

'FROM ISLAND TO ISLAND'

Extracts from an unpublished autobiography

ALISTAIR TE ARIKI CAMPBELL

Alistair Te Ariki Campbell was a leading figure in the post-war Literary Society of Victoria University College which after several 'Broadsheets', published a new literary journal Hilltop in 1949. In these extracts from his unpublished autobiography we approach some of the sources of his poems, especially that of 'The Return', his most celebrated single work, first published in Hilltop 2 under the title 'Landscape with Figures'. He also gives us a student's view of life at Victoria, but before coming to Wellington he had 'reluctantly and resentfully' enrolled as a student at Otago University for the 1944 academic year . . .

THERE'S AN AIR of unreality about this year I find difficult to explain. Of course the University itself, the old part in particular with the clock tower, is a little unreal – pure Disneyland gothic in scale and conception. But the unreality I experienced came more from my refusal to come to terms with university life. Part of my mind was bent on academic life, part rejected it because the study required would be an obstacle to my writing verse. The result was an impasse which brought me close to a breakdown later in the year.

But meanwhile James K. Baxter, who had attended King's High School, arrived on the scene. Even then, at the age of 18, he had captured the student imagination, and after the appearance of his long war-time poem 'Convoys' in the *Otago Daily Times* he had become famous. Everyone was talking about him.

The Baxter myth had taken root. 'Convoys', not surprisingly, is an immature and uneven poem,



Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, 1953.

showing the influence of C Day Lewis's 'The Nabara', a long-winded tub-thumping tribute to

man's heroic spirit. Baxter was spoken of in awed tones as a prodigy, and all heads would turn to watch him as he shuffled into view, revolving resonant lines in his head. Or so we supposed. More probably he was nursing a hang-over, for he was already drinking heavily.

He could be found in the Bowling Green Hotel in the company of two or three hangers-on, spouting obscene verses of his own making or relishing the orotundities of Yeats or some new discovery such as George Barker, rolling the words in his mouth as if he liked the taste. Occasionally I ran into him, with the same cronies, in the Silver Grill in the Octagon, his favourite chophouse.

By November tensions had become intolerable. Alistair decided to quit: 'I wasn't in a funk. It was more than that.'

It was more like a paralysis of the will, and might have been a foretaste of my mental breakdown 16 years later'.

And so in November 1944 I arrived in Wellington. I had passed through the city before, on my way to stay with Aunt Peg at Onehunga, but I had never stopped there. Wellington then was still under the shadow of war and crowded with American servicemen who would soon be shipped out to halt the advance of the Japanese in the south-west Pacific. Numbers of New Zealand troops were also present, and in the nervous climate scuffles broke out, one of which became a nasty brawl involving hundreds of men from both sides, and later known as the 'Battle of Manners Street'.

Walking along the narrow unfamiliar streets, knowing nobody and with little money, I wondered if I had made the right decision in shifting here. I began to have my doubts. During the last three months between dropping out of university and leaving for Wellington, I had begun to take writing verse seriously, and now in the tiny room in the old Boys Institute building which I shared with two others, and between the dusty racks of the Records Office of the Department of Health, writing was to rescue me from loneliness and boredom. I was then reading Byron's *Don Juan*, but I was still writing verse that owed much to Keats. It was puerile stuff. Unlike Baxter whose early development showed extraordinary precocity, it took me a long time to get my bearings. I was like the skipper who had to sail backwards and forwards

for some time before stumbling on Penrhyn Island.

He resigned from the Health Department but managed to get into the Wellington Teachers Training College and at the same time enrolled as a student at Victoria. He was admitted to the student hostel Weir House where he shared a room with Bob Barraclough who was training to be a town planner.

Our room was on the first floor, with a superb view of the city, harbour, and the snow-topped Rimutaka Range beyond Lower Hutt. On fine still mornings, when sunlight flooded our rooms, you felt as if you were suspended in space, high above the earth. Two of my closest friends shared rooms on the same floor, Harry Orsman opposite us and Roy Dickson at the end of the corridor, above the common-room. Next door, in a single room, was John Oakley, an older student who studied law. I was to see a lot of him in the coming months.

