ormiston Roy Fellows presented to G. Ross Roy* (Columbia, 2012), 131–49; Elizabeth Waterson, *Rapt in Plaid: Canadian Literature and Scottish Tradition* (Toronto, 2001), 24–7; Elizabeth Waterson, 'The Lowland Tradition in Canadian Literature' in W. Stanford Reid (ed.), *The Scottish Tradition in Canada* (Toronto, 1976), 208–11.

which settler poets used Scots to assert a rootedness in their new homeland that was not available through standard English. The comparison with the Ulster 'Rhyming Weavers' is instructive here. In 'The Course of Writing in Ulster', John Hewitt distinguishes between the writing of 'colonial' verse by English settlers and the writing of 'vernacular' verse by Ulster-Scots planters which 'began, by comparison with the English colonial, to appear a rooted activity'.[70] As the lingua franca of a global empire, English had in effect been 'deterritorialised'. Scots, by contrast, was associated with commitment to a particular locale; however, because Scots was also throughout the nineteenth century viewed as a 'literary standard that non-Scots can write', it could be readily exported to serve as a marker of belonging in other parts of the world.[71] Scots thus becomes, in the nineteenth-century Anglophone world, a global language of locality.

Typically, Barr's Scots signals a rootedness in Otago – 'I wark nae mare wi' grubbin' hoe, / But whistle at the pleugh' – instead of a longing for Scotland.[72] In this sense, Barr fits very ill with the image of the homesick poetic exile. No more is he, like Curnow's colonial poets, a hapless man alone, alienated from a hostile and terrifying environment. The man alone topos, named for Alan Mulgan's 1939 novel, is a powerful element in New Zealand literature and criticism.[73] In a recent monograph, *The Lonely and the Alone: The Poetics of Isolation in New Zealand Fiction* (2011), Doreen D'Cruz and John C. Ross argue that isolation (or aloneness) forms a kind of master-trope or 'informing symbol' in New Zealand writing, comparable to the topos of the frontier in American literature, and it certainly functions as such in the work of Allen Curnow and the mid-century cultural nationalists.[74]

John Barr, once again, triumphantly fails to fit the bill. As a 'bard', Barr maintained a 'vital poetic relationship with his community'.[75] Barr not only published his verses in community newspapers but performed them irrepressibly in public: '[a]t a gathering, he was pretty sure to come down and sing one or two of his new compositions,' recalls T. M. Hocken.[76] Barr hosted informal

---

[70] John Hewitt, 'The Course of Writing in Ulster' (1953) in Tom Clyde (ed.), *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (Belfast, 1987), 66.

[71] Murray Pittock, 'Introduction: Global Burns' in Murray Pittock (ed.), *Robert Burns in Global Culture* (Lewisburg, 2011), 14.

[72] John Barr, 'When to Otago First I Came' in Barr, *Poems and Songs,* 224.

[73] See Lawrence Jones's entry on 'Man Alone' in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, 331–2.

[74] Doreen D'Cruz and John C. Ross, *The Lonely and the Alone: The Poetics of Isolation in New Zealand Fiction* (Amsterdam, 2011), xv–xvi.

[75] Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (London, 2009), 3.

[76] Hocken, *Contributions*, 201.

ceilidhs in his own barn at Halfway Bush, and was deeply involved in Dunedin's Scottish associational culture, as founder of the Burns Club and official 'Bard' of the Caledonian Society.[77] As such, he was part of the vigorous 'tradition of public performance of literature' that characterised colonial Otago, whether at so-called 'sixpenny readings', town-hall lectures, or memorial dinners for Burns and Scott.[78]

