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Author: Andrew Blaikie

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Homeless Minds, Imagined Nations, Peripheral Visions: Hugh MacDiarmid and Allen Curnow

Andrew Blaikie

This article explores some paradoxes of self-conscious marginality. During the 1930s and 1940s, the encounter with modernity saw both Scots and New Zealand poets engaged in imaginative projects of decolonization. Although their relationships to the British 'other' were somewhat different, in both instances achieving cultural nationalism depended strategically upon essentialized conceptions of place, re-imagined histories and representations of forgetting. From self-imposed exile in Shetland, Hugh MacDiarmid embraced peripheral places, simultaneously celebrating these as microcosmic prototypes of national identity while squirming at the narrow parochialism of actually existing Scottish society – a condition he attributed to Calvinism and capitalism, twin spectres of internal colonialism. Meanwhile, for Allen Curnow, settler modernity in the antipodes involved 'awakening from a dream of home to a home that [was] alien'.[1] Confronting this ontological dilemma betrayed a double gaze where anti-suburban eyes fixated upon local landscapes yet drew on a European, non-indigenous vocabulary.

Any analysis must necessarily consider the relationships between poetry and the social construction of nationhood. Ernest Gellner famously argues that 'it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round',[2] but that this requires conditions of modernity in order to happen. Nationalist poetry was always an encounter with modernity – and by the 1930s it was also an encounter with modernism. But what shape did it take? Was this something that happened in comparable ways in different places, in, say, both Old and New World countries? In addressing how MacDiarmid as a Scot and Curnow as a New Zealander went about the task of representing national identity, my contention is that paradoxically the very idea of a homeland could only emerge as a result of these writers exclaiming their alienation from actually existing societies. It was, therefore, exile and self-conscious marginality – a sense of homelessness – that defined what home might be. It would be erroneous to

[1] Allen Curnow (ed.), *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (London, 1960), 'Introduction', 17–67 at 47.

[2] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* 2nd edn (Oxford, 2006), 54.

claim that either poet was typical of their generation or their times, hugely influential though both were. Nevertheless, the particular structure of feeling they create has a resonance in the mid-twentieth century that coincided with perceived crises of national development: it was of the moment, in that such a vision of the relationship between the self, culture and society could not have occurred in Victorian times or in the allegedly post-modern present. In terms of literary style, much of the cultural production of the era was a realist reaction against Georgian romanticism. But it is not my concern here to explain such; rather, I am interested in how the dialogue between poet and nation (or, rather, their conceptualization of 'nation') was expressed as an ontological predicament. If one's mental security depends upon a sense of order and continuity gained from experience, then what do acknowledged feelings of homelessness tell us about how this sense of self has been disrupted? What was awry in the scheme of things and how was one's sense of being in the world to be re-instated?

MacDiarmid's lonely republic

Between 1933 and 1942, Hugh MacDiarmid lived in self-imposed exile on Whalsay, a small Shetland isle, just five-and-a-half miles long by two wide. Forty years later, the social anthropologist Anthony Cohen also lived there, making, over seventeen years, the most sustained study to date of a British rural community. Cohen claims that since community is about symbolising ourselves and others, 'people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries'.[3] This is a comment on the consciousness of the observed, but it applies at least as readily to MacDiarmid the observer. As leaders of the self-proclaimed Scottish Renaissance during the 1930s, MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassic Gibbon wrote respectively from Shetland (140 miles north of the Scottish mainland and 400 from Edinburgh) and Welwyn Garden City (a planned new town deep in southern England), arguing that 'distance from the Scottish Scene would lend them some clarity in viewing it'.[4] It was a vantage

[3] Anthony P. Cohen, 'Belonging: the experience of culture' in Anthony P. Cohen (ed.), *Belonging: Identity and Social Organisation in British Rural Cultures* (Manchester, 1982), 1–17, at 3. See also Anthony P. Cohen, *Whalsay: Symbol, Segment and Boundary in a Shetland Island Community* (Manchester, 1987).

[4] Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene; Or, The Intelligent Man's Guide to Albyn* [1934] (Bath, 1974), 40, quoted in Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic* (Edinburgh, 2006), 116.

point that led to a 'crucial correspondence between the local and the universal' in the development of a vividly Scottish rhetoric.[5] What is also remarkable is that MacDiarmid's vision depended upon the imputed values of remote and rural rather than urban contexts.

