

## Reflections

### The Beginnings

At the celebrations of the Stout Centre's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, held on Friday 15 August 2025, the present Director of the Centre, Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich, was in conversation with the Centre's founding Director, Jock Phillips. We present a lightly edited transcript of their conversation.

Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich:

I want to invite Jock Phillips to come up and talk with us about our history, our challenges, New Zealand studies, and his and our vision for the future. Thank you very much, in case I forget at the end, because I'm pretty nervous today. It's so exciting. Thank you all for coming, and thank you all for supporting us and being with us over the years, and I see quite a lot of younger faces, so into the future as well.

I always hate it when at conferences, people say, no, this person doesn't need an introduction, but who has never heard of Jock Phillips? Well, I think that founding the Stout Research Centre was one of your very first marks as a leader supporting New Zealand studies and museum history. Then you went on to do even more important and even more challenging projects. You did a good radio interview about 2 weeks ago about your other project, and how they're faring at the moment in the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. But we want to be positive today, so let's talk about the project we are concerned with today: the Stout Research Centre. Jock, can you tell us a little bit about how you actually went about, and how you had the idea to do it, and how you managed to get something really difficult over the line, like actually installing a totally new centre at a university?

Jock Phillips: Well, thank you very much for that. Let me just say, to begin with, *kia ora*, it's a great thrill to me to think that something that was a fantasy just over 40 years ago, is still going. And it's a great tribute to the people who picked up the idea and ran with it. I have felt many times I've been very much following in their footsteps. So, it's a wonderful occasion to celebrate the Stout Centre and all the people who've put such energy and creativity into it. Now, where did the idea come from? ... I was a graduate student at Harvard in Boston in the late 1960s. Jim Holt, who was the lecturer in American history at Auckland had come to do refresher leave at Harvard. He was resident at the Charles Warren Centre for American Studies.

Jim, with his typical generosity, befriended me, and I used to go and visit him there. I became impressed at the great intellectual atmosphere in the Charles Warren Centre. It was basically a place which attracted people who were interested in American history and American studies from all around the United States, and from all around the world. They had regular seminars, and I thought it was a perfect place to do research. I yearned to make it there one day.

Well, I never actually did make it there, so I decided, I know what I'm going to do, I'm going to set a centre up, a place up like that in New Zealand. I came back to New Zealand, and by that time, I'd become a crude cultural nationalist, who had the nerve to attack John Beaglehole as the great New Zealand historian in the columns of the *New Zealand Listener*. That was not a smart thing to do, really. It was arrogant, but I had become quite a strident cultural nationalist.

So, looking at the academic world through this lens, I became very frustrated by the fact that we had all these intellectual disciplines in the university, but very little ongoing research about New Zealand. And I was staggered to find that in half of the universities in New Zealand, it was impossible to get refresher leave if you said you were going to study New Zealand in New Zealand. You could only get refresher leave if you went overseas to study things overseas, and I thought that was absurd. I had a very strong commitment to the idea of encouraging research on New Zealand in New Zealand. And then I started to become involved in doing my own research on New Zealand. I started to write a book about Kiwi men. I found myself spending a lot of time in the Alexander Turnbull Library, and a lot of time in the National Archives, and began to realise that Wellington was actually a superb place to do research about New Zealand. And Jim Traue, who at that time was the Alexander Turnbull Librarian, was always frustrated at how few academics from New Zealand universities he saw in the reading room of the Alexander Turnbull Library. So, we got together and moaned about this incessantly. Out of this came an idea of creating a research centre for New Zealand at Victoria, using the fact that Wellington had such a superb set of research institutions that could feed it.

