

“No Ordinary Assignment”: Graham Kirk’s *Dick Sargeson*

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Abstract

Comics are a popular medium that are often overlooked in terms of New Zealand cultural history. This article discusses Taranaki artist Graham Kirk’s comic strip *Dick Sargeson*, which ran in the *New Zealand Listener* from 1984 – 1988, as a significant piece of contemporary New Zealand popular culture. The two extended serial adventures that constitute the strip are used as a vehicle for socio-political commentary on the New Zealand of the mid-1980s through the application of distinct narrative and aesthetic approaches, such as parochial Taranaki settings and a photo-realist drawing style.



Figure 1. ‘The Stone of Glotte’, episode 1.

New Zealand has a rich and fascinating history of comics, although cultural awareness of this history is generally limited to those few examples of the medium that have achieved widespread cultural prominence. Pre-eminent in this respect would be Murray Ball’s comic strip *Footrot Flats*, which achieved immense success in the 1970s and 1980s via syndication across regional newspapers and collection into best-selling albums, along with serving as the basis for New Zealand’s first major animated feature film, *Footrot Flats: The Dog’s Tale* (1986). *Terry and the Gunrunners* (1982), an action-adventure produced in album format as something of an antipodean homage to Tintin by writer Steven Ballantyne and artist Bob Kerr, proved popular enough with children to spawn a TV adaptation and two further adventures which were serialised in the *NZ Listener* before being collected into album formats. Similarly,

the country has a long history of high-profile editorial/political cartoonists associated with newspapers and current affairs magazines. Notable figures of the last 50 or so years include Gordon Minhinnick (the *NZ Herald*, 1940s-1980s), Neville Lodge (the *Evening Post*, 1960s-1970s), Tom Scott (the *Dominion Post* and *NZ Listener*, 1970s – present), Trace Hodgson (*NZ Listener*, 1980s), and Chris Slane (*NZ Listener*, 1980s - present). Such cartooning has been well-documented by Ian F. Grant in book length studies,¹ and through the establishment in 1992 of the New Zealand Cartoon Archive, under the auspices of the Alexander Turnbull library.

Outside of these exceptions, however, it is arguable that the bulk of New Zealand's comic culture is little-known to the general public, and has been largely overlooked in terms of scholarship and commentary on New Zealand popular culture. However, over the last several years there have been a number of trends indicative of growing interest in New Zealand comics. These include publication of graphic novels by local creators through major publishing houses;² publicity for such titles (interviews, reviews) in mainstream media outlets; and the entrenchment of New Zealand comic stalls at the Armageddon pop culture expos held at various urban centres around the country. In this respect the publication in 2013 of *From Earth's End*, Adrian Kinnaird's history of New Zealand comics, marks something of a watershed in terms of recognition of the medium within New Zealand popular culture.³ However, in order to make the project manageable Kinnaird restricted his focus to New Zealand comic books, rather than comic strips and cartoons. The significance of the latter forms to New Zealand comics culture is therefore considerably under-represented in the book.⁴

In this context, the time is ripe for further scholarship and commentary developing New Zealand comics as a distinct area of indigenous cultural study. This article seeks to contribute to such a body of work by presenting an appraisal of *Dick Sargeson*, a comic strip written and drawn by Taranaki artist Graham Kirk, which was published in the form of two extended serial narratives in the *NZ Listener* from 1984-1988. The series is replete with significant elements of cultural and aesthetic interest, but has been overlooked in discussions of New Zealand comics to date. As mentioned above, the strip format placed the series outside the parameters of Kinnaird's recent history: other factors shaping its marginalisation include its relatively ephemeral publication history (as a strip in a weekly current affairs magazine that was not subsequently collected and re-published in standard comic-book or album formats), and the fact that Kirk's creative affiliations are rooted in the realms of painting and photography rather than comics and graphic design, so that his profile has remained relatively low within the cultural networks of New Zealand comics and graphics practice and criticism. Kirk uses the genre conventions of adventure serials, in combination with a photorealistic drawing style, to convey astringent social and political commentary on contemporary New Zealand. Over 30 years later, the strip is not only a pioneering example of 'serious' comic work in New Zealand, but a fascinating historical document of an epochal period in recent New Zealand history.

About the 'Dick Sargeson' comic strip series

The *Dick Sargeson* serials are an artifact of a distinct, possibly unique, milieu in New Zealand's comics culture. For the better part of a decade under the editorship of David Beatson, *The New Zealand Listener*, a bastion of the New Zealand public sphere, published comic strip serials – Kirk's *Dick Sargeson* series, followed by political cartoonist Trace Hodgson's series *Shafts of Strife* and *The Television* (1988–1991) – that combined socio-political commentary with formal experimentation, a marked departure from the usual journalistic engagement with comics as either political cartoons or humour strips. This article will discuss both *Dick Sargeson* serials in relation to the social history of New Zealand during the period in which they were produced. The initial focus will be on the major socio-political thematic of each respective adventure: concerns about chemical pollution of the Taranaki environment in 'Dioxin Man', and the rise

to power of neoliberal ideology in New Zealand in 'The Stone of Glotte'. This will be followed by two sections discussing formal aspects of the series that are both significant components of the strips socio-political commentary and significant departures from standard comic conventions and make significant contributions to the socio-political commentary: the subversion of narrative expectations in relation to the development of Dick Sargeson as the ostensible protagonist, and the photorealist visual aesthetic that affiliates the strip with the ethos of pop art. A synopsis of the storyline to both serials will be firstly presented, so as to provide necessary context for such discussion.