While MacDiarmid's work demonstrates many traits of high modernism, his spatial frame of reference ran contrary to the metropolis, so definitively its milieu. His vision of resistance, difference, pluralism and, at the same time of nationhood, required that he go out of his way to reject Anglocentricity. This he did quite literally:

> Inspired by Langholm [his birthplace], MacDiarmid's best creative work was written in Montrose and Whalsay. It is by living and working in these peripheral places that MacDiarmid developed a political strategy through which to resist the symbiotic assault of anglification and capitalism and so suggest a radically nationalist Scotland [Langholm is a small town very close to the English border; Montrose, a fishing port and market town on the northeast coast; Whalsay, a Shetland island, lies at the extreme north extremity of the British Isles].[6]

Presaging the internal colonialism thesis later espoused by critics of modernization theory,[7] he castigates the English core not only for systematically retarding the 'Celtic fringe', but also for being both provincial in itself and imperialistic in its drive to negate cultural difference. Turning the idea on its head, he renders the culture of the periphery central to understanding nationhood, hence, for example, his conviction that 'the cultural "treasures" of humanity can still come "frae the lanely places,/No' the croodit centres o' mankind yet"'.[8] As Scott Lyall is quick to elaborate, in the voices silenced by imperial versions of history lie the sources of national revival, his renaissance project being 'calculatedly rooted [in] geopolitical marginality'.[9] But this is no post-colonial hybrid; it is a vernacular society that emphasizes the continuity of a tradition pre-dating Reformation and the Union, and in which small towns act as catalysts, Scotland in microcosm.

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[5] Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry*, 4.

[6] Ibid., 12.

[7] Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (London, 1975).

[8] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems, Vol. II*, M. Grieve and W. R. Aitken (eds), (Manchester1994), 1424, quoted in Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry*, 78.

[9] Ibid., 152.

'He perceives', continues Lyall, 'that there can be no nation without the unending imagination of community … "Until I saw a timeless flame/ Take Auchtermuchty for a name,/And kent that Ecclefechan stood/As part o' an eternal mood"'.[10] Against this MacDiarmid sets a capitalist, anomic 'urbanisation of the mind', part and parcel of 'the paralysis of internal colonisation and the detritus of industrialism [that] defile Edinburgh and Glasgow'.[11] Despite this, for him the virtues of small places most definitely do not inhere in their existing civil society. Among other things, his monumental poem, 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle' (1926) caricatures parochial Scotland. Elsewhere he denounces its 'damned democracy', its 'egalitarian attitude of ordinary chumminess'.[12] While Empire capitalism has produced the alienation and proletarian decay of the cities, so a provincial culture, born of the Reformation and carried forth by the Union, created a legacy of canny lads o'pairts, couthy Kailyard ministers and populist music hall characters, all 'fostered by a capitalist education system grounded in Calvinist self-repression'.[13] For him, such false consciousness can only be overcome through the Nietzschian self-realization of an intellectual vanguard: it is the cultural producers, not the consuming public, who will transform the nation by recovering a medieval sensibility, one that requires a concept of national anteriority, while rendering England as 'the Other'.

Cultural difference is underpinned by three factors. Firstly, in opposition to the centralising tendencies of British internal colonialism that threaten to extinguish place-bound heterogeneity, MacDiarmid wants to create an autochthonous culture, unified in its refusal to adapt to capitalist modernity. Each different community is regarded, in its ideal incarnation, as culturally organic, thus 'Our ideal ethnological method/ May be fairly called the ecological one'.[14] Secondly, this rootedness is imaginatively consolidated by myths of racial origin, 'a timeless background against which the generations come and go'.[15] Thirdly, insofar as it has been argued that during his brief sojourn in London and Liverpool 'a sense of geographic and emotional displacement

[10] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems, Vol. I*, M. Grieve and W. R. Aitken (eds) (Manchester1993), 144, quoted in Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry*, 109.

[11] Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry*, 128, 65.

[12] Ibid, p. 157. 'Your damned democracy' is a line from Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The North Face of Liathach', *Complete Poems, Vol. II*, 1055.

[13] Ibid., 49.

[14] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems, Vol. II*, 788.