Barr's favoured genres are the social ones of song and satire. He lauds his province in boosterish ballads for convivial male audiences ('Cheer Up, My Jolly Boys'), and lashes the settlement's vices in his 'broad and caustic' satires.[79] He attacks the colonial habit of drunkenness ('Drunken Davie Deil-Me-Care'), while disparaging the Free Kirk 'unco guid' who would ban strong drink altogether ('Noo Quat Your Fiddlin' and Your Fun').[80] His satirical targets include money-grubbing ('Get Siller, Gude Neighbours'), religious hypocrisy ('The Hypocrite Gangs to the Kirk'), and snobbery, as when Dunedin's smug upper classes are lampooned in a song ('Fy Let us a' to the Dinner') modeled on one of Burns's election ballads:

> His Excellency's health will be toasted
> Wi' mony a hip, hip, hurra;
> But I hope it'll never be mentioned
> *We e'er* SIGNED *the Maine Liquor Law!*
> We'll boast o' our high moral standin' –
> The workin' folk keept out o' view,
> An' then we will toast ane anither
> Wi' "Claw me an' I will claw you."[81]

The speaker's shamefaced allusion to the temperance principles of Otago's Free Kirk founders – the Maine Liquor Law introduced prohibition to that

---

[77] James Barr, *The Old Identities: Being Sketches and Reminiscences during the First Decade of the Province of Otago* (Dunedin, 1879), 346–7.

[78] Tony Ballantyne, 'Placing Literary Culture: Books and Civic Culture in Milton', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 28 (2010), 84–8. It is worth noting that some of the volumes of Scottish New Zealand verse – such as John Blair's *Lays of the Old Identities: And other Pieces suitable for Recitations and Readings* (Dunedin, 1889) – seem expressly intended for public performance.

[79] Barr, *Poems and Songs*, 68–70

[80] Barr, *Poems and Songs*, 5–7 and 206–7. James Barr, *The Old Identities*, 347. On the endemic abuse of alcohol in colonial New Zealand, see Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, 107–8.

[81] Barr, *Poems and Songs*, 78–9, 247–8 and 181–3.

American State in 1851 – throws into sharp relief the sedulous debauchery of Dunedin's grandees as they toast one another in 'Champagne, port, sherry, and claret'.

In the very forms of his verse, Barr's orientation is social. The default measure of Barr's poetry is the Christis Kirk stanza, a form that has traditionally served as the vehicle for genial, satiric overviews of festive events and community customs (as in Robert Fergusson's 'Leith Races' and Robert Burns's 'The Holy Fair').[82] Barr uses a modified form of the Christis Kirk stanza (minus the 'bob-wheel') in manners-painting poems of courtship ('As Johnnie Rode o'er yonder Muir'), studies of popular superstition ('Stanzas Respectfully Inscribed to James Kilgour'), and sketches of drunken shenanigans ('Tam Maut was Fou' whan he Cam Hame').[83] When not using the Christis Kirk stanza, Barr deploys the Burns or 'Standard Habbie' stanza in 'To My Old Dog Dash', in the verse-epistle 'Hoo's A' Wi' Ye, Dear Gowan Ha', and in the burlesque 'I Wonder What in This Creation'.[84] 'Standard Habbie' takes its name from a festive mock-elegy on a community musician (Robert Sempill's 'Life and Death of Habbie Simpson, the Piper of Kilbarchan'), and the term itself is coined by Allan Ramsay in the course of a sociable exchange of verse epistles written in the measure. Burns uses it for verse epistles and for other poems of direct address. As with the Christis Kirk stanza, Standard Habbie has a communitarian bias encoded into the form: as Alan Riach has recently argued, the use of Standard Habbie implies a 'context of social reciprocity'.[85]

Barr also favours the dialogue form, with two speakers taking alternate stanzas, as in 'Crack Between Mrs Scandal and Mrs Envy', or 'Rise Oot Your Bed', in which a hungover husband and his scolding wife berate one another. This poem illustrates another favourite Barr device, which is the appearance of the poet as a character in his poems. Here is the climax of 'Rise Oot Your Bed', in which the wife monopolises the closing two stanzas to chide her errant spouse:

> And wha's the warst ane o' the twa,
> Ye'll maybe tell me that?

[82] See Allan H. MacLaine (ed.), *The Christis Kirk Tradition: Scots Poems of Folk Festivity* (Glasgow, 1996).