Academically, 1945 was a good year for me. As a part-time student, I passed English I and Latin I quite comfortably. My Latin teacher was Professor Rankine Brown, a noted but ancient classicist. You would have thought he was gaga, but now and then he'd come out with a flash of wit that made you sit up and take notice. His body might have been failing, but there wasn't too much wrong with his mind. My English teacher was Professor Ian Gordon, a first-rate lecturer.

At the end of the year, four Weir House boarders (Bob Barraclough, John Oakley, Roy Dickson and Alistair Campbell) set out

in a 1924 Chevrolet convertible for the South Island.

The Mackenzie country itself was windswept and strewn with straggly trees, and mile after mile of tussock. The road was stony and awash in places with shallow wandering streams. There wasn't a sign of a sheep anywhere, so the purposes of the wire fences might almost have been to define the road, to distinguish it from its surroundings. No sign of a rabbit either, although the whole area was riddled by their workmanship. Oddly enough, faced by this desolation, I felt exhilarated.

Tekapo was enchanting. Against a backdrop of towering peaks, brown hills plunged softly into a lake of opal, where, close to shore, a few tiny islands, tufted with willow, floated in sunlight. A small pub invited us in to slake our thirst, and beyond it the road rose as it passed a small clump of pines aromatic in the afternoon sun. After Tekapo came the real mountain country. The plain narrowed and was deeply scored by rocky creek beds alive with bustling, milky, glacier-fed water. The spell of the mountains was now pervasive, the air dry, sharp, and heady.

Perhaps the most beautiful place we went through was the Lindis Pass, which marked the end of the Mackenzie Country. I had always thought of tussock as pretty uninteresting, but here it was a deep golden colour gleaming in the hot sunlight like well-brushed hair. The rocks too, the grass, the lichen, the moss, with their rich texture of greens and browns, and greys



Friends and fellow Weir House boarders, 1945, clockwise from above, Geoff Datson, Gordon Orr, Ron Trotter, Bill Oliver, Harry Orsman, and Pat Wilson.



completed the effect that was little short of magical.

Next day I climbed the mountain again, and this time alone, pausing halfway for a breather. It was another beautiful day. The lake was placid, the mountains stood tall, competing with their reflections, then round the corner came the *Earnslaw* no bigger than a child's toy. When she berthed at the wharf below, I felt I could reach down and pick her up. A little later I stood at the summit. It was Christmas Eve. I was looking across at the Remarkables, thinking about poetry, when I had the feeling I had it in me to write good poems, although I had written nothing so far I could be proud of. It was as exhilarating as taking in a lungful of cold mountain air. The feeling stayed with me all the way to Lake

Te Anau, the Eglinton Valley, Camp Marian at the head of the Hollyford Valley, and beyond to Milford Sound. Freezing cold air can have a strange effect on the mind.

Camp Marian under Mt Christina was a collection of Public Works huts, unoccupied at the time of our visit. The mist was low, and only the lower flanks of the mountain were visible, its granite surface smooth and gleaming in the half light. From every side came different sounds of water, splashing, murmuring, singing – and the light seemed to be dancing too, as it fell on rocks, tree trunks, and flowing water.

A decision had to be made, and that snapped me out of my reverie. Should we camp here for the night? Or press on to Milford Sound fifteen miles away? I was for staying, the

others wanted to go on, even though it was raining and close to nightfall. We were ill-prepared for such an expedition, and I can recall our amusement at the incongruous sight of John in a suit, hopping along a road as rough as a creek bed, cursing the sole of one of his shoes, which had become unstuck, and flapped when he raised his foot.

The approach to the Homer Tunnel was awe-inspiring. Sheer mountains hung above us on both sides. On our left a forest had been laid waste by avalanches, leaving jagged stumps, while on our right the infant Hollyford River tumbled noisily in its rocky bed. An avalanche cover-way that had protruded some distance from the tunnel mouth had also been swept away.