I was thinking of three communities. The centre would be a home for academics from other New Zealand universities who wanted to come to Wellington and make the most of the research institutes here. I was thinking of international scholars who might like to come to New Zealand on their refresher leave and do research here. And I was also thinking about people in the community, people like journalists or public servants -- people who had always aspired to doing serious research, scholarly writing, and I thought, this could be a home for them. There was also a fact that I'd become personally increasingly frustrated. I was a stropmy member of the history department, and I'd had several ideas about the way we could reform the study of history. But in each case, my ideas got dashed, and I thought, bugger it, I'll go out and set up my own institution and won't have to make do with failure all the time.

So that's where it all came from. Do you want me to talk about what happened then?

BB Well, you had convinced a scientist, a vice chancellor scientist, who actually then proceeded to a Max Planck Institute in my home city, to set up the Stout Centre, so I think we want to know how to do the coup, because we might need to do something like this again.

JP You're right, Ian Axford had just come to Wellington, and he had shifted his office from the Hunter Building, to a room where he could look over Waiteata Road. And he had this vision, because he came from the Max Planck Institute,

that universities were primarily about doing research. He had this dream that he would be able to look from his office and see all the old houses on Waiteata Road, each one of them a research institute. I happened to come and see him with my idea at the very time when those houses were unfilled, and he was still full of ambition and excitement about this. So, when I told him this idea about a centre for New Zealand Studies, he had no idea at all what I was talking about. He wasn't interested in New Zealand studies, but he thought, I can fill that building down there, with a research centre. So, he looked out the window and said, you can have that one down there. It was a pretty grotty old building, and then he said. And you can have \$100,000 to refurbish it. Well, I just couldn't believe it. I'd had this idea for about a month, gone to see the Vice-Chancellor, and I already had a building! And we all know a building is the essence of success, then I got further support. I wrote to Allan Highet, who as the Minister of Internal Affairs was responsible for culture, and he promised \$15,000 from the lotteries by return of mail.

Then I went to the professorial board, and they gave it support. And I remember writing to my parents and saying, I had this idea about a research centre, and I thought that within about five years, it might get established, and lo and behold, it's going to open next year. I was staggered at how easy it had been, and it was just the luck of the of the moment, really.

BB            So you went from stropky young lecturer to director, but to be a little bit vain, because everybody who goes to the Stout Centre admires the absolutely beautiful stained glass windows, one for Anna Stout, one for Robert Stout, and one for the Stout, as I always think of them.

So, and I think a lot of people do not know that you were actually also quite a good handyman, because you got these windows for that shabby old building, which is not at all shabby anymore. But can you tell us about the story? Because we are recording, and that will be part of the history of the Stout Centre. We just need that story coming out of you.

JP            Okay. Well, this goes back a long way, too. When I first came to Victoria as a first-year student, I roomed in Weir House and my roommate was an American from Minnesota. Well, he went back to the United States, and I went and finished my degree, and then went off to Harvard to do a PhD, and he became a stained glass artist. So, I went and visited him in Minneapolis and spent about two weeks working in his stained glass art studio. Well, a couple of years later one of my history students, Chris Maclean, came to me one day and said he was going off to the United States, and I replied, well, you better go and visit my friend Frank Stone. He's a stained glass artist. So, Chris went and visited him. And he thought it was the most wonderful way of life. He came back to New Zealand, deciding that he wanted to be a stained glass artist, which he proceeded to be. And we got talking one night and agreed that perhaps there might be a nice project documenting New Zealand's domestic stained glass windows. So, we set off that night and walked up and down The Terrace, looking at all the lead-light windows on The Terrace. And before long, we were going around the country, taking photographs of windows, and we produced a little book on stained glass windows.

Well, one of the windows we'd seen on The Terrace was in Robert and Anna Stout's former house. They and their family had long since left and when we visited the house, it had become a refuge for homeless people. Well, just at the very time when I was setting up the Stout Centre and we were beginning the refurbishing of the building, lo and behold. I read in the paper that the Stout house had burnt down. I wasn't surprised given the state of the house. So, Chris and I agreed that perhaps we might be able to rescue the windows and put them to an appropriate use. We raced down there, and amazingly the windows were largely undamaged. We managed to convince the contractors to allow us to take the windows, which we did.

