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Rotorua Mad Poets: Words of Their Own

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Abstract

If truth is beauty, beauty truth
Just as the poet said¹,
Then patterned sense in research
Can be sewed by lyric thread.

Mad Poets Rotorua is
The topic of this story,
Acknowledging that all research
Is largely allegory.

The group has met religiously
Since Nineteen Ninety-Four
Enabling some to read their poems
Who’d never read before.

From my perspective many themes
Emerge in all that follows,
While these are mine, there will be those
That you my reader hallows.
1. Prologue: Departing from Madness

Let’s start with Emerson, writing in *The Poet*

of a kind of excess

of “abandonment to the nature of things”

the “unlocking of human doors”

“suffering the ethereal tides
to roll and circulate”

the necessary wildness of speech

with the intellect inebriated

by nectar.

Or Dickinson, succinctly:

“Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –”

driving Higginson to distraction

with those disruptive dashes

knowing full well

“the pride that stops the breath,
in the core of woods,
is not of ourself.”

Abandoned to retirement

I am resituated with Millie

in the Ngongotaha Valley

Rereading the *Georgics* living out on the land

a Middle State idyll of sorts

landscape as culture finding my way into town

nosing into Atlantis Books

and the hardly undersea world

of Rotorua Mad Poets Society.

2. The Meeting as Ritual

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is *Man,*”

Said Alexander Pope perhaps forgetting The place of context in behavioural begetting.

A sandwich board outside Atlantis Books Announces Wednesday’s meeting, overlooks The need for something grander than A4.

The meeting space is opposite the door With chairs and couches carefully arranged To challenge hierarchy. The rites unchanged Since May 15, of Nineteen Ninety-Four When Monkey Jo’s saloon saw poets galore Respond to Frank May’s clarion call to crawl Out of the woodwork and deliver all Their covert masterpieces with aplomb.

The current president seems quite at home, Looks at his watch, announces meeting number
One, one, thirty-five, then calls upon a member
To read aloud a pristine composition
Based on the theme. There is no inquisition.
All offerings are esteemed. Some favour rhyme
With regular accentual fall and climb,
While others like their verse non-metrical.
In such a climate nothing is heretical,
No tone nor topic viewed as out of bounds
Instead a murmuring of praise resounds
Acknowledging the bravery of those
Who write and share the poems they compose.
Madness, of course, occurs in many forms
From silliness to disregarding norms
Of etiquette. The custom is, with flair,
In the interstices of poems to share
Quotations, apt and quizzical,
Obscene, obscure or metaphysical.
Then comes the mid-way point, a break
For notices, a bit of goss and cake.
We’re half way down the winding of the road,
The interlude behind, it’s time
Or verse or ballad from a cherished tome.
Then with the last poem’s knell to slip off home.

3. Russell Tibby

After a morning of hard frost
the air is clear on Te Waerenga Road
the blueness of the lake intensifies
and Tarawera’s hump shrugs off its shroud.
Past the farm cottage, past the shed,
past a salvo of silvereyes fed
by Kay with dripping, I hear his voice
welcoming warm as river gravel.
Words are not for wasting unless
there is a tale to unravel:
Talks of his Waikato origins and the choice
to move to Rotorua, enjoying success
buying and selling motorbikes
but more at home on horseback
chasing hares at Tallyho or on hikes
in the wild, or cutting gorse back.

In his own Words

i Poetry and the Child

It’s the simplicity of children’s poetry
the rhythm and rhyme is what
has always attracted me.

I was a young schoolboy about 11 or 12
the teacher asked us to write a poem
I was never a great scholar
good at social studies but mathematically devoid
I wrote out this poem all about a little train in my imagination that had run away from home I wrote it in a rhythm train noise Choo choof choof choof choof I imagined him going up a hill and slowing down choooof choooof choooof choooof and down the other side choof choof choof choof I handed it in to my teacher:

The following day talking about our poems how good they were turned round and said to me, “Unfortunately, somebody’s handed in a poem he never wrote.” I’d never written it. I was telling lies And so, after that, my poetry went into a secret place.


tt Poetry as Secret Activity
tt I still liked reading it and hearing it never told anyone about it.

Kids the road block doesn’t have to be very big It stops you in your tracks I just got very shy But kept on writing poems. After I got married to Kay if she was away and I was away duck-shooting I’d come home and write her a poem leave it on the bench for her I’ve always carried on in my little, secret poetic world. It stayed hidden away until I turned up at Mad Poets Rotorua.