[15] Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry*, 137, quoting 'Mr C. M. Grieve on Up-Helly-Aa', *Shetland News*, 8 February 1934, 4.

prompted the need for his creative vision to refocus around memories of home', a spiritual rather than social feeling of belonging provides a signal emotional resource.[16] However, writing again from Shetland, he departs from the modernist orthodoxy of conceiving home from exile, because living on the Scottish margin, among the places of the periphery, he can claim there to be at least culturally at one, while it is mainstream Scotland that has become detached from its bearings.

Because his literature foregrounds a Scottish strain of modernism, unusual in its inseparability from socio-economic and political debate, Lyall regards MacDiarmid as critical in the shift from 'elitist modernism … to the ideal of postcolonial society'.[17] But such a stance is far from politically convincing given the elitism of a difficult poetry which although written in Lallans – a synthetic vernacular of Lowland Scots tongues – is nonetheless fiendishly difficult to comprehend in its intellectual complexity, even wilful opacity, and may in no way be construed as the voice of Everyman. Like many a critic of popular false consciousness, MacDiarmid, although very much a 'public poet', is scuppered by his own failure to connect with the people so central to his aspiration for a new nationhood, and, not least, his departure from a view of history that corresponds to that of many of his compatriots.

The life course of nations

In contrast to MacDiarmid's fractious singularity, literary nationalism (if it ever was such) in New Zealand, most particularly during the 1930s,[18] provides an excellent example of how national culture has been defined as a collective endeavour. One critic reflects:

> My own generation, born at the end of the Second World War and growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, were told that New Zealand literature had begun almost overnight in 1932, with the arrival in

[16] Ibid., 67.

[17] Ibid., 188. Margery Palmer McCulloch remarks that the Scottish Renaissance had 'more in common with Shelley's belief in the poet as "unacknowledged legislator" than with modernist detachment' (Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland, 1918–1939* (Edinburgh, 2004), xiii.

[18] Stuart Murray *Never a Soul at Home: New Zealand Literary Nationalism and the 1930s* (Wellington, 1998), 18 argues: 'The writing of the 1930s is one event, certainly the most important literary one, in New Zealand's process of self-imaging as a nation'.

> Auckland of a marvellously talented group of young men and women who had put together a literary magazine called *Phoenix*… It is the story that the young men and women who came of age at that time told about themselves.[19]

Central here was the myth-making of anthologist-poet Allen Curnow. Curnow took his idea for a nationalism born of allegorical images from Yeats. Writing in 1945, he claimed: 'Strictly speaking, New Zealand doesn't exist yet… It remains to be created–should I say invented'.[20] Using his friendship with publisher Denis Glover of the Caxton Press and his position as editor of two landmark anthologies, *A Book of New Zealand Verse*, and *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, he set about doing just this. His project is an object lesson in how intellectuals invent tradition, where carving out a literary space requires the visualization of nation as imagined community, a country that can be written about. Necessarily a process of inclusion and exclusion, it relies on a teleological linear journey that either perverts or ignores alternative narratives. Its ingredients begin with a life-course model of literary development in the century since the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) that posits a trajectory towards ecological maturity. The early colonial settlers, achieving 'migration bodily, but not in spirit',[21] exhibit doubts over identity, reflected in Samuel Butler's feeling that 'my power over collecting myself was beginning to be impaired' as he ventured into a strangely forbidding wilderness.[22] Thereafter, such poetry as exists consists of doggerel in affected dialects 'out of touch with the common converse of the place'.[23] With the second generation comes at best a conflict of spirit as English-bred sensibilities are part-accepted, part-denied (Katherine Mansfield's stories), at worst, further evasion of the problems thrown up by an ongoing colonial relationship, made more hollow by the absence of any nostalgic possibility. There is no fit between poet and place. With R. A. K. Mason and D'Arcy

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[19] Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland, 1990), 7. He continues (78): 'The fifteen years… from *Phoenix* to *Landfall*, are the most coherent in our literary history and without doubt the most potent source of its icons and mythologies'. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London, 1973), 8, who defines culture as 'the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves'.

[20] Allen Curnow, *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings, 1935–1984* (Auckland, 1987), 'A dialogue with Ngaio Marsh', 76–82 at 77.

[21] Allen Curnow, 'Introduction', 20.

[22] Ibid., 24, quoting Samuel Butler, *Erewhon* (1872), chapter iv.

[23] Ibid., 31.

Cresswell at last comes serious confrontation, but it is one of solitary outpost survivors, men [sic] alone.