We then went to the architects who were remodelling 12 Waiteata Road, and they provided a nice space for the windows. And so, lo and behold, the windows went in perfectly positioned. At some point, it must have been a bit before then, of course, we had decided to give the new centre the name of the 'Stout Research Centre'. I think that must have come before the windows. So, the windows were totally appropriate.

BB Well, everybody who doesn't know them is welcome to come, we are open every day.

9 to 5? No, most days. So, come and have a look, have a cup of tea. If we are not having classes in there, because there's a lot of teaching going on, you're always welcome to wander in and have a look. We have also other wonderful artwork. So, Jock, you were the founding director, and there was a series of directors who came after you. You had done your dash, but you always kept in contact. What would you remember of the last four decades that you thought were probably really, really were decisive moments in the history of the Stout Centre? Not just the amazing work the directors did, maybe even conferences, initiatives, Stout Fellows. Do you have any memories yourself, what you would rate?

JP Well, what I was primarily interested in was seeing really good books coming out of the place. And I must say, I am absolutely staggered when I look at the output of the books that have emerged from the Stout Centre. It gives me an enormous sense of pleasure. Some really important works have been born there. And I can't help but think that the discussions around the table have been important. I don't know if you still have Thursday lunches, but one of the things we set up was a regular Thursday lunch. You certainly still have regular seminars where people can try out their ideas. But as a place where ideas can get refined and then packaged into central books about New Zealand. That seems to me the real high point of the South Centre's life. And it gives me great pleasure to see that happen.

The conferences have been epic moments from my point of view. The conference that I was most closely involved in and made the biggest difference from my point of view was a conference we did in 1985 called, 'Te Whenua, Te Iwi, the Land and the People'. We'd had a pretty rocky relationship with the Māori Studies Department at Victoria. I'd always imagined that the Stout Centre

would be inclusive of Māori perspectives, and Māori would be heavily involved in the centre. But I was naive, and I made two big mistakes. I didn't go and see early on Sid Mead, who was a Professor of Māori Studies.

And he, understandably was a bit affronted by that, and I also made the fundamental mistake that I invited him to the Stout Centre to talk about how we would work together, instead of going and talking over at the marae. Two bad mistakes, and I also asked him for a suggested name for the Stout centre. I went on to say, that I'd talked to Michael King, who was my friend at the time, and he'd suggested that we call it a Wānanga. So, when I said, well, you know, one name that's been suggested is Wānanga he turned to me and said, who suggested that?

And I said, Michael King. And that was not the right thing to say at all, because, there was at the time a great deal of resentment, within the Māori community, about Michael's role in writing Māori history. So, we got off to a very, very bad start. But when the 'Te Whenua, Te Iwi' conference came, I made a real effort to have as much Māori input as possible into it, because obviously land, and the relationship between land and the people, was a major issue in late 1980s New Zealand, and it was absolutely central to the Māori community. And we got a great response. Tipene O'Regan kicked off the conference. We had Aila Taylor, who'd worked on the Motonui Tribunal case from Te Ātiawa. We had Eddie Durie, Chair of the Waitangi Tribunal, speaking, we had Robert Mahuta speaking, we had Ranginui Walker speaking, we had Keri Hulme speaking. And the response from the Māori community was extraordinary. I'll never forget, after Keri Hulme finished, Irihapeti Ramsden led a group of Māori women in singing a waiata. I felt then, we're getting there. And it was great to see large numbers of Māori who'd come a long way to go to that conference. I remember Hone Tuwhare, for example, came up from Dunedin.

So, we had a pretty rocky road in terms of the relationship with the Māori community, but I felt, particularly with that conference, that we made a real step forward. That was a high point for me, that experience, and I'll never forget the fact that, in the end, we had so many people sitting in the stairwells in the lecture theatre that we had to close the doors, which wasn't something I wanted to do, but something we had to do.