It’s funny, I still see my poems as being private it’s a weird thing I haven’t wanted them out there. There’s been a couple published. I’ve started thinking recently a book would be good I’d like my grandchildren and children to have this book; I’ve had one attempt at it

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looked at it and thought,
   “No, this is not right,”
I’m a bit of a perfectionist,
   pulled the plug on the whole deal.

iii Fronting up to Mad Poets

One day I was talking
to a guy from Brazil
lived in our cottage
down here on the farm
said there’s a group of poets called
the Rotorua Mad Poets Society.
Why don’t you go along?
   He happened to know Jackie
told me where they meet and when
   so one night I thought, “Right,”
packed a poem I wrote
   into my pocket    went along
had a listen and a chance
to read out my poem
from there on I just got
   more interested in it.
the people
   the total lack of rules
you don’t have to apologise
   you’re not allowed to apologise
no membership fees….

kept me going back as much as the poetry
   now it’s the poetry
You can sing a song or
   play a flute if you want to.
As you write more and more poetry
   you get better and better at it
As you get older you get more depth
   and more meaning
As you read other people’s poetry
   and listen to it you realise
some people have better handles on
   some parts of poetry than you have
and you swing over
   to a slightly different style.
I always had a very good imagination
   for situations.
Rhythm and rhyme are the challenges
   my poems are almost like
rhyming stories,    that’s my vent.

When you have a theme
   it forces you to sit down
it kick-starts you
   because sometimes
you can dilly dally around
   getting a poem started.
iv Inspirations

Rupert Brooke
   I like listening to and reading
   poetry about England.
   We mostly all come from
   around that way somewhere
   my families did
An affinity for Old England?
   Robert Browning is I find
   rather diverse.
   There’s a lot of humour
   in Banjo Paterson obviously
   that was the poetry of the day
   for outback Australian people
   but it was very Australian
   my mother was Australian
   so I am half-Australian
   Yeah, I do like it
   but I don’t admire it.
I swing back to Rupert Brooke
   I feel sorry for outlaws
   side with the unfortunate
   feel empathy for those who struggle
   that are basically on the hind tit.

v The Need to Explain

Don’t take this as criticism
   I have often written poems
   and read them
   one about an old-aged spy
   a spy all his life
   suddenly avenues of work closed down
   and so – a dead horse.
   I read it out
   and looked at all the people
   really nobody knew
   what I was talking about.
   I didn’t have time to explain
why I was writing about
   this guy called “Dead Lions” –
   that’s what they call a washed-up spy:
   he was the lion who roared
   now a dead one
   at that game so long
   they just can’t give it up.

4. Jackie Evans

On a rainy day the new library
   is haven to housed and chary homeless.
I enter from the manicured square
  on Haupapa Street and in the foyer there
find Jackie, deceptively demure
  with small black suitcase, poised on a chair.
The Don Stafford Room has its own allure,
  spacious and removed, a loving tribute
to Rotorua’s historian¹⁰, whose stories contribute
to the remembering of the place
and for us, as interlocuters, a boundless space.
I show her Russell’s “Dead Lions” vocal
on Audacity, point out the symmetry of shape
his metre makes. And then, to sound the inscape
¹¹ Of Mad Poets history, I prompt another local.

In her own Words:

  i Poetry and the Young Person

As a teenager working
  in Wellington and studying
the first time ever away from home
  I was very homesick
my father¹² would write
  frequent letters including humorous
mainly his own original poems
  which I loved and related to.
This began my interest and
  got me into poetry
which developed to interest
  in other forms.
He did tell me about Ogden Nash
  and then I would do my own
research into it.
  A healing process this
interest in humorous verse.
  I would post him poems of my own.

  ii Inspirations

Many other poets
  James K. Baxter¹³
and Janet Frame another
  I was particularly interested
in Janet Frame I knew
  she had a mental illness
there is mental illness in my family;
  she was a brilliant writer.
I read about her life
  she a patient in a psychiatric
hospital in the South Island
  only saved from a frontal lobotomy
by a book published
  a week before
the operation was to occur.¹⁴
  I was intrigued by this
continued reading her poetry
and her fiction and prose.

