

Time To Make A Song And Dance: Cultural Revolt in Auckland in the 1960s

By Murray Edmond. Pokeno, Atuanui Press, 2021.

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Reviewed by Nick Bollinger

‘The Terrible Screaming’ is a short story by the New Zealand writer Janet Frame, in which a city is awakened in the night by a terrible screaming which everyone ignores, fearing that if they admit to hearing it they will be labelled insane. The ‘city’, Murray Edmond suggests, can be read as New Zealand, or more specifically Auckland, where Frame - who might be claimed as ‘our writer of the 60s’ - spent 15 months in Oakley psychiatric hospital.

Written in London in the early 1960s, Frame’s fable, which Edmond recaps at the start of this illuminating, invigorating book, provides a perfect set-up for what follows: an exploration in ten essay-chapters, of the ways in which a few of Auckland’s citizens engaged in acts of ‘cultural revolt’ against a normality ‘contrived out of benignly oppressive myths of an amnesiac colonial culture’. These were, in effect, the rebellious few who refused to ignore the screaming.

It has long been standard to characterise the 60s as a time of revolt; a new generation rising up against its elders. A global protest movement had been galvanised by the Vietnam War, and a counterculture dominated by young white baby-boomers was upending social conventions around such things as sex, drug use, religion and the nuclear family. But Edmond takes a wider view; in fact, the term counterculture barely appears in his book at all. He shows that instances of revolt came from across generations, genders and cultural backgrounds. The book itself is a kind of revolt against the orthodoxy that has grown up around this historic period.

At the same time, his focus is quite specific, homing in on aspects of this revolt that were particular to New Zealand and even more particular to Auckland, the country’s largest city. The book is populated with characters who were either Aucklanders or who spent time in Auckland and did significant things there during the 60s. The majority come from what is usually thought of as ‘the arts’. They include poets, novelists, dancers, sculptors, musicians, theatre practitioners and film makers. But Edmond’s revolution also makes room for the transgender drag performer and entrepreneur Carmen, bohemian scenemaker Anna Hoffmann, and political bomber John Bower. To Edmond such individuals are, in a sense, artists of a different kind. His view resembles that of the American bohemian writer and publisher Margaret C. Anderson, who wrote of the early 20th century anarchists that ‘anything and everything is art for them - that is, anything containing an element of revolt.’

Most of Edmond’s art rebels are homegrown, but a few were imports who faced the challenging task of introducing new ideas to an audience that could be resistant to them. Theatre director Ronald Barker arrived from Britain in 1957, ‘flamboyant, eccentric, demonstrative’, to teach drama in the Adult Education section of Auckland University College. Taking over Community Art Service (CAS) Theatre the following year, he immediately mounted a touring production of *Waiting For Godot*, Samuel Beckett’s absurdist-existentialist masterpiece, which had seen its English language premiere in London just three years earlier. In New Zealand it both scandalised and thrilled. It was called a ‘blasphemous obscenity’ and there were calls to withdraw the production, but it was also praised by critics such as Bruce Mason and ultimately credited with revivifying CAS Theatre. Barker would continue to stage adventurous and pioneering works, including those of New Zealand writer Allen Curnow, for which he received varying degrees of acclaim. But if his work challenged audience conservatism, his bisexuality triggered other

prejudices, and in 1962 the Adult Education Council would terminate his contract after a police stake-out in a public toilet saw him charged with ‘committing an indecent act on another male’.

Peter Tomory was another Englishman who helped shake up Kiwi culture in the late 50s and early 60s. During his time as Director of Auckland City Art Gallery (only the second ever Art Gallery Director in New Zealand) he was involved in many battles, including defending a theatre production of J.P. Donleavy’s *Fairy Tales Of New York* against charges of obscenity, and the purchase of a Barbara Hepworth sculpture against the loud opinions of city councillors such as Tom Pearce, who knew a lot about rugby and little about art. In his critical, theoretical and art historical writing, Tomory, Edmond says, ‘laid down an interpretation of New Zealand art that still forms the basics for developments, disagreements, disputes and reinterpretations.’

Tomory also signed off the Auckland City Council’s commissioning of a work by local artist Molly Macalister: a bronze sculpture of a Māori chief for the bottom of Queen Street to ‘welcome visitors to the city’. After representatives of Ngāti Whātua asked why, as tangata whenua, they had not been consulted, Macalister entered into her own discussions with the iwi, who came to support her ideas for the sculpture. But when councillors, expecting a taiaha wielding warrior, saw the ‘still, brooding, calm, gazing figure in its enormous kaitaka, ceremonial cloak’ there was some consternation. ‘Why didn’t they look like Maoris were supposed to look to tourists?’

