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## Fast Food, Paranoia and Politics: The New Zealand Novel in 1986

### **Abstract**

It is the beginning of 1987 and, in the best of all possible worlds, in the most mythic of worlds, the sea gods are at work in Fremantle. Tangaroa, God of the Waitemata Harbour in Auckland, has arranged it all with his Fremantle counterpart. Because of the French infamy in sinking the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland, let the New Zealanders defeat French Kiss in the semi-finals of the America's Cup; because of the American infamy — bullying New Zealand for refusing entrance to U.S. nuclear warships, for keeping Tangaroa's waters pure — let the young New Zealanders defeat Denis Conner and his Stars and Stripes in the finals. Of course, at it turned out, Conner overcame the Kiwi syndicate and the consortium of gods; but, even if this had not been so, the divine vengeance would have come to an everyday halt. After all, the Australians hold the Cup; after defeating the Americans, the New Zealanders would have faced the Australians. Who would the Fremantle harbour god have supported then? After all the surface soil of myth, there is finally the bedrock of parochialism. Still, this is just myth-making: maybe the Fremantle divinity would have allowed victory to the New Zealanders because they have treated the Maori people with the slightest particle of that respect the Australians have denied the Aborigines. This is the soft underbelly of myth, the hopeful part.

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### THE MICROWAVE OF MYTH

For New Zealanders, the last half-decade has been a time of departing innocence. The 1981 protests against the rugby tour by the South African Springboks revealed a New Zealand police force in riot gear for the first time, armed with swivel batons of oriental design and prepared to use them. The steady diminution of the nation's economic base became painfully apparent, and was compounded by the political heresy of the

new Labour Government — determined to restructure the economy along free market lines. Unemployment, inflation, and public debt drove upwards, while government services began carrying double charges. Violent crime increased in the large cities, alongside the increased evidence of a monied entrepreneurial class: gaps widened and, if there was still insufficient reason to declare a class society of the classical sort, there was the compelling suspicion that the gaps had an awful lot of brown people on one side of them. Finally, in the blue harbours that surround the nation, that make it maritime in that most domestic sense — games on and near beaches — an international struggle over nuclear hegemonies was being waged. French saboteurs destroyed a Greenpeace ship; the Americans came down with heavy hands on the New Zealand decision not to allow nuclear warships into its waters. Who knows whether the New Zealand stand was a national drive to act as exemplar in a nuclear world, or whether it was a pious and naïve isolationism, based on a wholly selfish domesticity: no nukes in our playground, please. It doesn't matter why the New Zealanders did it; they soon learnt what it meant to have done it, and what it costs. What it means and what it costs are what concern the recent crop of New Zealand novels.

The three novels\* I wish principally to discuss in this article have been written by poets. Two of them are first novels. They have, however, been rapturously received by the New Zealand literary press and, if we were to believe it, literature has come of age — in that it has attained a worldliness — in New Zealand. All three novels are complex, and they are very ambitious. To a greater or lesser extent, each contains passages of virtuoso writing. But each of them also takes an extended poetic licence that ultimately sees them fail as finished novels.

Publishing in New Zealand has always been a business of risk. For the authors, it has been a risk of a satisfaction ringed by limits. Who reads New Zealand novels outside of New Zealand? Who needs to be famous within the circumference of one's own block? For the publishers, it has been a risk of bankruptcy. Who reads New Zealand novels within New Zealand? Now, in a nation of three million people, this is not as dire as it first sounds. The nation is not as literary as Iceland, where, in the long

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\*) Ian Wedde, *Symmes Hole*. Auckland: Penguin, 1986.  
Russell Haley, *The Settlement*. Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986.  
Mike Johnson, *Lear — The Shakespeare Company Plays Lear at Babylon*. Auckland: Hard Echo Press, 1986.

All three novels are being prepared for international editions.

winter night, one either drinks or writes books (one in six Icelanders has written a book), but a careful publisher with a good product, and a good marketing strategy, can count upon selling 1,500 copies of a novel. This compares exceptionally well with the British figures, which are very little higher amidst a very much greater population. At the same time, it means that the sale of 1,500 copies will barely cover the costs of producing the novel. The publisher has to rely upon coffee table books for a profit margin, and operate a policy of as much safety as possible in selecting novels. The joy that surrounds the three novels discussed here is that none of them is 'safe'; each of them is experimental; and there is the fine suspicion afoot that the reviewers are urging on the reading public — a public stretched large in a thin population — not to let the side down; to support these three novelists so that, in turn, the publishers will be supported, so that, in turn again, more unsafe works can be published. Loyalty make de boat roll home.

There is something else afoot as well. Two of the novelists, in their guises as poets, were very anxious, in their youth, to roll back the idea that New Zealand poetry could have distinctly New Zealand referents: you couldn't have a poetry of flora and fauna, and a domestic setting which eluded, almost entirely, the outside world. Russell Haley and Ian Wedde were activists in a campaign to introduce the currents of world poetry to New Zealand — in particular, the French poetry of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, and the American poetry of Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams. The background of this effort has leant the notion that they are setting up a similar infusion for prose. In the light of the compressed lessons in political reality that New Zealand has undergone in the last five years, it was time for the introduction of novels that concerned politics and, above all the place of New Zealand politics in the currents of international politics.