[83] Barr, *Poems and* Songs, 41–2, 48-51 and 218–20.

[84] Ibid., 144–6, 151-3 and 198-201.

[85] Alan Riach, 'James K. Baxter and Robert Burns: The Form of Address', *Journal of New Zealand Literature,* 30 (2012), 62.

It sets ye weel to lie up there,
  And see me dreepin' wat,
Wi' fechting 'mang the sharney kye,
  'Mang glaur up to the kuits,
Wi' scarce a sark upon my back,
  My taes clean oot my buits.

O swear awa, just swear awa,
  Ye canna bear the truth;
Ye'll what? ye'll rise and tak your nieve
  And gie me ower the mouth:
But, Guidsake, here comes Craigielee,
  Let's a' oor fauts conceal; –
'O come awa, ye're welcome here,
  Our Johnnie's no that weel.'[86]

So far from being Man Alone, or an aloof observer, 'Craigielee' shoulders his way into his own poem. There is a jarring adjustment of focus required by these final lines. The fiction that the poet has been eavesdropping on the squabbling couple breaks down when the poet himself – named for his farm of Craigielee – apparently hoves into view. And yet, that fiction is reinstated when we reflect that the wife's anxiety to screen their disagreement, and indeed to veil the cause of Johnnie's indisposition, comes too late: it has been preempted by the poem we have just read.

Barr's final publication in book – or at least pamphlet – form is the *Poems* of 1874, which comprises eight occasional poems, most of them written in honour of the annual gathering of the Caledonian Society of Otago, to whom the volume is 'respectfully dedicated'. These are formal public verses in 'correct' English, written by Barr in his official capacity as 'Poet to the Caledonian Society of Otago' (as the title page puts it), and they are almost uniformly dreadful. The poems – 'In Honour of the Eleventh Annual Gathering', 'In Honour of the Twelfth Annual Gathering' – are as perfunctory, dull and predictable as their titles. What is most striking about the volume is that, precisely at the moment when Barr's favoured stanza form – the Christis Kirk stanza, with its long history of depicting scenes of festive revelry and sports – is called for, Barr abandons it in favour of earnest and dull

[86] Barr, *Poems and Songs*, 131–3.

heroic couplets ('true heroic lays', as he puts it in 'Written in Honour of the Seventh Annual Gathering of the Caledonian Society of Otago'). In place of the panoramic vividness and pungent concretion of the Christis Kirk genre, Barr relies on banal and capitalised abstraction: 'Let all our sports with Virtue be combined, / And hateful Discord ever kept behind'. These are certainly the poems that Tom Leonard has in mind when he talks about Barr's later poetry 'taking on the platitudes of the professional expatriate'.[87]

However, amid the remorseless pomp of these poems, there is one satiric gem: a 'Genealogy of the Clan Macgregor'.[88] In a poem that carries echoes of the Ossian controversy and of Burns's poem 'On the Late Captain Grose's Peregrinations Through Scotland', Barr provides a mock-genealogy of the clan, asserting that the first Macgregor was playing his pipes a hundred years before Apollo took up the lute, while the *Iliad* was written in Gaelic 'by Homer, in Balquider'. Here Barr is sending up his own position as seannachie, the reciter of the tribe's whakapapa and traditions, finding Gaelic originals not just for classical but Biblical events:

> And you must know the gaelic tongue
> Was spoken in Glen Eden,
> For Adam wrote his highland sangs
> The time his sheep were feeding;
> And Mrs Adam's name was Grant,
> She came frae Abergeldie;
> She was a Poetess, and made
> "The Birks o' Aberfeldy."

The tradition that Gaelic was the world's first language is being satirised here, partly through a local joke, since 'Glen Eden' is not just a Scotticising of paradise but the name of an Auckland suburb. 'The Birks o' Aberfeldy' is a song by Robert Burns, adapted from an older song, 'The Birks of Abergeldy', and written during Burns's Highland tour of 1787.[89] A prelapsarian vintage is thus ascribed to a song barely eighty-years old. Similarly, the Highland Games, a Victorian invention, whose Otago incarnation was launched in 1863 by a

---

[87] Tom Leonard (ed.), *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh, 1990), 224.