Stories of quiet revolt like Macalister’s make a contrast to the self-congratulatory picture of the 60s propagated in the memoirs of many a Pākehā Kiwi male. And throughout the book Edmond makes a point of highlighting the roles women and Māori played in disrupting the social fabric. The endeavours, in vastly different fields, of poet Hone Tuwhare, film producer Shirley Maddock, political activist Donna Awatere and the aforementioned Carmen are all celebrated.

Edmond notes, but doesn’t subscribe to, the elitist distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture which have persisted, even since the upheavals of the 60s. Observing that as recently as the mid-90s the writer and academic C.K. Stead was expressing horror at being subjected to the torture of rock music at a music awards event (what did he expect?), Edmond comes down firmly on the side of the torturers, devoting a good chunk of one chapter to a single song, ‘Social End Product’, a three-minute howl of disaffection by 60s Auckland band The Bluestars. And in a chapter on novelists he discusses the work of Barry Crump, the deerstalker turned best-selling yarn-spinner, alongside that of high literary figures Janet Frame and Maurice Duggan.

Yet Crump, for all his individualism, is not really one of Edmond’s cultural rebels. The secret of his success, Edmond says, was nostalgia: for ‘the man’s world... [a] Kiwi-land in which the good keen man strides without fear or foe’, a nostalgia that, like the type of theatre Ronald Barker set out to supplant, was already 40 years out of date. Crump is used mostly as way of leading into a discussion of the writer Jean Watson and her novel *Stand In The Rain*, closely based on Watson’s relationship with Crump and time they spent together in the bush and on the road. As Edmond reads it, it is a tale about ‘how to survive as a woman with nothing’. In the character of Sarah, the novel’s ‘quietly defiant anti-heroine’ with her ‘dogged determination to defy convention and live life upside down’, Watson captures the real revolt against mainstream New Zealand. Like Molly Macalister’s silent brooding chief, ‘revolt’, as Edmond says and Watson demonstrates, ‘doesn’t have to be noisy and violent’.

Though sometimes it is. It is only in the last chapters that the hippie counterculture really raises its rowdy head, in the familiar form of rebel-ranter Tim Shadbolt, or the lesser-known legend John

Bower who infamously spent several spells in prison for geligniting various sites in and out of Auckland, including the Waitangi flagpole and an Air Force Depot in Parnell. But as Edmond looks ahead to the 70s, it is Second Wave Feminism, Gay Liberation and the fight for Tino Rangatiratanga that will define the coming era of dissent. The male rebels of the 60s are already starting to look like a thing of the past.

A feature peculiar to New Zealand is its interconnectedness. It's been said that where most people on this planet seem to be separated by an average of six social connections, in New Zealand degrees of separation are usually two or fewer, and this book could be used to support that claim. As Edmond wryly notes, '[i]t might be possible to make a map of 1960s literary New Zealand by joining the dots of who fucked Barry Crump.' Characters from one chapter turn up again in another, often in an entirely different context. In just one of many weird confluences, the photographer Leon Lesnie, who took iconic photographs of Anna Hoffman, dies after falling from a mezzanine in the home of Group Architect Bruce Rotherham, having been surprised in the midst of a tryst with jeweller Marie McMahon by her estranged husband. Rotherham's wife, Elizabeth Milne, is the subject of a poem by Irene Lowry, discussed in an earlier chapter. Such threads of connection occasionally result in paragraphs as dense as a Biblical family tree.

This interconnectedness extends to Edmond himself, who at various points refers to his own experiences in the 60s as a student, a writer and performer. The personal anecdotes are often surprising and always pertinent. When he recalls Frank Sargeson quizzing him about the Manson murders - a countercultural *cause célèbre* of the time - it reinforces his case that the generations and their areas of interest were not as rigidly demarcated as is commonly claimed.

Edmond's exploration of the cultural tensions that shaped New Zealand in the 60s is fresh, critical, lively and doesn't settle for clichés or received versions of history. But he is not the first person to probe this period for what it can reveal to us about ourselves. That mission began with the artists themselves. When Edmond describes Maurice Duggan's 1967 novella 'O'Leary's Orchard' as 'a book about the gap in the society, the generation gap, but also the gap between art and its society, and the gap between men and women' it could almost be a cover blurb for the book he has written here.