BB Boy, that sounds amazing. But to come back to the founding period; because Anna Green wrote in her report on the Stout Centre a few years ago when we were reviewed, that Sidney Mead also wanted to set up a separate Māori Studies Centre. So, he probably was also eyeing up one of the other villas in Waiteata Road. So was that also a reason why you couldn't actually set up your vision completely? Or what do you think, in hindsight, what happened? Because the Māori Research Centre didn't eventuate in this.

JP I don't know about that. I don't know whether he said that to me because he was understandably annoyed that I had taken a lead without consulting him, or whether he'd always had that plan. I simply don't know.

As I said particularly after the 'Te Whenua, Te Iwi' conference the Māori studies community got right in behind us. And Piri Sciascia became one of the John David Stout Fellows. We did another conference where the Māori input played an absolutely central role, and that was on 'Te Tinana the body'. Māori had a huge input there. So, we built the bridges.

BB You did an enormous amount for New Zealand Studies, for the nation, you founded Te Ara, you had a major role in the New Zealand Historical Atlas. What do you think about New Zealand studies today. Where should... where are we at? And do we still need it? And where do you think it's going?

JP Well, I was always of the view that I wasn't really in favour of the idea of New Zealand studies. At the time there were disciplines, such as women's studies or American Studies which were sort of cross-disciplinary. My view always was that New Zealand was too small a society to have a focus just on New Zealand. What I wanted to happen at the Stout Centre was that people of different disciplinary training would come together and bring that training to bear on New Zealand content.

So, I never saw it, really, as a centre of New Zealand Studies. That's why the original title of it was the Stout Research Centre for the Study of New Zealand Society, History and Culture. This was attempting to indicate that there were different ways of focusing on New Zealand coming from different disciplines. And I was always very keen that people would use the strengths of their discipline, their historiographical background, or their background in anthropological theory, and then apply it to New Zealand content. That was my model then, and so I still believe in it. I still think that New Zealand studies per se, which is defined simply by the geographical identity of New Zealand, is too small a focus for a serious intellectual discipline. And what we need to do is make sure that New Zealand content is being studied with all the rigor that various disciplines can mount.

So, I never saw it as a discipline. I think I always saw it as an invitation.

BB What I'm seeing at the moment is when we get international scholars coming here and applying for residencies, they 90 percent come with comparative projects. You know, at the moment in Europe, they have discovered rivers. And that rivers say they all have their own rights, and so it's very en vogue; and I think the Māori tribes around the Whanganui are completely swamped with European scholars wanting to know about rivers. I always try to hide that they are coming from us, because they're really getting a bit annoyed. But I think comparative studies is one way to go.

And the other way in which I always thought the Stout Centre was incredibly useful and important was, what you mentioned at the very beginning. That you also can invite people to come who are not academics, who don't work at universities, and the J.D. Stout Fellowship is explicitly for people who work outside universities as scholars, but also people who have got a project in mind. And they might not even have worked as academics. They might just be good writers, or good thinkers, and that we can host them, invite them, and give them



that environment. And get them together into the community of scholars. And I think that's something that has always been really, really important to me, and I learned so much from people from all walks of life who still come.

And I think that's a really invigorating thing, and that's very democratic. Can you think of a few people you love thinking back at, and who did really good projects?

JP

Yes, Brigitte, that's absolutely right. I was always committed to the idea that the Stout Centre would be a home for people who were outside the academy and could spend some time in the academy and use the resources and the skills and the knowledge of the academic community. My biggest anxiety, once we had the house was, what happens if we have a house and no one comes? And I was very, unhappy about this, so I'll never forget my sense of relief when one day Judith Fyfe contacted me and said, oh, we want to do an oral history project on prime ministers. Can we possibly come and work at the Stout Centre? And I remember thinking, yes, that's absolutely the type of person we want to come into the academic world. I mean, that project is still going, where Prime Ministers are interviewed. In fact, Jacinda Ardern has drawn on it quite extensively for this recent film she's made.