[88] John Barr, *Poems* (Dunedin, 1874), 12–14.

[89] Donald A. Low (ed.), *The Songs of Robert Burns* (London, 1993), 199.

group of 'Old Identities' alarmed at the changing demographics of Dunedin,[90] is confidently declared to be of antediluvian origin, invented by the builder of the ark:

> Now, Noah is a Grecian word,
> In gaelic it's Macpherson;
> He instituted highland games
> Just for his own diversion.
> M'Callum Mhor, his son-in-law,
> Was Lord Duke of Argyle –
> His mother's name was Janet Gun,
> A sister of King Coil.

Historical personages (the duke of Argyle) meet legendary figures (the Old King Cole associated with the district of Kyle in Ayrshire) in this cod-genealogy. This is Barr the urban lowlander, the Clydeside engineer, mocking the invented traditions of Scottish 'Highlandism'. But it is also Barr the New Zealander, the emigrant who has reinvented himself, casting a cold eye on the pretensions of his fellow Caledonians. Whatever else this is, it is not the work of a writer clinging to the Scotland of colonial figment and fantasy, to adapt Curnow's formulation. It is the work of a writer who is secure in his own identity and not afraid to mock it.

I want to finish by looking briefly at one of Barr's boosterish pro-Otago songs, 'Otago Goes Ahead, My Boys', whose final stanza runs as follows:

> Then come along, my merry men,
> Our fair Otago see;
> It is a glorious retreat
> For honest poverty.
> It is a place of health and strength,
> No workhouse to be seen;
> And honest men soon stand upright
> That bowed down have been.[91]

The echo of Burns ('For honest poverty') is less to the point here than the

[90] John Stinson and Donald Gordon, *Cabers and Ceilidhs: 150 Years of the Caledonian Society of Otago* (Dunedin, 2012), 6.

[91] Barr, *Poems and Songs,* 212–13.

anticipation of Curnow: 'And honest men soon stand upright'. For Curnow, the 'trick of standing upright here' is a gradual acclimatisation, a milestone in the development of an infant who had previously crawled or been carried:

> Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year,
> Will learn the trick of standing upright here.[92]

What Barr reminds us is that standing upright is also the achievement of grown men who had previously 'bowed down', whether under the burden of oppression or in deference to their supposed superiors. And to stand upright in Barr's sense does not require Curnow's four generations, or Charles Brasch's 'century of quiet and assiduity'.[93] John Barr was standing upright on his way down the gangplank.

This is not to suggest that Barr is somehow the first authentically 'New Zealand' poet. For all the comparisons with Burns, Barr is not a 'national' bard. He does not engage with Māori. He barely raises his eyes north of the Waitaki, far less to what Janet Frame calls the 'foreign places beyond Cook Strait'.[94] It would, however, be anachronistic to look for the expression of national consciousness from a poet writing at a time when New Zealand showed no sign of becoming – or of desiring to become – an independent nation.[95] That it was the 1930s before anything approaching a national voice entered New Zealand literature is a critical truism.[96] However, the implication often drawn from this – namely, that New Zealand literature prior to the 1930s can offer only the 'colonist's nostalgia for home' – is, as I hope to have shown, strikingly wide of the mark. If Barr is not a 'national' bard, he is emphatically not the kind of homesick and heartsick colonial poet limned by Allen Curnow. It perhaps makes most sense to view Barr, as Tony Ballantyne has done, in the context of a 'kind of popular regional patriotism – which

---

[92] Allen Curnow, 'The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch', *Early Days Yet,* 220.

[93] Charles Brasch, 'The Silent Land' in Charles Brasch, *Collected Poems*, Alan Roddick (ed.) (Auckland, 1984), 218.