Nonetheless, argued Curnow, by the Thirties, wherever they were in the world, in seeking their own identities poets were questioning New Zealand as a place-concept that became, in his words, 'a meaningful analogue for the homelessness of the modern mind'.[24] When Charles Brasch writes 'The godwits vanish towards another summer./ Everywhere in light and calm the murmuring/ Shadow of departure; distance looks our way;/And none knows where he will lie down at night',[25] he is looking back from afar; but in Oxford and London, it was, he says 'New Zealand I discovered, not England … part of myself as I was part of it'.[26] Whatever he found, it remained something amorphous. For Curnow such arrivals, departures and lack of labelling were 'full of the failure of the New Zealander … to make the land his own'.[27] In articulating a coherent culture of difference, his own *Not in Narrow Seas* collection explores how popular settler narratives create a national culture that is artificial to the point of theatre–'The cloud, the mountain-terror tamed now/ Framed to taste for parlour chimneyplace'.[28] The 'disenchanted detailing of cultural suburbia' is thus an act of creating an internal other alongside the external European other against which coalesces his essentialized critique.[29] In lambasting 'the cosmopolitan whimsies of suburban *grandes dames*',[30] the topography of the written nation becomes one defined by its cultural inadequacies, A. R. D. Fairburn's 'second-grade heaven/with first-grade

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[24] Ibid., 50. Cf. Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York, 1973), who develop a sociological thesis. The roots of such speculation in literary theory lie, of course, in Georg Lukács' claim that the novel is an expression of 'transcendental homelessness'(Georg Lukács, 'Die Theorie des Romans', *Zeitscghrift der Ästhetik und der allgemeinen Kunstwissenschaft*, 11 (1916), 225–71, 390–431).

[25] Charles Brasch, 'The Islands (ii)', *Disputed Ground: Poems, 1939–45* (Christchurch, 1948), reprinted in Curnow (ed.), *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, 179.

[26] Charles Brasch, *Indirections: A Memoir, 1909–1947* (Wellington, 1980), cited in Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie (eds), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (Oxford, 1998), 68.

[27] Allen Curnow, 'Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923–45*' in *Look Back Harder*, 42–75 at 63.

[28] Allen Curnow, *Collected Poems 1933–1973* (Wellington, 1974), 64, cited in Murray, *Never a Soul*, 236.

[29] Ibid, 237.

[30] Allen Curnow, 'New Zealand literature: the case for a working definition' in *Look Back Harder*, 191–208 at 192.

butter, fresh air,/and paper in every toilet'.[31] So how and when is this staged authenticity to be replaced by a genuine spirit of civil society? 'How many generations does it take?' chafes Curnow, interestingly betraying an ethnicised trajectory.[32]

And yet, by 1963, he feels able to claim: 'Nobody need feel as Brasch did twenty years ago when he wrote "The plains are nameless and the cities cry for meaning,/The unproved heart still seeks a vein of speech." Nobody would echo the thought I had myself, twenty years ago, when I wrote of the "great gloom" that "Stands in a land of settlers/ With never a soul at home"'.[33] Somehow, due in no small part to his canon construction, a defining national poetry appeared to have arrived. From his own inductive method he had wrought an understanding borne of an implied and unconscious kinship among poets: 'I am convinced that the impulse towards a formed myth of place and people is the chief energizing principle among those of their generation'.[34] He speaks of a shift from early colonists feeling homesick for Britain to a second generation 'home' sick in New Zealand, to 'the theme of the homeseeking, homesick exile, finding himself "at Home" … in England, and finding that home was not there after all, it was in the land of his birth', to the homecoming poet, whose 'uncompromising fidelity to experience' is there in 'a language of location that revolved around a connection to the landscape as settled place'.[35] Finally, albeit dismissive of Curnow's wishing to make 'the condition of never being quite at home a spring to the imagination', the younger poets of the 1950s certainly 'insisted that they were at home and the voyage was no longer a problem; though … they lost no time in telling us how satisfactorily alienated, modern and in due course postmodern they were in that condition'.[36] That, perhaps, is the poet's lot. There

[31] Cited in Curnow, 'Introduction', 65; Murray, *Never a Soul*, 230, remarks: 'it is a place devoid of narrative. But if the culture is waiting to be written as genuine civil society, it is also being written by Curnow as the imagined community defined by lack'.

[32] Curnow, 'A dialogue with Ngaio Marsh', 79.