'Dioxin Man' (1984-85) - synopsis

Taranaki resident Dick Sargeson (DS), photojournalist for World Pictures Agency, becomes involved in the mystery of the 'taniwha', a bizarre humanoid creature sighted around the New Plymouth shoreline, particularly near the Hodgekiss Chemicals plant. After initial investigations with his friend Ponso, DS is saved by the creature after almost drowning in an attempt to capture a photograph of it. Following local character Orlando, who is a friend of the taniwha, DS encounters it in the flesh on the beach, but it escapes. Visiting Orlando, DS is told the backstory of the creature: it is actually a man named Bruce Bilgepipe, who was mutated when struck by lightning in a pool of contaminated water on the coast four months earlier. Bilgepipe feeds on dioxin, ameliorated with pure water from the Stony River; due to his toxic diet, his touch is lethal to living organisms.

Meanwhile, a dioxin-drunk Bilgepipe causes havoc in downtown New Plymouth, before being rescued by his friend and former Hodgekiss Chemicals scientist Sola Poward, while DS disappears. Realising that 'Dioxin Man', as he is now labelled in the media, is focussing international media attention on Hodgekiss Chemicals' environmentally polluting practices, mogul Jeremy Hodgekiss hires local thugs Lurgan and Macduff to liquidate the creature.

With the help of his friends, Bilgepipe returns to live clandestinely in his house, and is told by Orlando that he has talked to a toxicologist who thinks she can reverse the accident and restore Bilgepipe to his human form. Meanwhile, the mercenary Lurgan has organised a double-deal: he and MacDuff will abduct Bilgepipe and smuggle him to a Russian impresario in New York who wants to commercially exploit him, while telling Hodgekiss that they have killed him.

Bilgepipe undergoes tests with the toxicology team, but has a toxic stroke and escapes to the beach. Drunk again on polluted seawater, he enters a local electricity station and accidentally kills a technician with his poisonous touch. Orlando and Sola find Bilgepipe and take him back to his house, from where he is abducted by Lurgan and Macduff and put on a freighter for New York. However, Bilgepipe escapes in Wellington, spawning a nation-wide manhunt. With Hodgekiss now aware of the doublecross and Macduff safe overseas, Lurgan decides to kill Hodgekiss to save himself from the latter's wrath.

Returning to New Plymouth, Bilgepipe is reunited with his father and Sola, who take him out to the coast to undergo the reversal operation, which consists of taking a chemical formula and being struck by lightning in contaminated seawater. The operation is a success, the restored Bilgepipe confronting Hodgekiss in his mansion at the same time as Lurgan. However, just as Bilgepipe rings the TV news to get Hodgekiss to confess to his crimes, the reversal operation fails and Bilgepipe dies. The story ends with a news item that reveals that DS had gone undercover as a worker at Hodgekiss Chemicals in order to gather evidence about the 'dioxin man' scandal, which will shortly be made public.

'The Stone of Glotte' (1987-88) - synopsis

Dick Sargeson, in need of work, accepts a position with the New Plymouth-based newspaper *The Daily Mail* courtesy of editor Des Hogan. His first assignment is to investigate the claim

by local psychic Ben Skull that he has found a mysterious ancient artefact – the Glottestone – buried in a Taranaki swamp, which proves to be correct. Becoming aware of the find, henchman Lurgan informs his boss, Jeremy Hodgekiss, who instructs him to get rid of the stone as he has just bought the land to develop into a theme park and resort.

Finding the Stone vanished, Sargeson accompanies Skull in a ritual which produces a vision of where the stone has been hidden, while Sargeson's fellow reporter, Tracey Malone, interviews Hodgekiss and begins a romantic relationship with him. Tracking the stone to an abandoned Taranaki dairy factory, Sargeson and Skull are overcome by Lurgan, after Skull has first instructed Lurgan in how to use the stone's power.

The Daily Mail publishes a front-page story on the Glottestone saga to date, albeit lacking conclusive proof linking Hodgekiss to its disappearance. Sargeson reveals he is suffering from neurological illness caused by exposure to a chemical spill from Hodgekiss Chemicals, and is rescued by Tracey after collapsing in his driveway. In damage control mode, Hodgekiss begins work on the site of his 'Boomerland' theme park with supervisor Leo Lovegrove. O'Hara reveals that Sargeson has become a sickness beneficiary as a result of his condition, which has affected his memory and left him incapable of testifying against Hodgekiss.

Failing in his attempts to access the mystical energies of the stone, a disgruntled Lurgan delivers it to Hodgekiss's mansion, where Tracey catches him trying to get rid of it. Making to leave Hodgekiss, Tracey is accidentally run over by Hodgekiss's car and killed. Hodgekiss decides to get rid of the stone and then contact the police about Tracey's fatal accident, but his car breaks down before he can dump the stone in the sea. Acting on a tip-off from Lurgan, Hogan despatches reporter O'Hara to tail Hodgekiss, but the unlucky reporter fails to get to the scene.

Realising that it is too late to restage Tracey's death, Hodgekiss cremates her body in the incinerator of the chemical plant. While Hogan and O'Hara presume Hodgekiss is involved with her disappearance, Hodgekiss manages to remove himself from suspicion with the police, but is caught by both his ex-wife Sybil and Lovegrove loading the Glottestone into the boot of his car. Not wishing to compromise their lucrative relationships with Hodgekiss, both become accomplices in disposing of the stone, arranging to have it taken out on a boat from a remote Taranaki beach and dumped at sea. Getting wind of the scheme, O'Hara tracks them to the beach and takes some photos of the loading, but gets stuck in rocks before he can physically intervene. On the boat the Glottestone emits a high-pitched whine and begins to grow, causing Lovegrove to dump it overboard just off the coast.

O'Hara's photographs prove too inconclusive to incriminate anyone. Standing on the beach at night, a drunken Hogan witnesses the bizarre spectacle of the gigantic Glottestone rearing out of the sea and shooting a 'baby' glottestone into space through one of its horns before disintegrating. The story ends with a TV news item on the Boomerland development, which announces that Hodgekiss has been granted a knighthood.