The other way we resolved that issue of how do we fill it up, was by getting the Stout Trust to give us a fellowship. I had a chat one day to David Wiley, who was the university librarian. He asked me how it was going, and I said, well, my biggest concern is no one will come. And he said: oh, I'm on the Stout Trust, why don't you apply to the Stout Trust to see if they'll fund a fellowship. Well, what I didn't realize was that Jim Traue with whom I had very early discussions about setting up a research centre in New Zealand Studies, was also on the Stout Trust, so it was a shoo-in. And, then I thought, well, how can we make sure that this isn't just a one-off? And I realised that what we could do was, because we were still looking for a name, was, give the Stout name to the centre. So, I spent some time in the Beaglehole room, looking through Robert Stout's collection of pamphlets, and realised that actually he was quite an intellectual magpie. And that it would be entirely appropriate to call it the Stout Centre, because, both because we could cement in the John David Stout Fellowship, I hoped, but also because we could honour a man who was, at a time, quite creative intellectual, and was also, of course, the founder of Victoria University.

So, the Stout Centre, it became. It was a little bit embarrassing in some respects. Peter Gibbons always used to call it the Harry Fat centre. And, I had a friend who, wanted to do a letterhead for the Stout Centre. So, what he did 'The Stout Research Centre' in great fat letters all the way around, which, I thought was not entirely what we wanted. But the Stout Centre, it remained.

BB

I think the fellows are really the heart of the centre, and when I looked back at Anna Green's report and how many books won awards, it has been amazing, productive years, and an incredible service. Nearly all were non-university academics who had the time for a whole year to write that book, maybe that book of their life.

And, I've been more or less a friend of the Stout for 30 years, and it's incredible who I met, and who swung by - people like Greg O'Brien, Max Rashbrooke.

I left out Bruce McFadgen. I love Bruce McFadgen, especially because, in a twist of fate, he's absolutely pushing my anthropology department into the top of the international rankings because his work is on archaeology, and in the American world of rankings, archaeology and anthropology belong together, and his work is cited so much that we owe him a lot. He probably doesn't even know that. So, we just got to the top 150 of the world, Thank you, Bruce.

But a wonderful suite of books, and Jamie Belich, of course, spent quite a lot of time there writing his latest books, and Richard Hill won awards for all his books he produced at the Stout, so it's been an incredible place, and you yourself wrote some pretty good books. So, where do you think this is going? Do we have a future? Do we need to become comparative? Do we need to correct our ways, or shall we just...: go, as always, with the directors who come and go, and their intuition. Because, you know, I'm a social scientist, and it becomes... has become a lot more social science-y. But maybe that's not a wrong thing.

JP Oh, well, it's not my role to say where these things go in the future. I mean, I had a vision 40 years ago, and what you say about the productivity in terms of the books that are produced is really impressive.

And the ones that I've particularly enjoyed are those people like Geoff Park, or Chris Bourke who weren't academics by training, but who came into the academic world and produced books that have made both people in the society, but even in the academic world take note and ask new questions, and that's exactly what the Stout Centre was meant to do.

BB Well, thank you, and to come back at your, I think, quite brilliant idea to name the Stout Centre the Stout Centre. And when I realised that we're having this anniversary, I looked at Robert Stout and Lady Anna Stout, and I thought, what wonderful figures to actually be in our windows and be in our name, because they were very, very progressive thinkers, they were quite radical in their ideas. As Geoff McLay also said in his title for his upcoming talk here, you know, Robert Stout had many opinions. Some of them, you know, may be unpalatable today, but others really, really, you know, fruitful and still inspiring, and so maybe, we slowly glide over to Geoff, but thank you so much, and I think we got a real little treasure here recorded, and, can write it up. Thank you so much for coming here, and thank you for reminding us on how it all started.