[33] Curnow, 'New Zealand literature', 198. There were shifts in Curnow's own work, reflected in his self-conscious creation of the terms 'unhistory' and 'anti-myth' to label his emergent counter-narrative.

[34] Peter Simpson, 'Introduction', in Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, ix–xxv at xvi.

[35] Curnow, 'Introduction', 51; Allen Curnow, 'Distraction and definition: centripetal directions in New Zealand poetry', *Look Back Harder*, 213–29 at 226; Curnow, 'New Zealand literature', 200; Murray, *Never a Soul*, 109.

[36] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands* (Cambridge, 2005), 12. Pocock also describes a 'culture of resentment' where 'too much fear of a former colonial identity inhibits one from replacing it' (9). Both Murray and Pocock take their book titles from Curnow's poetry.

would be something disingenuous finding resolution through any settled connection, for as W. H. Oliver autobiographically insists, 'to eliminate the experience of being a stranger is also to preclude a sense of belonging that stretches across oceans to places both as distant as the other hemisphere and as close as breathing'.[37] The antipodean sense of home appears by definition paradoxical. Because colonialism happened, the relation between self and nation must forever acknowledge its complexities. The other is never banished.

Fracturing the myth

Clearly, as public mentor, Curnow intervened in the accounts of others. In deconstructing Curnow's project, then, one has an eye both to alternative interpretations and to what it defined out. There are other spaces. He celebrates Fairburn's *Dominion* as a great nationalist document because of its subject matter, while its schizoid sense of conflicting representations of locality is played down. Others are more fundamental. Eileen Duggan's demotic writing, in which the peasantry wrote a country's, literature was clearly influenced by her Irish inheritance, yet this cross-cultural aspect is lost in Curnow's dismissal of her work as gently evading the New Zealand problem by 'trying to substitute for it something prettier'.[38] Similarly, John Mulgan's rejection of his Irish ancestry but affection for England, and, indeed, his dilemma of how to respond to the impending war, is ignored. Curnow makes much of Mason's vivid alienation – 'here in this far-pitched perilous hostile place/ … / fixed at the friendless outer edge of space' – but the counter-narrative is again absent, for, as Stuart Murray indicates, 'Instead of a nationalism based upon geography, suffused with references to the local, Mason's conception of the national community in the late 1930s was moving towards a view of the people as a socialist brotherhood'.[39] In common with modernists everywhere in the 1930s, apprehension about social and political breakdown is registered in retreat. From England, Fairburn writes to Mason: 'I would like to live in the backblocks of New Zealand … Somewhere where I might escape the vast halitosis of the Press, and the whole dreadful weight of modern art and

[37] W. H. Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix: A Memoir* (Wellington, 2002), 55, cited in Pocock, *The Discovery*, 15.

[38] Curnow, 'Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse*, 51.

[39] Murray, *Never a Soul*, 75.

literature'.[40] So why, like Brasch, Mulgan and James Bertram, was he there? Why, like Frank Sargeson and Cresswell, did he feel the need to walk through Britain as an itinerant? These are troubled souls in search of themselves and, quite clearly, neither return to New Zealand nor escape from it provide solace. Why, roam the heart of the old Empire looking for home?

Perhaps the most intriguing clues to this existential conundrum come not from Curnow's striving heroes but from two abjected women poets. Murray notes that: 'The supposed overnight transformation from what Denis Glover once termed the "feminine-mimsy" school of writing ['a bunch of bores in stuffy drawers'] to the hard edges of a new masculine nationalism resulted in a national narrative that was necessarily partial and deceptive in its seeming simplicity'.[41] Similarly, Patrick Evans has remarked how the Phoenix poets pursued their mission with a possessive 'male literary territorialism', evident again in Glover's lines 'Alas, New Zealand literature distils/ An atmosphere of petticoats and frills'.[42] He continues: 'The historical effect is curious, for while men seemed to be pushing themselves forward into British models of High Culture, women at the same time seemed to bury themselves in the small and the local'.[43] If such specificity is omitted from the masculinist self-narrative, nevertheless the landscape is a vital component since it enables a frame of reference for resisting urban-industrial modernity. It provides locales in which national meanings may be negotiated and is thus a key component in many works, not least those that celebrate the 'authentic' ecology of people in place. This follows the pastoral vein of much earlier poetry (hence its being disregarded as conservative and traditional).