**iii Mad Poets Dilemmas**

It’s a long time,
 twenty-four years
that I have been involved.
 I was intrigued to see
in the first seven years
 an impasse develop between
two sets of poets  in the end
one group of about eight decided
to leave and start another
 group they were unhappy because
two members suffered
 from mental illness
we encouraged and supported.
 The group that decided to leave
resented these people.
 The remaining group continued
to enlarge membership;
 the group that decided to leave
really just fell apart.
 Mad Poets Society didn’t just
manage to survive but
 continued to thrive.

**iv Mad Poets as Inclusive Community**

We offer a very safe
 opportunity for poets to come
write original poetry
 listen to others,
as Russell said,
 there are no rules.
We seem to be a group
 which functions happily
together towards each other
 accept people with disabilities
a very important thing.

I found my love of poetry
 a healing influence in my life.
I particularly love memorising poems
 a very useful tool to prevent
oneself worrying about
 daily problems and finding a poem
you particularly love and
 memorising it I find
 particularly therapeutic.
5. The Questionnaire

After great pain a formal feeling comes\textsuperscript{15}
Wrote Dickinson who knew the mind as well
As anyone. And Frost, whose momentary stay

Against confusion\textsuperscript{16} tells of frailty,
Recalls his sister Jeanie’s spells of true
Madness\textsuperscript{17}, beyond his reach, unmended walls,

The new birch fence facing reclaiming nature,\textsuperscript{18}
In short the limits of formality,
Of lines, tersely hammered out in verse,

As if one’s feelings could be formalised.
A questionnaire is never innocent,
Though questioners may argue otherwise.

To keep the lid on fell Pandora’s box
Declaring you prefer \textit{not} to be conscripted
Becomes a blessed wall containing sadness
Protects the voice of your own sacred script.

6. An Essay on Criticism

And so, we arrive back, where we always began
with that “intolerable wrestle with words
and meanings” Eliot speaks of\textsuperscript{19}. You do what you can,
knowing in your heart of hearts that the rewards

Are at best, random and capricious.
So criticism is a problem concept
calling up the dire spectre of vicious
Loss of face, or judgement to accept….

Perhaps it simply needs a dusting off,
refurbishment of sorts, a new stance:
“True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn’d to dance.”\textsuperscript{20}

So here I am, participant observer,
attempting verse to foot it with Minerva
knowing full well the sense the poetry makes
will only satisfy the ones who serve her.\textsuperscript{21}

Let me slip into another metre:
reflection on Mad Poets as a safe place
a harbour for the outcast and the frail
that Jackie speaks of.
Maybe it’s enough
and tough enough for many
to simply utter hard-won crafted
sound beyond the comfort of closed lips.
Such tentative forays into the public space
are far from the ultimate display
of publication exercised by Jackie
and reserved by Russell.
Somewhere in between there lurks
the beckoning finger of review
a moment of reckoning for sure
but, as Lyndsay and others say,
a needful conversation around craft
a forum to explain or justify
a prompt for “swinging over” to
a new way of saying. It will happen
this discovery of a language
to articulate the art
of measured and careful critique
given that we discipline our cranks
and prejudices and compose
our differences in the common
pursuit of true judgement.22

Appendix: The Poems

DEAD LIONS
by Russell Tibby

His life’s an illusion of ruses the users
have left him confused on his role in the play,
so this lion, a dead one, is trying a re-run
to capture the past and with luck make it pay.

But blasts from the past that try to reharness
excitement that pays need a network on line,
so without it, it’s doubted, and those with the clout
shut the doors when he roars, it’s a matter of time.

Dead lions, slow horses and left-over ghosts
are the names he gets called, washed up on a beach,
but he knows as he goes that with time and the chances
that even dead lions have something to teach.

So he prowls and he waits round the clubs and the places
he speaks with the Spooks and the ones in the know,
preening while gleaning the info he’s seeking
and hoping some ember could light up and glow.

But the playfield ain’t level so slightly dishevelled
he loses his grip on the liferaft of hope,
and sadly quite badly he now flounders madly
as shrinking and sinking he’s run out of rope.

Next scene on a gurney, the end of his journey
the lion that roared is now pale and cold,
icotined fingers and nobody lingers
dead lions laid out just look older than old.
This relic, a wreck, with no one on deck,  
now over and out is this blast from the past,  
and this mountain of lies and king of all spies  
has at last gone to ground with his flag at half mast.