I suppose we were foolhardy to

walk through the tunnel on which all work had been suspended because of the war. It was unlined, and murmurous with the different sounds of water, and from the rubble lying throughout on the floor it was prone to rock falls. But we got through safely enough, and were lucky to find a hut near the tunnel mouth where we dosed down for the night.

On a subsequent southern expedition Roy Dickson was to lose his life in tragic circumstances.

Together with another student, he was swept to his death by a snow slide while climbing with a student party in the Southern Alps. As Weir House had temporarily closed down over the Christmas break because of staffing problems, I was staying in a bed-and-breakfast private hotel in Boulcott Street, when I heard the news. For months afterwards, the horror of his death – a large rock had been driven through his stomach – and the loss of his body down a crevasse, as the stretcher party was bringing it out, haunted my dreams. ... These are the events which led me to write my 'Elegy'. It was to the Hollyford Valley my imagination turned first for images to convey my sense of loss:

The shattered cliff's sheer
Face spurts myriads
Of waterfalls, like tears
From some deep-bowed head
Whose colossal grief is stone . . .

Douglas Lilburn later composed a fine setting of these poems.

My subjects for 1946 were Latin II, English II, and Greek History,

Art and Literature, and it was a relief to have [my brother] Stuart's gratuity, which enabled me to give my mind to them without being distracted by money worries. Of my University teachers, it is Professor H.A. Murray that I remember with special warmth. He wasn't an exuberant teacher like his fellow Scot Professor Ian Gordon. He was a scholarly man, quiet and retiring, but there was never any question of his ability to inspire in his students a love of the classics. He had his detractors who thought him sombre and suspicious, but I never found him so. He could be aloof and stiff, because he was shy and even diffident, but he would always unbend when I visited him in his study after a lecture. These informal sessions, during which he talked freely about the Roman author we were reading at the time, Tacitus, Virgil, Horace, and Pliny the Younger, were among the most rewarding of my university experiences.

I was interested in his impressions of A.E. Housman, a poet I had long admired, some of whose lectures he had attended as a young man. He told me Housman was a demanding lecturer, and a great classical scholar, feared for the ferocity of his attacks on slipshod work by his contemporaries in the field of classical scholarship. One of the mysteries about Housman is that he spent almost 30 years editing an incredibly dull poem on astrology by M. Manilius, an obscure Latin poet. Professor Murray didn't particularly care for Housman's poems.

During the three years I was at

Weir House, I had the good fortune to get to know some of the best minds of my generation: P.S. Wilson, W.H. Mabbett, W.H. Oliver, G.E. Datson, G.S. Orr, A.C. Moore, and H.W. Orsman.

The old daemons, however, returned and Alistair jettisoned his four subjects one by one, leaving only Latin III. But even here he was pursued and a few days before finals fled to Dunedin: 'I couldn't explain to myself why I was there. Perhaps I was looking for the lost thread of childhood that would lead me out of the Minotaur's den'.

Still uncertain of my plans, I sought refuge in the Dunedin Public Library where, as a high school boy and a university student, I had spent many happy hours browsing among the romantic poets – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley – and it was there I suddenly came to my senses. For the first time in weeks the fog rolled off my mind, and I knew I had no choice but to return to Wellington and face the music. With this decision came such a sense of relief that I became carefree and light-hearted.

But there was no time to lose. If I caught the next express to Christ church, which connected with the Lyttelton ferry, I would arrive back in Wellington on the very morning of my first Latin paper. I reserved my seat on the train, then returned to the library to review the state of my studies. I had put a lot of work into the *Odes* of Horace and the *Annals* of Tacitus, and if I were to spend the remaining available time, in the library, on the train, and even on the ferry, on Terence's *Phormio*,

which I had barely looked at, I would have a fair chance of passing. But it wasn't going to be easy, because *Phormio* was a play, much of it in idiomatic language.

I found an edition in the reference library upstairs, and was about to return to my chair when I saw a copy of WB Yeats's *Last Poems* on the display table. Yeats had never greatly appealed to me before. I had made several attempts to get inside his verse, and each time had been disappointed, I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. I had encountered his poems mainly in anthologies which leaned to the earlier soft-centred favourites, like the ubiquitous 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' and 'The Man Who Dreamed of Fairyland', which I had studied in English I under Professor Go'don, so I was curious to learn how his last poems shaped up. I picked up the book and began reading – and Terence was immediately blown away.