Embarrassed by the tone of much that passed for poetry at the time, Curnow justified his 1945 anthology on the grounds that without his judicious editing 'it might have looked like a Gardening Guide'.[44] In part, this was a dig at Ursula Bethell's work, which includes dozens of 'garden poems'. An English émigré living near Christchurch, Bethell develops a gaze which balances that of the New Zealanders in England looking the other way. Aware of her liminality–'I don't belong anywhere in particular–I've dodged to

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[40] Lauris Edmond (ed.), *The Letters of A. R. D. Fairburn* (Auckland, 1981), 6–3, Fairburn to R. A. K. Mason, 6 January 1932, cited in Murray, *Never a Soul*, 32–3.

[41] Murray, *Never a Soul*, 48.

[42] Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland,1990), 102n, citing Glover's 'The Arraignment of Paris'.

[43] Evans, *Penguin History*, 81.

[44] Curnow, 'A dialogue with Ngaio Marsh', 80.

and fro'[45]—she seeks resolution in her 'small fond human enclosure' in the hills above Christchurch: 'Oh, become established quickly, quickly, garden!/ For I am fugitive, I am very fugitive'.[46] In the face of permanent exile, her garden becomes her own small corner. Possibly because of the implications of reticence and retreat, and not just because it countered the masculinist view, such narrow immersion was only useful to Curnow insofar as it aided in 'making poetry that sounded localised'.[47]

Initially, Curnow is unable to work Robin Hyde into the canon because any place-bound sense of belonging was at best an evanescent sensation for her. However, in 1936 she declared: 'it's just dawned on me that I'm a New Zealander**,** and surely, surely the legends of the mountains, rivers and people that we see about us should mean more to us than the legends of any country on earth'. As Evans notes, 'this promises an accommodation to local things far more authentic in fact than any self-conscious mythology of attachment male writers were devising', and she did indeed begin to include local references in her poetry, evident for instance in the *Houses by the Sea* volume.[48] Like Mansfield, she used memories of childhood to evoke 'a genuine attachment to the local that was outside the growing dominance of male ideology'.[49] Yet this only serves to mark a triple displacement—not just from the patriarchal canon, but also across time and place. In 1937, close to the end of her short life, and from a bach in the Waitakere ranges, Hyde wrote *A Home in This World*, an autobiographical fragment about her difficulties in finding a home for mind or body.[50] Living in a caravan in Kent, then in London boarding houses, before convalescing in Brasch's house, she eventually sought escape from her personal turmoil in suicide. Her travels in Australia, China and Japan capture something of the restless sensibility that was the antipodean dilemma. But, unlike Curnow, she did not contrive an imagined political community; rather, she sought, and failed to find, a permanent place 'conducive to the workings of the literary imagination, and a political conception of the culture that came

[45] Ursula Bethell Papers, MS Papers 1020, quoted in Murray, *Never a Soul*, 90.

[46] Ursula Bethell, 'Time', cited in Curnow, 'Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse*, 68.

[47] Evans, *Penguin History*, 110. It might nevertheless be suggested that 'Certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks', Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (London, 1992), 40, cited in Cairns Craig, *Intending Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2009), 24–5.

[48] Evans, *Penguin History*, 112.

[49] Ibid., 114.

[50] Murray, *Never a Soul*, 182.

from that'.[51] Here the meaning of home is rather more prosaic – a thinking space functionally akin to Bethell's (and Voltaire's) garden. Yet significantly, if inadvertently, her approach ushered in 'the destabilizing of narrative authority and representation of place that has become a postcolonial orthodoxy'.[52]

Conclusion

The common thread in both MacDiarmid's and Curnow's nationalisms is the strategic maintenance of ecological integrity via an ecology of mind and geography. A sense of belonging concerns the goodness of fit between the individual and the landscape, and more rarely – because the social has also to be comprehended – between people and place. Curnow's search for a language of authenticity, found through 'an uncompromising fidelity to experience', requires us to connect with *settled* places; it is the fixing of identity *in* place.[53] Likewise, MacDiarmid's desire to create culturally organic communities, unified by the will to resist capitalist modernity, stems from a rootedness both in myths of origin and the underlying geology. As he himself wrote: 'Our ideal ethnological method/ May be fairly called the ecological one'.[54] This, of course, represents an ideal, spiritual belonging rather than actual social harmony. Nevertheless, his fixity displays 'a far more concrete sense of geography and geology than Curnow provides'.[55] When MacDiarmid asserts in the opening line of 'On a Raised Beach' that 'All is lithogenesis' he lends the nation anchorage an essential, absolute landscape.[56] On the other hand, he perpetually shunned or bickered about his neighbours. As we have seen, neither he nor Curnow, nor any of our poets, felt at one with the world; indeed, their value for us inheres in their expressed alienation from it. But whereas MacDiarmid was legendary in his cantankerous eccentricity, Curnow worked to impose a sense of collective national feeling, hence 'figures who would have been surprised to be dubbed "nationalists" in 1938 were worked into the national canon by 1948'.[57] Equally, his exclusions are a clear

