

Stout Centre Review

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Words as ambassadors

Books are still the most effective and manageable communicators between cultures for they can encompass all the arts and sciences. Their sales far surpass those of prints of paintings or CDs of contemporary music. This was made abundantly clear at the first international conference of NZ/SAGAS (New Zealand Studies Association [linking] Germany, Australia and Switzerland) held in Laufen, near Salzburg from 14-16 May 1993. Many of the visitors from universities throughout Europe already had a familiarity with New Zealand's principal poets and writers so that the theme of the conference 'The New Zealand - European Dialogue' came quickly to life.

Over 120 delegates attended, some from New Zealand but most from Europe, to listen to an exceedingly wide range of papers, so many in fact, that the working day began at nine in the morning and continued until eleven at night, an ardour that might well be muted a little, it was felt, by the time of the next conference in 1994. The two conveners, Dr Katrina Bachinger of the University of Salzburg and Vincent O'Sullivan of Victoria, were both surprised and pleased at the high degree of interest shown in what was an untried venue and an entirely new name on the conference agenda. 'This first meeting was organised on a fairly modest scale', said Vincent O'Sullivan. 'The next conference can take advantage of the enthusiasm generated. It has provided an opportunity for New Zealanders in Europe to meet and such was the interest and knowledge shown that it will be possible next time to build it around a particular topic or theme, to choose some area of interest in cultural studies so that it will also attract historians, sociologists and so on'.

Papers in 1993 tended to stress literary topics such as Ken Arvidson's sympathetic appraisal of Alistair Campbell and Albert Wendt. 'Other valuable papers', said Vincent O'Sullivan, included Howard McNaughton on Janet Frame, Marianne Rolshoven, a German geographer, on climbing in the Alps, and two very good papers by German academics on the New Zealand economy. Herman Hiory spoke on New Zealand as an imperialist power in its administration of Samoa. A former ambassador to Germany and Austria, Alistair M Bisley, made the useful point that just as the 19th century had the motto that "'trade follows the flag", it's important for New Zealand to remember that in the European mind trade is often accompanied by culture'.

Dr Katrina Bachinger has offered her 30-room renaissance palace in Laufen rent-free to the New Zealand Government for use as a cultural, commercial or educational centre, but some eighteen months ago this was apparently turned down by the present administration. The place is a splendid building, once used by the Archbishop of Salzburg in his administration of the salt trade. Built in the 14th century, it was added to in the 18th. It stands on the banks of the Salzach, the turbulent river that flows through Salzburg. Laufen itself is a very small town of considerable charm, linked to Oberndorf in Australia by a fine suspension bridge. A somewhat Gilbertian customs system operates at each end of the bridge so that it was possible for the present writer, while standing in raincoat and hat near the German side, to nod approvingly at the many passports flashed at him through passing car windows while the real customs officer and Dr Bachinger gossiped happily inside.

Indeed, any traveller to Europe today feels at once the diminished power of the passport. They are scarcely looked at and it is possible to cross many national borders without a single stamp being implanted on it. As barriers fall and East Europeans enjoy a novel freedom of travel, New Zealand should seize the moment and make known through books and all other means the high points of its culture, remembering Alistair Bisley's comment that culture stimulates trade. New Zealand embassies abroad should not be regarded and run merely as 'trading posts'. Laufen proved an invaluable pointer in this direction. Ways might well be found through the universities and other sponsors to turn the Archbishop's palace into some kind of European equivalent of the Stout Research Centre.

J.M. Thomson