Who quarrels over halfpennies
That plucks the trees for bread?
What shall I do for pretty girls
Now my old bawd is dead?

This was a new experience, passionate and direct. Where was the dreamy Yeats of the Celtic twilight? As I read on, it seemed that Yeats was showing me how poems should be written, in a language that was bare and hard-edged as the hills of Central Otago:

Because I am mad about women
I am mad about the hills,
Said the wild old wicked man
Who travels where God wills . . .

Up till now I was dissatisfied

with my poems. I had found no model I could profit from. I had read W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis, but I could never write like them, although I tried to in a number of unsuccessful poems. Politically conscious verse with its empty rhetoric, such as Spender wrote, was not for me. He was a sensitive writer, but there was a softness in him that was reflected in his weak rhythms, imprecise imagery, and self-pitying tone.

MacNeice was altogether better, although I wearied of his bright language, Irish wit, and sprightly tone. But his 'Bagpipe Music' still remains a favourite. Day Lewis's early verse, showing deference to Auden 'Look west, Auden, lone flyer, birdman, bully boy' – is embarrassing, but his later poems indicate he had learnt much from Thomas Hardy, as had Baxter some years later. T.S. Eliot, whose verse I admired, clearly had no time for Lewis's verse, and this may have been largely because he despised him as a womaniser.

Auden's verse I loved, especially the early lyrics, and this may surprise some readers familiar with my poem, 'Memo to Mr Auden', in which I attack him for his heartlessness. I particularly like the ballad, 'As I Walked out One Evening' with its extravagant and playful imagery.

The years shall run like rabbits
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And first love of the world
...

It was late, late in the evening
The lovers they were gone

The clocks had ceased their chiming
And the deep river ran on.

When Auden wrote 'I think that poetry is fundamentally frivolity. I do it because I like it', he may have only been half-serious, but he could have cited this poem as an example of what he meant. I consider 'The Shield of Achilles' one of the great poems of the language.

Which brings me back to Yeats, and my excitement at discovering him. Here was a poet, I felt I could learn from. It was poetry with sharp imagery that left clear pictures in the mind, subtle rhythms, and the language of everyday speech, heightened by powerful emotions.

For years afterwards Yeats was to haunt my imagination, sometimes making it difficult to speak in my own voice – as some critics were only too happy to point out.

And so, with Yeats singing in my veins, and my nose in the library copy of *Phormio*, I made it safely back to Wellington, not without some distraction from a couple of barmen on holiday, who shared a cabin with me, as well as a couple of cartons of beer and a bottle of whisky. I had been lying on one of the upper bunks, trying to study by the rather weak light by my pillow, when one of the barmen said, 'Shit, mate, you'll go blind readin' in the dark. Must be a cracker book'.

'I've got an exam tomorrow'.

'A student, eh? Thought so. Why not take a break, and join us for a drink?'

At first I refused, then I thought, 'What the hell!'. I had made a lot of headway with the *Phormio*, but I still

had some distance to go. I can't absorb much more. I'll just have to hope that the questions are taken from the first half of the book. It's too late to worry now. So I joined the jolly barmen, and just before midnight crashed into my bunk.

Next morning, elated and a little tipsy, I sat my first paper, and over the following fortnight the other two papers as well, and then put them completely out of my mind. I had already passed my test, and success in the examination, which was published in due course, could only come as an anticlimax.

On my return to Weir House Harry Orsman had warned me that my absence had been reported to the principal, and that I should expect to be summoned before him. I had never met the great Tommy Hunter, but I had heard from Pat Wilson, who had studied under him, that he was a tetchy little man, a rationalist and a martinet, who commanded much respect and even fear from students and teachers alike. But as Pat was careful to point out, he was also a just man who would give me every chance to explain my behaviour.