'Dioxin Man' and 'Boomerland': Environmental and political commentary in *Dick Sargeson*

Two key factors shaping the articulation of the *Dick Sargeson* strips as socio-political commentary are the background of creator Graham Kirk and the genre frameworks of the strips. Born in the south Taranaki township of Hawera in 1948, Kirk has lived in Taranaki most of his life with a base in Okato, a rural area not far from the major city of the province, New Plymouth. A professional artist, his comic work on *Dick Sargeson* bridges his early work in photography and current work in painting (this will be discussed in more detail below). While not arguing for an overtly biographical dimension to the stories, I would however postulate that the critical perspectives on environmentalism and politics implicit in the strips reflect the values of the

1960s and 1970s counterculture of which Kirk was a part,⁵ as evidenced by his tertiary studies and early arts practice in the New Zealand 'bohemia' of late 1960s/early 1970s Auckland.⁶

In terms of comic genres, *Dick Sargeson* is ostensibly an adventure serial. The narrative template of adventure serials generally involves a heroic protagonist battling against enemies in a fairly realistic setting, a template which can be readily developed into more specific generic forms such as sci-fi and thrillers.⁷ Each episode presents a limited piece of the story, thereby keeping readers in suspense as they have to read each successive instalment to find out how the plot develops. The templates for this genre lie in the early era of American comics, in which the dominant mode of comic narratives were daily or weekly strips published in mass-circulation newspapers.⁸ Such comic strips were popular aspects of newspapers, in terms of making the medium commercially attractive to children, and providing light relief to adult readers from the serious nature of the news. The 1920s and 1930s saw the development of the adventure serial as a major comics genre, in such well-known forms as the strips *Mandrake the Magician* and *Flash Gordon*.⁹ At face value, *Dick Sargeson* could be seen to function as entertainment content in relation to the *Listener*'s status as New Zealand's senior current affairs magazine - a perception reinforced by the initial placement of the Dioxin Man strip within the *Listener*'s then-section for children, entitled 'Look'. The entertainment value resides in the strips' distinct generic approach, which I'll label here with the epithet 'provincial pulp'. Kirk takes scenarios and motifs familiar from adventure serials and the associated 'B-grade' or 'pulp' genres of sci-fi, fantasy and thrillers, and stages them in the explicitly parochial environs of New Plymouth and the Taranaki province.¹⁰ While this approach might initially appear entertaining due to the novelty of combining genre elements associated with American popular culture genres in distinctly New Zealand settings, it not only revivifies story elements that might come across as clichéd in standard genre settings, but also enables Kirk to use these genre tropes and narrative conventions to construct the *Dick Sargeson* adventures as critical and satirical commentaries upon contemporary New Zealand society. In these respects the *Dick Sargeson* stories should be more appropriately considered as socio-political commentary in the guise of popular adventure.

The socio-political focus of the first *Dick Sargeson* adventure, informally titled 'Dioxin Man' (1984-1985), are environmental issues relating to chemical pollution.¹¹ These concerns were the central focus of books like American biologist Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) that formed the basis for the environmental movements that became expressed in international organisations like Greenpeace and political groups such as the New Zealand Values Party in the 1970s and, more recently, the Green Party. The 'Dioxin Man' adventure is a thinly disguised allegory for what has been one of the central sites of concern about chemical pollution in New Zealand - the Ivon Watkins Dow agri-chemical plant (now Dow AgroSciences), situated in the New Plymouth suburb of Paritutu. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, when more stringent environmental standards were applied, the plant manufactured herbicides such as 245T containing dioxin, a synthetic organophosphate compound that is highly toxic to organisms and responsible for serious impacts upon human health. The health and environmental impacts of pollution, particularly upon workers at the plant and residents of surrounding suburbs, has been the subject of long-term activism from New Plymouth residents.¹² The 'Dioxin Man' story was directly inspired by a particular period in the early 1980s, when Kirk, working on a beach reclamation project with fellow New Plymouth artist Michael Smither, was a first-hand witness to chemical contamination of the shoreline of the Back Beach area in the immediate vicinity of the plant.¹³

Kirk articulates his environmental message through a premise that is a staple of the sci-fi genre, and, in particular, the superhero comics of DC and Marvel that have become ubiquitous standards of post-war popular culture: a man is caught in a scientific accident and mutated into a being with powers beyond ordinary humans. However, chemical waste

technician Bruce Bilgepipe's accident – struck by lightning whilst standing in contaminated water somewhere along New Plymouth's Back Beach – doesn't transform him into a superhero along the lines of the Hulk or the Fantastic Four, but a grotesque feathery lump endowed with the anti-heroic attribute of a lethal chemical touch (Fig. 2). In this respect Bilgepipe's mutant name - 'Dioxin Man' - is a satire on the genre convention whereby the word preceding the suffix 'man' signifies the types of powers that are passed on to the victim as the result of whatever scientific experiment goes wrong, for example Spiderman (boy given arachnid abilities after being bitten by a radioactive spider) and Plastic Man (who is able to stretch and mould his body after being contaminated with polymers). In keeping with the explicitly provincial realisation of Dioxin Man, Kirk uses localised examples to embody the environmental messages at the heart of the strip. For example, the dominant dichotomy of environmental value between the natural world (good) and the man-made/industrial world (bad) is expressed through the plot device of Bilgepipe ameliorating the 'toxic strokes' he suffers in the comedown from his dioxin 'highs' by ingesting the pure water from the Stony River which runs from the flanks of Mt Taranaki. Similarly, the engagement of the Taranaki arts community in anti-pollution activism is reflected in Kirk's use of Michael Smither as the model for Orlando, Bilgepipe's helper.