SENTINEL
by Jackie Evans

Matuatonga  
Kūmara Goddess  
sightless eyes  
sweep Mokoia,  
seeking the unknown;  
stone sentinel  
symbol of fertility;  
weathered face  
rubbed smooth  
by curious hands;  
mute Goddess  
carved in rhyolite  
what lies within your pitted core?  
kaleidoscope  
of utu?  
anguish?  
karakia?  
taunts of circling Ngāpuhi?  
Te Arawa lament?  
tangi  
tangi  
tangi

AWHITU AT EASTER 2018
by Lindsay Campbell

Sunlight blesses our car as we wind our way to Awhitu  
I remember an old friend, horses and Kariotahi Beach  
Long before they were born,  
These precious children who run to hug us.  
Together we explore a new place,  
The home of first settlers on this land,  
Echoes of pit saw and succulent stew on tin plates.

Now they dance on glistening rock  
And balance on the old wharf with sticks.  
The out tide has given us an island  
Floating on mud, shining, calling  
To Audrey, whose feet plough the mud to find  
Her mystical island of dreams.
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1 John Keats’ famous conclusion to “Ode on a Grecian urn”, slightly paraphrased.
6 See, for example, Marx, Leo. 1964. The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America. New York: Oxford University Press. Marx writes that the “pastoral ideal is an embodiment of what Lovejoy calls ‘semi-primitivism’; it is located in a middle ground somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature” (p. 23).
7 A treatise on the human condition by Alexander Pope (1688-1744), An essay on man was an attempt to “vindicate the ways of God to man” (l. 16). One might consider its heroic couplets as reflecting this optimism in the form itself.
8 Evans, Jackie. July, 2014. “Mad Poets, Mild Poets, Wild Poets: A History of the Rotorua Mad Poets Society”, a fine line (The magazine of the New Zealand Poetry Society): 1-3. You can access this at https://poetrysocietynz.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/a-fine-line-july-2014_0.pdf, and find out more about its stunning record as a group meeting weekly, and its support of young Rotorua poets, whose work has been published in three of its books over the years.
9 I am grateful to my research student, Priya Gain, for introducing me to Mears’ (2009) “gateway approach” in the course of a focused ethnography investigating participants’ responses to a biculturally oriented, music education workshop. Mears advocates for the use of participants’ words in a way that reflects “the wholeness of the experience, bringing the narrators into being as complex, living individuals, in a holistic context” (Mears, Carolyn. 2009. Interviewing for Education and Social Science Research, The Gateway Approach, 10. New York: Palgrave Macmillan). Priya’s dissertation can be accessed at: https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/d37311_79d5ad0580e4475bb6681875685beff5.pdf.
11 In his 1950’s introduction to the Penguin Poems and prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. H. Gardner describes inscape as “that deeper pattern, order and unity which gives meaning to external forms”. One might compare this to the holy grail of most if not all researchers.
12 Tim Evans-Freke, one of New Zealand’s pioneering television newsreaders.
13 New Zealand poet (1926-1972), who often sided with the marginalised and homeless. See https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-k-baxter.
14 This happened in 1954 when Frame was a patient at Seaciff Lunatic Asylum. The book that saved her life was a collection of short stories entitled The Lagoon and other stories, published by Caxton Press in 1951.
15 See note 3. This is poem number 341, p. 162.
17 Frost had to commit his sister Jeanie to a mental hospital in 1920 and she died there in 1929. His son Carol committed suicide in 1940 and his daughter Irma was committed to a mental hospital in 1947.
18 Two “canonical” poems of Frost are alluded to here, “Mending Wall” and “Home Burial”, both from North of Boston, first published in 1914.
19 In the second section of “East Coker” from Four Quartets (1943).
20 Lines 362-3 of Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Criticism” first published in 1711. In this essay, Pope gives wonderful examples as he writes of the sort of writing he abhors.
21 Oh, dear. heroic couples are one thing but brave intrusions by cheap Byronesque rhyming is another. My apologies to my reader. I simply don’t know what possessed me.
22 See Eliot, Thomas Stearns. 1951. Selected Essays, “The Function of Criticism (1923). The full quotation reads: “The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks – tares to which we are all subject – and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment” (p. 25).
In 1823 a Ngapūhi taua (war party) massacred hundreds of Te Arawa people, who had sought refuge on Mokoia Island. On the island stood Matuatonga, a stone symbol of fertility: the Kumara Goddess. She remains there still. This poem was published in *Te Reo Pohewa: The Spirit of Rotorua in Verse* (2011), edited by Jackie Evans and published by Rotorua Mad Poets Society.