As it turned out, Tommy Hunter was more than just, he was very kind and patient. He listened

without a word to my story, and then gently pointed out the great concern I had caused the matron through my thoughtlessness, and made me promise to come and see him if ever I needed help or advice. He then wished me well in my studies, and said he would look out

in bookshops, and he never failed to come up to me and inquire about my poetry.

In matters of poetry I was closer to Pat Wilson than to any other member of the Wellington group. We used to discuss poetry, in particular, prosody until the cows came home, driving our girlfriends up the wall. I can recall Douglas Lilburn's amusement over the solemn way we used to discuss the mysteries of our craft. Fresh from my study of Latin verse, the odes of Horace, I had the simple belief that a poet should bring to his craft the same concern that a bricklayer brings to his trade, and we should no more tolerate a badly made poem than a badly built wall. I still believe this, but I no longer get excited about prosody. I would go some way with A.E. Housman who wrote:

'Do not ever read books about versification: no poet ever learnt that way. If you are going to be a poet, it will come to you naturally and you will pick up all you need

from reading poetry'. This is almost a paraphrase of what Keats wrote: 'If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all'.

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<small>HILLTOP published by the Literata Society of Victoria University College is not a student magazine. This is the only point we would like to make clear, editorially, in this first issue. It exists for all writers, in New Zealand and outside.</small>	

The cover of Hilltop Volume 1 Number 1, April 1949.

for any poems that appeared under my name and read them with special interest. I left his study treading on air, and with the highest regard for that admirable man. I never went back to see him – I was too diffident – but I did run into him from time to time, usually

In the summer of 1948-49 he went with friends fruit picking in Central Otago:

I was then working on my *Elegy*, a set of poems commemorating the death of Roy Dickson, and I composed some of the lyrics while picking fruit. I particularly recall 'Now He is Dead', the second in the sequence, because, when a storm caused work in the orchard to be abandoned, I retired to my hut, and wrote the words down before I forgot them. By then the worst of the storm had moved away, leaving the gentle patter of rain as a creative distraction.

I have read that Indian poets find the monsoon season especially congenial for writing verse. That's how rain used to affect me, and how it affected the Welsh poet Edward Thomas:

Rain, midnight rain,
nothing but the wild
rain

On this bleak hut, and
solitude,
and me

Remembering again that I shall die

... and die he did, in the Great War, a terrible loss to literature. Who doesn't like lying in bed in the darkness, listening to rain on the roof, preferably a tin roof? It's like being in the womb of mother nature.

Back in Wellington, John M. Thomson, Lorna Clendon, and Pat Wilson were busy planning a literary magazine, and John had written to me at Clyde, asking me if I could suggest a suitable title for it. Pat, who was working on his doctoral thesis, on Blake, favoured

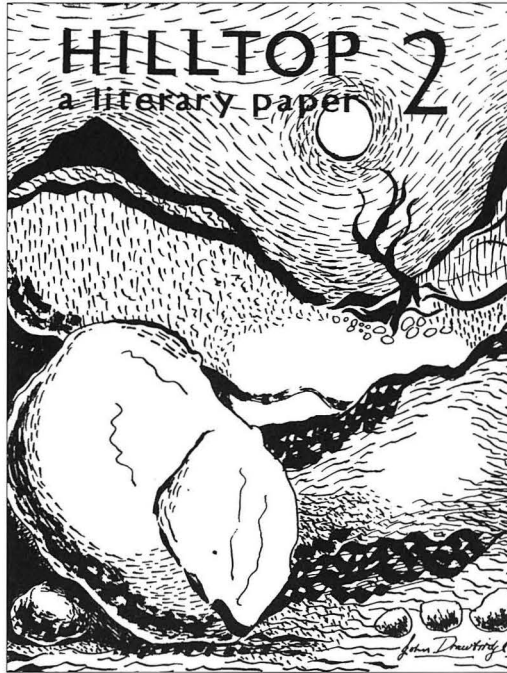
international success:

I travel'd thro' the Land of Men,
A Land of Men & women too
And heard & saw such dreadful
things
As cold Earth wanderers never
knew ...