The environmental themes of 'Dioxin Man' are framed within a wider critique of the values of late capitalist society. Bilgepipe is a tragic figure, his transformation the result of an industrial accident caused by the lax environmental practices of the villains of the story, the Hodgekiss Chemicals plant and its owner, Jeremy Hodgekiss. The plant's corruption of the environment is linked to the moral corruption of Hodgekiss, who uses his wealth and status to try and avoid responsibility. While Hodgekiss's corruption is predominantly shown through standard thriller tropes, namely his hiring of goons Lurgan and Macduff to eliminate 'liabilities' such as Bilgepipe, it is also depicted in forms that appear more realistic – and more typical – in relation to the nature of power in capitalist societies. A notable example in this regard is the scene at the start of the climactic sequence in Hodgekiss's mansion in which Hodgekiss is on the phone to his public relations advisor, commending him on an effective job downplaying Dioxin Man's links to Hodgekiss Chemicals in the news media and inviting the advisor to a 'poolside barbecue' featuring the local 'health department boys'. In showing Hodgekiss's use of public relations to manipulate public opinion and personal networking to buy the favour of government officials, Kirk reflects perennial liberal concerns regarding the compromising of democracy by big business.

The environmental and economic themes of 'Dioxin Man' are endowed with further critical resonance by virtue of their setting, which is contemporaneous with the New Zealand of 1984-1985 when Kirk created and published the strips. 1984 is now regarded as a watershed year in New Zealand politics, as it saw the end of Robert Muldoon's long-standing National government in favour of David Lange's Labour administration. During its six-year tenure in office, this government belied its Leftist roots and radically reconfigured New Zealand society through the implementation of economic reforms – nicknamed 'Rogernomics' after their chief architect, Labour Finance Minister Roger Douglas – based upon free market principles and the socio-economic ideologies of monetarism and neo-liberalism, which considered the market to be a more effective and moral system of social organisation than the state.¹⁴ The overt references to contemporary politics in 'Dioxin Man' reflect traditional delineations between left and right values in NZ society that would soon be challenged and become increasingly blurred under the Lange government. For example, when Sargeson encounters the mutated Bilgepipe after staking out his rendezvous point, his attempts to stop Bilgepipe fleeing are expressed not only through standard genre dialogue like "you can't hide forever!" and "you've got to trust me!", but the more atypical declaration "we've had a change of government!" (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. 'Dioxin Man', episode 15

As this particular episode was published in 1984, just after Labour's election victory, Sargey's line suggests that the traditionally pro-worker Labour government will be more ready to address Hodgekiss Chemicals' criminal liabilities behind Bilgepipe's unfortunate mutation into 'Dioxin Man' than the outgoing National government, given the latter's reputation as the party of big business. However, this ostensibly pro-Labour tone is noticeably absent from the 'Glottestone' adventure, which was published from 1987 onwards, when the Rogernomics revolution was well-established.

The traditional Labour/National divisions of New Zealand society, which would become irrevocably blurred under Rogernomics, are more directly expressed in the episode in which Sola Poward tracks down Bilgepipe's father, who tells her his son's life story (Fig. 3). Mr Bilgepipe is conveyed as a classic 'old-school' New Zealand figure: "we've never had any pretensions. We're just working-class folk. Never hurt anybody, always minded our own business!" While initially proud of his son's educational achievements - "blow me down if he didn't get himself a couple of degrees!" - it is revealed that father and son are estranged through the latter's abrogation of his left-wing roots: "In the seventy-eight election he stood for the National party. I begged him not to! He lost, but the damage had already been done. How could I ever hold my head up again?"



Figure 3. 'Dioxin Man', episode 41

In this context, Lurgan's attempt to smuggle Bilgepipe out of New Zealand to New York by stashing him on a freighter as a crate of kiwifruit becomes symbolic as well as humorous, as the New Zealand kiwifruit industry had a short-lived boom period in international exports in the mid-1980s in relation to investors looking for 'get-rich-quick' opportunities to capitalise on the financial sector reforms of Rogernomics.¹⁵

'Dioxin Man' also reflects the political climate of contemporary New Zealand society in its references to nuclear weapons. The 1970s and early 1980s in New Zealand were marked by strong public anti-nuclear sentiment, particularly evident in large-scale protests against the trans-Pacific ANZUS defence agreement in which visiting American warships adopted a 'neither confirm nor deny' policy regarding their nuclear weapons capability.¹⁶ Anxieties about nuclear war also manifested on an international scale in the mid-1980s, in relation to the Cold War sabre-rattling of the Reagan administration.¹⁷ Kirk alludes to these geo-political concerns in a variety of sardonic asides. In the sequence where a drunken Bilgepipe wreaks havoc in downtown New Plymouth, a couple of American tourists are depicted amongst the shocked onlookers. The wife is so appalled by the "hideous creature" and "that vulgar woman" (Sola Poward) that she tells her husband "I don't care if our house is next to the Minutemen silo...I want to go back to the States!", the implication being that the couple moved to New Zealand out of worries that the location of their house in the USA would make them prime targets in the case of nuclear conflict. Similarly, in the scene where Bilgepipe trespasses on the power station, Kirk has a panel with one of the technicians doing the crossword in the newspaper and asking his colleagues for help with one of the clues: "Hey you guys! This one's got me stumped! What's a four-letter word beginning with 'B' that means extinction and annihilation?"; while the concluding episode places a TV news item on the fate of Dick Sargeson alongside one about international talks on nuclear arms reduction. If the mid-1980s critiques of corporate power presented in 'Dioxin Man' were ultimately exacerbated, rather than ameliorated, by the economic policies of the Lange Labour government – a perspective that forms the basis for the

next *Dick Sargeson* adventure, 'The Stone of Glotte' – these contemporary critiques of the Cold War arms race had a happier ending in the form of Labour's historic June 1987 legislation that rendered New Zealand a nuclear-free nation.¹⁸

The second *Dick Sargeson* adventure, 'The Stone of Glotte' (1986-1987), is also based on an overtly pulp premise, in this case the discovery of a formerly lost artefact with mystical powers.¹⁹ Kirk uses this premise as the basis for a critical commentary on the nature of the neo-liberal ideologies that were becoming establishment values in New Zealand as the result of the Rogernomics reforms. The 'Glottestone', found by psychic Ben Skull embedded in a totara post in a swamp at the base of Mt Taranaki, is a liability to Hodgekiss's plans to transform the swamp into a tacky-Las Vegas style development entitled 'Boomerland', which he proclaims will 'put Taranaki on the map'.