[51] Ibid., 196.
[52] Ibid., 169.
[53] Curnow, 'New Zealand literature', 200.
[54] MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems, Vol. II*, 788, quoted in Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry*, 186.
[55] Murray, *Never a Soul*, 239.
[56] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, *Vol. I.*
[57] Murray, *Never a Soul*, 18.

illustration of how nationalism involves deliberate 'forgetting'. By the 1950s the Wellington Group, particularly James K. Baxter and Louis Johnson, had become fiercely critical of Curnow's localism, favouring instead a universalism that problematized *inter alia* the historical predicament of the dispossessed, not least the Maori who were distinctly absent from his national story.

For latter-day historians like Pocock, the antipodean sensibility 'sees people in motion, histories traversing distance and "identities" as never quite at home'.[58] Yet Curnow's project resists the implications of such plurality and ambivalence. In a retrospective lecture in 1970, he claimed that 'if the "centripetally" guided work of New Zealanders is excluded, what is left of the country's poetry is a dull and random residue … the poet cannot do without a country'.[59] There is an overt social constructionism here, and it is this manoeuvring that needs to be addressed: firstly, because it elides the fracture of alternative narratives; and secondly because it omits engagement with the social. Cultural nationalisms thenceforth continued to battle over images of location: 'for the New Zealand critic of the 1940s, the yardsticks of quality were those of an essential notion of place – of landscape, of language use and of history'.[60] But to see all poetry as obsessed with or contained by such a focus would be foolish. For instance, Robin Hyde's attempt 'to write a sense of place that matched the doubts and contradictions of the culture she saw around her' required her to de-centre the representation of place.[61] Rather acerbically she spelled out the implications of such a multi-vocal understanding:

If society consists of a body of individuals with some real tie of feeling between them, we have no society in New Zealand yet: there are ties of prejudice and self-interest, but of genuine feeling, no. However, there are some very lovely gardens, some very nice dogs, and the sun shines here as elsewhere.[62]

To be fair, Curnow was sceptical in his 'constant refusal to allow the stereotypes of convention to simplify the complexities of New Zealand's spatial and temporal location', himself penning the line 'Nation is a hazardous sign'.[63] And whatever the conventions he in fact devised, there was no escaping the peripheral structure of feeling. Here stood marginal men and women. Notwithstanding they articulated, like M. H. Holcroft, an awareness of the 'brooding presence of the land', there remained the perpetual

[58] Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands*, 23.
[59] Simpson, 'Introduction', xii.
[60] Murray, *Never a Soul*, 249.
[61] Ibid., 181.
[62] Robin Hyde, *Journalese* (Auckland, 1934), 113.
[63] Murray, *Never a Soul*, 240.

'alienation from where they were and where they would like to be'.[64] In these doubts they differed from the steadfast if deeply contradictory agenda set by MacDiarmid and, by the 1940s at least, Curnow's undertaking was regarded as being about nationality, but not nationalism: 'To his readers in that decade it was anything but news that nations were imagined communities; we were saying that ours would not be a nation or a community until it learned to imagine itself; but we were saying also that the antipodean imagination could not create itself out of any unifying myth'.[65] Stranded, in their gardens, baches and harbours, as much as their London bedsits, the New Zealand poets negotiated the fragility of their being in the world. So it was that their chronicler 'presented an imagination which could never be fully at home where it was, could never fully return to where it might have come from, and had travelled too far to fly off and live anywhere else',[66] while our solitary Scot in his island fastness contrasted his countrymen's errors with the surpassing certainty of the rocks.

University of Aberdeen

[64] Evans, *Penguin History*, 115.
[65] Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands*, 11.
[66] Ibid, 11.