Christopher's Paper, as a title, reflected Pat's puckish and rather private sense of humour, but it would have meant little to the uninitiated. For my part I could think of nothing more resonant than *Notornis*, from a bird that had recently been rediscovered, and was much in the news.

Sporting a beard and with a pocketful of poems, I returned to Wellington by way of Naseby, to find that the question of the title had been settled – *Hilltop*. I was appalled. For a magazine that was to make a breakthrough for the rising generation of New Zealand writers, it was singularly inept. Pat who was then in Tauranga disliked it as much as I. It was John who explained to me, in

some embarrassment, how the title had come about. He had discussed the problem with Ian Gordon, Professor of English at Victoria, who thought *Christopher's Paper* sounded too precious, and would put people off. 'I want to see you succeed'. He got up and took down



The cover of Hilltop 2 (Volume 1 Number 2), June 1949, featuring a drawing by John Drawbridge.

Christopher's Paper after the patron saint of travellers. I suspect he identified the writer with the protagonist of Blake's richly symbolic poem 'The Mental Traveller', which Joyce Carey had used to such marvellous effect in his novel *The Horse's Mouth*, then enjoying

a volume of Donne's poems, and quickly leafed through the pages.

'I think I have the very title for you,' he said. 'Listen to this. It's from "Satire III":'

On a huge hill,
Cragged, and steep,
Truth stands, and hee
that will
Reach her, about must,
and about must goe;
And what the hill's
suddenness resists,
winne so . . .

'Why not *Hilltop*?', he said. And *Hilltop* it was – God damn it! We learned to live with it, and even developed an affection for it, which survived the first tentative issue, whose appearance, as Roy Parsons unkindly observed, was all too redolent of a parish magazine. He little knew that the galleys had been pasted up on the pages of *The New Zealand Undertakers Magazine* which served as the dummy. By comparison James Bertram was generous to *Hilltop*, describing it in his article 'Literary Periodicals' in *Spike* 1954, 'one of the most interesting experimental journals put out at a university college in New Zealand'. Of my own poems, which numbered eight, four were of a poor quality ('Evening through the Gorge', 'The Girl in the Library', 'I Remember

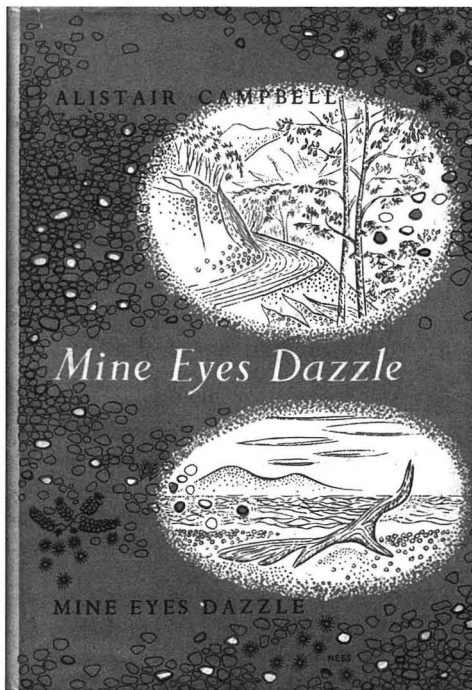
this Day', and 'Easily you Move'). I have never republished them.

Our editorial policy was to publish the best work we received. Occasionally, we would solicit certain established writers, such as

of the editorial committee interested in a particular writer- John Mansfield Thomson, for example, wrote a perceptive review of a novel by a rising American novelist, Truman Capote, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

Although *Hilltop* was published by the Literary Society of Victoria University College, we wanted it to be known that it wasn't a student magazine. As we put it in a brief editorial note, 'It exists for all writers in New Zealand and outside'. I was perhaps the least engaged of the editors, and while I was happy to offer an opinion on any work shown me, I tended to leave final decisions to the others. My shortcomings as an editor have always come from the priority I place on my verse.