In terms of generic convention, this scenario suggests that the mystical powers of the Glottestone will be central to the development of the plot, culminating in some spectacular manifestation of the stone's supernatural abilities. However, Kirk subverts expectations by showing very little of the Glottestone's powers. Instead, the stone functions as a metaphorical mirror of the socio-political values of those who seek it. The motivations of Ben Skull, Dick Sargeson and his editor Des Hogan, and the employees of the Taranaki Museum are ones associated with humanist liberalism and spiritual enlightenment. Skull recognises the stone as an object of profound mystical significance, an interpretation given a distinctly New Zealand gloss by the fact that the stone is found embedded in a totara post, implying that it was venerated by Maori in times past before being lost or hidden. For the museum employees, the stone is a spiritually and historically valuable artefact that should be preserved within the public institutions of culture. While recognising both of these dimensions, the stone is predominantly sought by Sargeson and Hogan as evidence of Hodgekiss's corruption and malfeasance. By contrast, the stone is used to illustrate the venality and philistinism of the ideological world that Hodgekiss and his associates inhabit. For Hodgekiss, the stone is little more than an obstacle to the fulfilment of his commercial and personal self-interest, an attitude reflected in the scene where he vents his frustrations out on it with a sledgehammer. Leo Lovegrove, Hodgekiss's project manager, is portrayed as an acolyte of neo-liberal values through behaviour such as laughing sycophantically at Hodgekiss's tasteless enthusiasm for 'Boomerland' as the name for his development. The episode in which Lovegrove chats to his hairdresser (Fig. 4) is particularly notable in this regard as it reflects the establishment in New Zealand society of the 'entrepreneurial self' as an aspirational identity position that embodies the acquisitive individualism central to the value system of neo-liberalism.²⁰



Figure 4. 'The Stone of Glotte', episode 64

Finding Hodgekiss in possession of the stone, Leo becomes a willing accomplice in disposing of it so as not to jeopardise the material rewards to be accrued from his involvement in the Boomerland project. The spiritually debased nature of a materialist worldview is also represented by Hodgekiss's henchman Lurgan. Following Skull's instructions, Lurgan attempts to access the 'power' of the stone for the egotistical purpose of feeling 'invincible'. His subsequent frustration at his failure to get anything from the stone – "flippin' hunk of junk!" – implies that he is too spiritually base for the stone to provide him with any form of enlightenment. In this regard, the sole manifestation of the Glottestone's power at the end of the story, when Hogan witnesses it growing to a gigantic size and shooting a new glottestone into space, presumably to take root on another planet, can be read as an indictment of the contemporary values of Hodgekiss and company: the stone seeking to leave earth altogether, rather than remain in a society in which its mystical significance is denigrated to such an extent.

The Disappearing Protagonist: Narrative subversion in *Dick Sargeson*

One other major area in which Kirk subverts genre tropes is through the narrative positioning of Dick Sargeson himself.²¹ As the title character, readers naturally expect Sargeson to be the focus of the narrative from beginning to end. However, Sargeson disappears from the 'Dioxin Man' and 'Glottestone' adventures about halfway through each, and does not reappear in person in either. This plot device, in combination with the characterisations of both Sargeson and Hodgekiss as chief protagonist and antagonist respectively, is central to the reading of both adventures as commentaries on contemporary New Zealand, particularly the epochal shift to neoliberalism instigated by the 1984 Labour government.

In the 'Dioxin Man' adventure, conceptualised and produced just before and at the start of the Labour government's tenure in power, Dick Sargeson is characterised as an emblematic figure of 20th century liberal/progressive values – a investigative photojournalist who upholds the democratic and progressive function of journalism by informing the public of events and

issues that affect the common good. At the start of the ‘Dioxin Man’ adventure we are introduced to Sargeson as an “intrepid photographer for World Pictures Agency”, photographing the environs of the Stony River as part of what he later describes as a ‘picture postcard portfolio’ designed to prevent its development.²² Sargeson’s role as investigative reporter is reflected in the scene in which he almost drowns at Back Beach in pursuit of a photo of Dioxin Man, and the succeeding sequence where he follows up a “lead about the lee breakwater” by staking out the location and overhearing the rendezvous between Orlando and Bilgepipe, which in turn leads to him encountering Bilgepipe in the flesh. Sargeson disappears after the scene where he finds out the back story of Dioxin Man from Orlando, with Bilgepipe becoming the main protagonist in his absence. The anticipated denouement, with Hodgekiss receiving poetic justice at the toxic hands of the rehumanised Bilgepipe, is subverted by Bilgepipe’s unexpected demise, leaving the reader to presume Hodgekiss has gotten away with it. However, in the last episode of the story Sargeson reappears, featuring in a news item on the Dioxin Man saga in which it is revealed that he had gone undercover as a worker at Hodgekiss Chemicals and taken photographs of the polluting industrial practices being undertaken therein (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. ‘Dioxin Man’, episode 59

This coda affirms both Sargeson’s status as the ‘hero’ of the adventure and the liberal values he represents, as his absence from the main narrative is revealed to be an act of investigative journalism that has successfully garnered evidence incriminating the corporate villains of the piece who would otherwise escape justice. The liberal ethos of journalism as the ‘fourth estate’ which acts as a watchdog against abuses of power can thereby be seen to triumph in this story, with Sargeson rendered as a ‘heroic journalist’ in the post-Watergate mould.²³