[94] Janet Frame, 'Dot' in *Gorse Is Not People: New and Uncollected Stories* (Auckland, 2012), 64.

[95] J. C. Beaglehole, 'The Development of New Zealand Nationality', *Journal of World History,* 2 (1954), 106–23.

[96] This truism has, nonetheless, been challenged; see Kirstine Moffat, 'Fashioning a Past and Constructing a Present in Maoriland', review of Jane Stafford and Mark Williams, *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature, 1872–1914* (Wellington, 2006), *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 24 (2006), 148–54.

saw Otago as a new patria, a homeland for a distinctive colonial order that drew heavily on Scottish antecedents'.[97]

If, as W. P. Ker argued in the 1920s, the 'history of Scottish poetry … is the history of forms establishing themselves and being followed closely by writers of poetry', then that history must encompass those New Zealand poets who used Scottish forms, modes and idiom to assert their rootedness in a landscape half a world away.[98] And these poets must also feature in accounts of New Zealand poetry since, *pace* Curnow, Barr and Mackay *do* have a posterity. Barr's use of Scots language and stanza forms as vehicles of political dissent and social satire, his customising of Burns, was exemplary not just for the Scots-language poets who followed him but for fiction writers like Vincent Pyke, whose remarkable Lallans novel *Craigielinn* (1884) surely nods to the Bard of Craigielee in its title as well as to the eponymous waterfall in Renfrewshire. An adapted Burnsian mode survives the attenuation of spoken Scots in New Zealand to surface in unexpected places in the twentieth century, as in the unpublished poetry of Archibald Baxter, with its Burns stanzas and its local patriotism.[99] And Archibald's son James K. Baxter, New Zealand's pre-eminent twentieth-century poet and the closest the country has come to a national bard, maintained an obsessive engagement with Burns throughout his poetic career.[100] It was Baxter who observed, in a lecture to the New Zealand Writers' Conference in 1951, that 'a 'good tradition is like fat: it can be clarified and used indefinitely'.[101] In the work of New Zealand writers as diverse as Cilla McQueen, Bill Manhire, Keri Hulme and John Summers, elements of Scottish tradition are used in just this way.[102] And recent developments – such as Sarah Paterson's translations from te reo Māori into Scots in her 'Bagpipe

[97] Tony Ballantyne, 'Life in the Provinces: Poetry and Politics in Victorian New Zealand', unpublished Keith Sinclair Lecture 2011, University of Auckland, 27 October 2011.

[98] W. P. Ker, *Form and Style in Poetry: Lectures and Notes*, R. W. Chambers (ed.) (London, 1929), 201.

[99] Archibald Baxter's unpublished poetry, together with the MS of an unpublished novel on Scottish migration to Otago, can be found in the archive of his literary papers held by the Hocken Collections at the University of Otago, Hocken MS ARC-0350.

[100] See the special 'Baxter and Burns' number of the *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 30 (2012). On Baxter and Burns, see also: Dougal McNeill, 'Baxter's Burns', *ka mate ka ora: a new zealand journal of poetry and poetics*, 8 (2009), http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/kmko/08/ka_mate08_mcneill.asp [accessed 6 August 2014]; Liam McIlvanney, 'Editorial: Burns and the World', Special Robert Burns Number, *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 6 (Spring/Summer 2010), http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue6/editorial.htm [accessed 6 August 2014].

[101] Baxter, *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry,* 10.

[102] Alan Riach, 'Scotland' in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, 483–5.

Waiata' – suggest that Baxter's 'clarification' continues, and that Lowland Scots may yet regain its place – alongside te reo Māori, 'cockney slang … Australian vernacular, American hipster cool, [and] Pasifika inflections' – as one of the available idioms of New Zealand literature.[103]

University of Otago

[103] *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature*, 15; Sarah Paterson, 'Bagpipe Waiata', in Madeleine Campbell, Georgina Collins and Anikó Szilágyi (eds), *Quaich: An Anthology of Translation in Scotland Today* (Cathair na Mart, 2014), 49–54.