Hilltop was to be an alternative to *Landfall*, which we considered stuffy and academic, favouring the work of the so-called Caxton poets Curnow, Glover, Fairburn, and the rest – whose preoccupation with what Curnow was to describe as 'the New Zealand, the real thing', struck us as provincial and limiting. To us the international scene was just as relevant as the local one, and to exclude it from our concerns could only diminish us as writers. We looked on our seniors as adversaries, determined to belittle our efforts, and bring us into ridicule by charging us with 'easy



The cover of the new revised edition of Alistair Campbell's *Mine eyes Dazzle*, Pegasus Press, Christchurch, 1956, with jacket design by Geoffrey Nees.

Baxter and David Ballantyne, for a poem or a short story, but generally we let it be known that we were in business, and were interested in good original writing and wait for it to come in. As we had little money to pay reviewers, most of the reviewing was done by one or other

publication'. However, it was more than a clash of values or taste: certain writers in the opposing Auckland and Wellington camps detested each other, and refused to concede that anyone who was not a personal friend could produce work of lasting value.

What conclusions can one draw? The fault lay on both sides. Our seniors lacked generosity and we lacked respect for what they had achieved. It is a commonplace that young writers, hungry to make their mark, tend to be dismissive of the previous generation, who in turn are equally dismissive of *their* efforts. As the American novelist John Updike writes: 'I know now that the literary scene is a kind of Medusa's raft [*Raft of the Medusa*, a painting by Théodore Géricault], small and sinking, and one's instinct when a newcomer tries to clamber aboard is to stamp on his fingers'.

But was *Landfall* as stuffy and academic as we claimed? Some of its leading reviewers and critics were university teachers, who were stuffy when they wrote to impress fellow academics, or when they genuflected too readily to the established writers. Charles Brasch's editorials sometimes fell short of being effective, because his prose often

lacked precision and incisiveness, essential in such writing.

Nevertheless, we didn't hesitate to send *Landfall* some of our best work, for example, Bill Oliver sent his 'In the Fields of my Father's

have admitted that it was a feather in one's cap to appear in *Landfall*.

John Mansfield Thomson was a slightly built, thoughtful young man, with fair hair already thinning, a fine sensitive face, troubled in repose, and a jolly sense of fun. He was more Pat Wilson's friend than mine. But over the years we have become close friends. More recently he became respected in the musical world as the founding editor of the influential periodical *Early Music*, London, 1973-83, and the leading writer on New Zealand music. His numerous books, written in elegant prose, include *The Oxford History of New Zealand Music* (1991). John was the most committed of our editors. I sometimes had the feeling that he was the only true professional among us.

For the first issue, John and the editorial committee organised an impressive line-up of writers, including committee members and poets Pat Wilson and Bill Oliver, fiction writer David Ballantyne and P.J. Wilson, and poets James K. Baxter and Louis

Johnson, a newcomer to our ranks. Baxter's arrival in Wellington in 1949 was especially welcome, because he was the one writer acceptable to all sides. The magazine was planned, edited, and prepared for the printer at 301

The Return

And again I see the long pouring headland,
And smoking coast with the sea high on the rocks,
The gulls flung from the sea, the wooded hills
Swarming with mist, and mist low on the sea.

And on the surf-loud beach the long spent hulks,
The mats and splintered masts, and fires kindled
On the wet sand, and men moving between the fires,
Standing or crouching with backs to the sea.

Their heads finely shrunken to a skull, small
And delicate, with small black rounded beaks;
Their antique bird-like chatter bringing to mind
Wild locusts, bees, and trees filled with wild honey

—And sweet as incense-clouds, the smoke rising, the fire
Spitting with rain, and mist low with rain—
Their great eyes glowing, their rain-jewelled, leaf-green
Bodies leaning and talking with the sea behind them:

Plant gods, tree gods, gods of the middle world. Face
downward

And in a small creek-mouth all unperceived,
The drowned Dionysus, sand in his eyes and mouth,
In the sea tide lolling—beautiful, and with the last
harsh

Glare of divinity from lip and broad brow ebbing . . .
The long-awaited! And the gulls passing over with
shrill cries;
And the fires going out on the thundering sand;
And the mist, and the mist moving over the land.