The ‘Stone of Glotte’ adventure also makes reference to Dick Sargeson’s status as heroic journalist. En route up to Auckland to visit Ursula ‘the bone woman’ with Ben Skull, Sargeson thinks back to his involvement in some prominent examples of post-war progressive activism, as photojournalist in the Don McCullin mode: “irradiated and batoned in Mururoa, blasted and asphyxiated in Vietnam, scorched by molten lava in the tropics, and booby-trapped by the CIA in Nicaragua – all the time packing a camera, when maybe I should have been packing a gun”.²⁴ However, little of the intrepid patina of this illustrious past is otherwise in evidence. The implied revelations at the end of the ‘Dioxin Man’ story have presumably had no impact on either the status of Jeremy Hodgekiss or Sargeson’s career, as the adventure begins with Sargeson scrounging work at *The Daily Mail* ‘to pay the rent’ – a notable departure from the international news magazines like *Time* or *Newsweek* that his earlier photojournalism was presumably published in. Although he undertakes some investigative work, such as finding out from the Department of Lands & Survey that Hodgekiss owns the block of land upon which the Glottestone was found, his attempts with Skull to retrieve the stone from Lurgan are ineffectual, ending in the latter beating him up and retaining possession of the artifact.

The most notable example of Sargeson’s reduced station as heroic protagonist is related to the structure of the story. As in ‘Dioxin Man’, Sargeson disappears from the narrative about a third of the way into the duration of the adventure. However, where Sargeson’s absence in ‘Dioxin Man’ is revealed to be ultimately heroic, his absence from the Glottestone storyline is ultimately pathetic. Telling Des Hogan that he is suffering ill-health as a result of being contaminated by a spill from Hodgekiss Chemicals while out walking one night, Sargeson is last shown collapsing in the driveway of his home and being rescued by fellow reporter Tracey Malone. The only other mentions of Sargeson in the narrative come in a discussion between Hogan and reporter O’Hara, in which Hogan states that Sargeson can’t be called as a witness against Hodgekiss in relation to the disappearance of the Glottestone as the chemical poisoning has made him lose his memory, ‘ruining him’; and a subsequent footnote which informs the reader that Sargeson is no longer a journalist, but rather the neo-liberal pariah that is a sickness beneficiary. The chemical pollution which symbolises the corrupt corporate ideology of Hodgekiss’s world in ‘Dioxin Man’ is here the agent of Sargeson’s descent from hero status. In these respects the presentation of Sargeson in the Glottestone adventure takes on allegorical significance, as a symbol of the decline of traditional liberal-humanist values in relation to the 1980s neo-liberal/corporate ideology embodied by Hodgekiss and his associates.

This decline is also reflected in the strip’s depiction of the fourth estate as an institution falling short of its duty to hold power to account. While the *Daily Mail* initially publicises the Glottestone controversy in a front page story – much to Hodgekiss’s ire – Hogan is unable to pursue the story further due to a mixture of circumstance (Sargeson’s condition rendering him incapable of testimony) and ineptitude (the accident-prone O’Hara failing to intercept the stranded Hodgekiss and his potentially incriminating car, and capturing inconclusive images of Leo and Sybil dragging the Glottestone along Pungarehu Beach). A more complex sense of ethical compromise is conveyed through the character of Tracey Malone. Introduced as part of the Glottestone investigative team along with Sargeson and Hogan, she is later portrayed as ‘selling out’ by not only interviewing Hodgekiss for a book she is writing on NZ millionaires (a topic that reflects the neoliberal adulation of wealth as an end in itself) but by becoming romantically involved with him – literally ‘sleeping with the enemy’. This reading of the Glottestone adventure as Kirk’s cynical commentary on the rise to power of neo-liberal ideology in New Zealand is affirmed by the sardonic ending. A news item shows bulldozers scouring the Taranaki landscape in preparation for the Boomerland development, supervised by a smug and newly honoured Hodgekiss (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. 'The Stone of Glotte', episode 80

Photography and Moonhoppers: The aesthetics of *Dick Sargeson*

The photo-realist graphic style of *Dick Sargeson* is integral to the articulation of the strips as socio-political commentary. Photographs have long been used as reference material by comic artists concerned with conveying a sense of realism in their work. Two notable examples include the Belgian artist Herge, who kept an extensive reference archive of newspaper and magazine photography on all manner of topics for use on the *Tintin* adventures,²⁵ and the British artist Frank Hampson, who made mock-up costumes and model spaceships that could be photographed from a variety of angles and lighting set-ups, for the Dan Dare strip in the popular post-war British comic *Eagle*.²⁶ A more direct application of photography to comics is the tradition of photo-novels or fumetti, in which comics are made from putting word balloons or captions to photographs arranged in sequence.²⁷ Kirk's aesthetic in *Dick Sargeson* offers a blending of these two approaches. Kirk staged sequences in a manner akin to film-making or fumetti, putting actors in locations and shooting photographs of them in the poses required for the story.²⁸ He then used a photographic enlarger to project the images onto his drawing board so that he could delineate photographic figures, backgrounds and objects as graphic representations.²⁹ The result is a highly verisimilitudinous depiction of characters and locations that roots the stories overall firmly in the time and place of mid-1980s Taranaki and, by extension, the New Zealand of that era.

This visual realism not only makes the fantastic elements of the strip – Dioxin Man and the Glottestone – plausible by depicting them as part of an 'everyday' New Zealand, but makes the political themes and subtexts resonate with the reader in a way that a more overtly 'cartoony' style would not be as effective in doing. The use of photography as an aesthetic approach is also significant in giving the strip overtones of photojournalism, as presenting a document of events unfolding in a particular time and place – overtones which resonate with the characterisation of Dick Sargeson as an ostensibly heroic photo-journalist, as discussed above. For example, in the Glottestone adventure Kirk stages the sequence where Skull and Sargeson

seek out the stone and have an altercation with Lurgan in an abandoned dairy factory. The location is significant as a contemporary reference to the upheaval in the farming sector caused by Rogernomics. The late 1980s and early 1990s were a period of significant transition in rural New Zealand, as many farmers struggled to adapt to economic reforms such as the removal of subsidies and increase in interest rates.³⁰ The abandoned dairy factory is thus a significant index of the impacts of Rogernomics upon the New Zealand agricultural sector and regional economies such as those of Taranaki. The photo-realistic artwork, redolent of a photojournalistic essay on the subject, clearly evokes the sense of rural decline (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. 'The Stone of Glotte', episode 15