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*Facsimile of 'The Return' as published in the
new revised edition of Mine Eyes Dazzle, 1956.*

*This 'final' version was further revised when republished in
Pocket Collected Poems (Hazard, 1996).*

Youth', Baxter his 'Poem in the Matukituki Valley', and I my 'Elegy'.

Even Johnson, who did more than any of us to encourage young writers, and who jokingly spoke of Brasch as Auntie Charles, would

Willis Street, which became for a while the group's headquarters. John shared the house with various people, including the painter Hugh Mason, who had also been at Nelson College, and the historian and 'King of Quiz' Jim Winchester. It was a meeting place, not only for Wellington writers, but also for writers passing through, such as Keith Sinclair. David Ballantyne once lived there, as did Ian Cross.

In its second issue, Hilltop published Alistair's 'Landscape with Figures', later re-titled 'The Return'.

I remember the time I wrote 'The Return'. It was a close rainy night. I was coming off duty in the ward [at Mowai home where he worked as an orderly], when the first lines came into my head. I sat at my table, and with the rain rustling on the roof, I quickly wrote the first draft, which was published in *Hilltop* 2. The final version appeared in my first book of verse, *Mine Eyes Dazzle*.

Many influences went towards the making of this poem: my own Polynesian roots, canoe voyaging remembered in the blood, the dark myths and sculptures of Egypt and Polynesia, the Bible, Greek myths, certain poems by Keats, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, and the wilder aspects of the New Zealand coast. So much I can suggest, but how or why elements from these sources came together and fused dramatically to become a poem is a mystery I can't explain.

I was surprised and delighted by its reception. John, who as editor of

Hilltop was first to read it, was excited by it, as was Hubert Witheford after him. On publication it immediately became popular, and has remained the most admired of my poems, overshadowing later works some of which I consider as good. Douglas Lilburn, New Zealand's leading composer, set it to powerful and evocative sound imagery, which has been recorded with Tim Eliot as reader.

What is the poem trying to say? Rather than reveal any secrets, I shall quote Baxter in his paper, 'Symbolism in New Zealand Poetry': 'The images, like many of Campbell's have an almost hallucinatory force. The Polynesian gods and demigods have returned from the sea (Jung would say the collective unconscious); the falling rain is a symbol of their regeneration; their bodies are "leaf-green", a symbol of the energy of the unconscious mind ... Campbell uses Greek mythology also - Dionysus (perhaps in another role, Eliot's drowned Phoenician sailor) lies submerged, a mysterious figure in this context, "unperceived" perhaps the Dionysiac self which must die in order that the gods may return'.

Baxter often had recourse to Jung in analysing poems, and here, as so often, he is both tantalising and illuminating. J.E.P. Thomson, former university teacher, is also to the point in his 'Note on Alistair Campbell's "The Return"' in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 1, 1983: 'The poem, I think we may agree, embodies a vision of Polynesian powers returning to take possession again of these south

Pacific islands', and so replacing 'the alien individualistic represented in this poem by Dionysus'.

In his review of my collection of poems entitled *Wild Honey* in *Comment* 6, No 2, 1965, James Bertram makes some interesting remarks on 'The Return': 'I don't think anyone could explain this poem, or would want to: it has something to do with migrations, with men and gods, in a Pacific setting; the setting is clearly realised, the figures are figures in a dream?'

He continues: "'The Return' ... is a purely magical poem, which (one is tempted to think) only someone of mixed European and Polynesian descent could have written: the kind of poem these islands had been waiting for'.



ALISTAIR TE ARIKI CAMPBELL was born in Rarotonga on 25 June 1925, the son of John Archibald Campbell, a third-generation New Zealander from Dunedin who became secretary of the Cook Islands Trading Company, and Teu (née Bosini), a Polynesian family of chiefly origins. Both his parents died early and the orphaned four children spent several years of their childhood in a Dunedin orphanage. He attended Otago Boys High School where he succeeded academically and in sports. Besides several volumes of poems he has written four novels. His Pocket Collected Poems of 1996 is his most recent attempt at a complete survey of his poetic oeuvre, and has an important introduction by Roger Robinson.