The photorealist aesthetic is also central to one of the other significant aspects of cultural interest related to the strip - resonances with the realms of art which suggest a reading of *Dick Sargeson* as an example of New Zealand pop art. A key aspect of pop art (considered both as a distinct movement within Western art history (1950s-1960s), and as a more general aesthetic and thematic approach to the present) is the appropriation and re-presentation of imagery from the contexts of vernacular and mass-produced commercial culture, as a means of getting viewers to look afresh at everyday life and consider the powerful ideological forces, such as consumerism, that operate beneath the veneer of mundanity.³¹ Comic art, along with advertisements, newspaper photographs, and film stills, are central examples of commercial imagery used by artists working in this mode, as in the seminal works of American practitioners Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, and leading New Zealand painter Dick Frizzell. That *Dick Sargeson* can be interpreted in this context is suggested by the pop art nature of the painting career which Kirk embarked on after the conclusion of the strips. Many of Kirk's paintings and prints situate well-known pop culture characters, including many comic figures such as Superman, Tintin, and The Phantom, against photo-realist renderings of New Zealand landscapes and street scenes: juxtapositions that address (amongst other things) the cultural dynamics of foreign popular culture in relation to notions of New Zealand identity.³² The

conveyance of socio-political commentary in the *Dick Sargeson* strips, through the combination of a vernacular photorealism with the popular register of comics, is an obvious precursor to the pop art sensibility expressed in these paintings. The playful and ironic sensibility of pop art is certainly evident in key visual details of the strips, notably the use of a Moonhopper – a large ovoid ball topped with gripping prongs, designed as a bouncy toy for small children – as the design basis for the Glottestone, and Bilgepipe’s ‘granny’ spectacles, which provide a disarmingly banal complement to his mutated appearance.

The aesthetics of *Dick Sargeson* are also interesting in relation to one of the key critical dimensions of pop art (and one that underpins its reading as one of the first ‘postmodern’ cultural movements) – how our sense of social reality is shaped by cultural representations that are highly artificial in their construction. The photorealism of the strip is the product of layers of formal artifice involving a variety of media: photographs of actors engaged in staged scenes on real-world locations, which are then rendered as black and white ink drawings, and finished off with the addition of Letratone, a graphic design product that conveys grayscale tones and shades redolent of the ‘dot’ processes typical of pre-digital newspaper photo-reproduction.³³ This visual artifice (in combination with the fantastic aspects of the stories) helps the reader to ‘re-imagine’ the quotidian environs of Taranaki and New Plymouth as places of intrigue and wonder. For instance, Back Beach is transformed into the haunt of Dioxin Man, while the swamps on the slopes of Mt Taranaki become the repository of mystical artifacts such as the Glottestone. In this respect the *Dick Sargeson* series can be read as a cultural artifact that mythologizes the character or spirit of Taranaki as a distinct region of New Zealand, in a manner comparable to the landscape paintings of Michael Smither and Christopher Perkins’ iconic 1931 painting *Taranaki*, or – to use a darker, literary reference point – the famous thriller and black comedy novels of Hawera writer Ronald Hugh Morrieson, notably *The Scarecrow* (1963) and *Came A Hot Friday* (1964). The application of the photorealist approach to evoke a distinctly New Zealand graphic vernacular (for example, weatherboard bungalows, provincial streetscapes, Taranaki vistas) – in a medium (the comic strip) that is historically rooted in American popular culture – further suggests an aesthetic subtext of cultural negotiation that complements the implicit criticisms of American geopolitical power throughout the series.

Conclusion

Dick Sargeson is a significant work in the annals of New Zealand comics culture for several reasons. It not only represents one of the few sustained examples of comic strip serials published for mass audiences in this country, but moreover reflects a critically engaged application of the serial format beyond the standard remit of escapist storytelling to purposes of socio-political commentary, such as in the use of narrative strategies which subvert generic expectations (notably in the positioning of Dick Sargeson as the ostensible ‘hero’). The use of photography as an integral part of its graphic aesthetic conveys a degree of formal sophistication that enhances its thematic concerns and aligns it with artworld practices. All of these factors in turn inform the strip’s historical value as a cultural document of a period of profound change in New Zealand society. As such, it deserves to be recognised and reconsidered as something of a pioneering work of New Zealand comics, and a notable text within wider contexts of New Zealand popular culture. It also indicates that the subject area of New Zealand comics and cartooning is one of considerable cultural interest which has been relatively overlooked in terms of New Zealand popular culture scholarship.

All images are reproduced by kind permission of Graham Kirk.

¹ Ian F. Grant, *The Unauthorized Version: A Cartoon History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Cassell, 1980); Ian F. Grant, *Between the Lines: A cartoon century of New Zealand political and social history, 1906-2005* (Wellington: New Zealand Cartoon Archive, 2005).

² Notable examples include: Chris Slane and Robert Sullivan, *Maui: Legends of the Outcast* (Auckland: Godwit, 1996); Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2010); Ant Sang, *Shaolin Burning* (Auckland: Harper Collins, 2011).

³ Adrian Kinnaird, *From Earth's End: The Best of New Zealand Comics* (Auckland: Godwit, 2011).

⁴ Adrian Kinnaird, personal communication, 16 May 2015.

⁵ Phillipa Main Smith, *A Concise History of New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jenny Carlyon and Diana Morrow, *Changing Times: New Zealand Since 1945* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013).

⁶ Graham Kirk, "Profile," from Graham Kirk's personal website: <http://grahamkirk.com/profile.htm>, accessed February 2015.

⁷ The nature of the narrative world in which an adventure-based storyline is set is often the major determinant of its generic classification. For example, adventure stories set in the future are usually classified as sci-fi; those in a supernatural world as horror.

⁸ The first 'comic books' were anthologies republishing these newspaper comics.

⁹ Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013); Brian Walker, *The Comics Before 1945* (New York: Abrams, 2004).

¹⁰ The term 'pulp' is a standard cultural synonym for popular genre fiction. It derives from mass-market story magazines specializing in sensational genre fiction that were major forces in American popular culture from the 1920s to the 1960s, which were predominantly printed on cheap 'pulp' paper stock.

¹¹ The first episode has the subtitle 'In Search of the Taniwha', although 'Dioxin Man' is the title used by Kirk in correspondence about the strip.

¹² Warren Gamble, "We won't let up, say sick residents," *The NZ Herald*, 18 February 2001, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=172733, accessed February 2015. Alongside environmental contamination, the IWD plant has also been embroiled in political controversy regarding its alleged manufacture of the toxic defoliant Agent Orange for use by the US military in the Vietnam War. For a summary of claims, see <http://www.vietnamwar.govt.nz/memory/price-manufacturing-agent-orange-nz>, accessed February 2015.

¹³ Graham Kirk, personal communication, June 2013.

¹⁴ Bruce Jesson, *Behind The Mirror Glass: The growth of wealth and power in New Zealand in the eighties* (Auckland: Penguin, 1987); Brian Easton, *In Stormy Seas: The Post-War New Zealand Economy* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 1997); Carlyon and Morrow, 2013.

These reforms included the removal of government protections for local industries; the privatisation of state-owned assets; reducing the tax rate for businesses; and cutting public services. See Jane Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment: A World Model for Structural Adjustment?* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, 1997), 18.

¹⁵ Jacquie Webby, ed., *New Zealand Kiwifruit Journal – 100 Year Centennial Edition*, Issue 161 (Tauranga: Kale Print & Design Associates, Feb 2004).

¹⁶ Marie Leadbeater, *Peace, Power & Politics: How New Zealand Became Nuclear Free* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ These anxieties were reflected in popular culture of the period, such as the US TV mini-series *The Day After* (1983) and UK children's author Raymond Briggs's book *When The Wind Blows* (1984), both of which dealt with ordinary people trying to survive after a nuclear attack.

¹⁸ Leadbeater, 2013.

¹⁹ The 'search for mystical artifact' storyline is a potent mythological narrative, perhaps best typified by the multiple series of 'romances' in medieval Europe based upon quests for the Holy Grail (e.g. Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* and Wolfgang von Aschenbach's *Parsifal*). The most visible manifestation of this premise in modern popular culture are the Indiana Jones films made by Hollywood mega-moguls Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, in which the titular archaeologist finds

spiritual artifacts such as the Grail and the Ark of the Covenant (the first two of these films, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) preceding the publication of ‘The Stone of Glotte’).

²⁰ Dolores Janiewski and Paul Morris, *New Rights New Zealand: Myths, Moralities, and Markets* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005); Karen Nairn, Jane Higgins, and Judith Sligo, *Children of Rogernomics: A Neoliberal Generation Leaves School* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2012).

²¹ The name of the character was inspired by a childhood friend of Kirk’s who possessed the relatively rare surname ‘Sargeson’ – although as Kirk stated, he quite liked the association with famous NZ writer Frank Sargeson as well. The character’s first name also bears associations with Chester Gould’s famous American comic strip character *Dick Tracy* (Graham Kirk, personal communication, June 2015).

²² This plot point refers to early 1980s activism by residents living in the environs of the Stony River (including Kirk’s home district of Okato) in favour of preserving the river from possible hydroelectric and agricultural development. The activism resulted in the river being granted official protection from development in 1986, one of the first instances of this in New Zealand. See Jim Tucker, *Clearing the Water: the saving of Taranaki’s most precious asset* (New Plymouth: Puke Ariki/New Plymouth District Council 2014), chapter 3.

²³ The unravelling of the Watergate scandal in 1974 by *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, leading to the resignation of American President Richard Nixon, is undoubtedly the defining cultural moment of post-war investigative journalism. The events were mythologized in pop culture form by Alan J. Pakula’s 1976 film *All The President’s Men*.

²⁴ British reporter Don McCullin is synonymous with post-war photojournalism, due to a high-profile career covering hotspots such as Vietnam and Biafra.

²⁵ Michael Farr, *Tintin: The Complete Companion* (London: John Murray, 2001).

²⁶ Daniel Tatarsky, *Dan Dare, Pilot Of The Future: The Biography* (London: Orion, 2011).

²⁷ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

²⁸ Kirk played the character of Dick Sargeson himself in ‘Dioxin Man’, although the logistical challenges of this, in relation to other creative duties in producing the strip, led him to use another actor for ‘The Stone of Glotte’. Some images, such as the visages of the freighter captain ‘Long John’ and Russian impresario Nikolayevskiy in ‘Dioxin Man’, were derived from news and magazine photographs (Graham Kirk, personal communication, June 2013).

²⁹ Graham Kirk, personal communication, June 2013.

³⁰ Neil Wallace, *When the Farm Gates Opened: The impact of Rogernomics on rural New Zealand* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2014).

³¹ Jamie James, *Pop Art* (London: Phaidon, 1996).

³² For examples, see Kirk’s website: <http://grahamkirk.com/>, accessed June 2015. The website also includes episodes of two strip ideas Kirk developed in 1988 as possible successors to *Dick Sargeson*: ‘Snap Harris’, about a photographer for the New Plymouth *Daily Mail*, and ‘Sir Jeremy’, about the further adventures of Jeremy Hodgekiss. While David Beatson was keen on the second concept, he was no longer editor of the *New Zealand Listener* when Kirk submitted the first batch of completed episodes, and his successors turned down ‘Sir Jeremy’ as being unsuitable for the magazine (Graham Kirk, personal communication, June 2013).

³³ Graham Kirk, personal communication, June 2013.