The questions that arise here are truncated immediately. It cannot be asked, for instance: 'If we are no longer innocent, which of the swirling international guilts is most like ours?' For there is still a bravado, a sense of righteousness that isolation breeds. The worst thing that could have happened to New Zealand political consciousness was to ban nuclear ships from a country which no one believes is threatened by nuclear weapons. If purity is based on safety, there's going to be an awful lot of patronizing stares in the contemplation of what's 'out there'. (The lesson the New Zealand Government learnt in all this was that it can't patronize the United States.)

The second thing is that New Zealand is a country with a great deal of barely-repressed internal guilt. This has to do with the conquest of the

Maori people, and the subsequent repression of the Maori culture. This has caused a curious and unstable approach: 'We approach the guilts out there on the basis of our guilts in here.' There has been a huge attempt to reinvigorate Maori culture and to make it a central reference point in determining the argument for the nation's future. It breaks down as soon as it is applied to international affairs. No one 'out there' wants to know what Maori culture and its implied nobility mean 'in there', and, frankly, no one needs to know. This international refusal to know could form the ideological centre-piece of novels; the novelist confronts a set of terms which are inclusive (every nation on earth is included), but which are also exclusive (everything that cannot be measured in terms of power and capital is excluded). Instead, the starting-point has been inverted, and the attempt is to establish a set of standards, explicated from a background of guilt — to that extent, an invention — and to hold up that set of national standards against the perils which international politics might visit upon the country. The new novel does nothing new. It restates the romance that the novelists, as young poets, resisted. The unsafe novel is, in reality, as safe as it can possibly be.

All this is to say how much Ian Wedde's novel, *Symmes Hole*, tries to make it, and to describe the margin by which it fails. Of the three, it is undoubtedly the most ambitious, and it is the one with the greatest number of virtuoso passages. Some of these passages are so extended, breathless, and simply beautiful, that the reader — any reader anywhere in the English-reading world — is going to sit in awe. The constant changes in time and place are as ambitious as any attempted by, for instance, Carlos Fuentes. The weakness of all these leaps about history and location is that they are all hinged on the internalized quest of the narrator (who is barely distanced from the author), and what happens early in the piece is that they become merely vehicles for his sense that he is writing wonderfully. As a series of passages in how to string words together, *Symmes Hole* is masterly. As a series of connected, developing episodes, it is not there. The writing is too great for the book.

What do I mean when I say that the book doesn't develop? I don't mean to say that it doesn't tell much of a story (it doesn't). I mean that the book doesn't develop its sense of politics. The quest for Moby Dick (Mocha Dick here), the polite settlement of Wellington, and its subsequent location for a MacDonald's Hamburger Bar, are treated, with hilarity, as the cumulative extensions of capitalism. The point is that it is the sort of capitalist encroachment that writes its own history. It 'officializes' all it manufactures in its own image. Simultaneously, it trivializes the history of others, in particular the history of those on the margins of

polite society. So, in Wedde's book, the marginalized and the hunted fight back. Mocha Dick fights back. Worser Heberley, the failed whaler gone native with a Maori wife and tribe, takes centre stage. The whale and the whaler liberate their history and fling it in the face of the official version.

None of this is new. As a movement among historians it has gained immense cachet from the work of Braudel in France. E.P. Thompson in Britain, before his fame as a campaigner against nuclear weapons, worked in this mould, as did other British academics such as Raymond Williams. As a man of many talents, Williams has written novels as examples of his literary theories and historiography. They are attempts to reclaim a local history and to make it a history that was established on the terms of the local, everyday people. It is, in short (and I think admirably), a socialist history. The difficulties of this sort of history lie in the expansion of the circle in which it is located. From local to regional, to national, to international, this history requires a number of intermediaries — people who act upon the pressures from the masses below them, and the pressures of vested interests above them. It is one thing to say that the pressure of the masses was more influential overall than anything else; in this sense, we can say that they created history and that this has not been officially recognized. The difficulty comes in analysing those who were the intermediaries, who were, in some sense, pivotal. In international relations, this difficulty has had its most extreme revelations. Latin American theorists of the *Dependentista* school, such as Andre Gunder Frank, had to invent a *Comprador* class of people: a class who intervened between local exploitation and international capitalist gain. These were people who collaborated at the national level with the international bosses. For helping along the immiseration of their own people, these collaborationists were allowed to get rich (though not as rich as their overlords). This approach had all kinds of difficulty, not least that presented by the politicians of developing nations. Had those who had suffered to bring independence to their countries been, all the while, collaborationists? Does wealth depict collaboration?

Whatever the merits of the *Dependentista* theory, the point here is: where, in Wedde's work, are the *Compradors*? Where is the opposition? The few figures of opposition in the book are either not fleshed out (the 'new people' of Wakefield's dreams), or are caricatures (MacDonald's hamburgers). The opposition does not exist in itself, except as shadowy or cartoon symbols of international capitalism; and, more particularly, the opposition is not manifest in terms of intermediaries at the points of choice and intervention. No hero of Wedde's book, no figment of the nar-

rator's internalized quest ever comes up against an opposing character or a collaborationist with the opposing side. There is, in short, no battleground founded on contradiction in *Symmes Hole*: the book which advocates a socialist history has no dialectical tension. Who is confronted with what? Someone composing a myth of whaling is expressed (or expresses himself) in paragraphs that dazzle; but he and the myth are counterpointed with nothing. The myth has no weight gained from struggle. It is a fast myth, a convenience that extrudes from the writing. It is, in an appalling irony, a replica of the fast food that symbolizes Wedde's capitalism. This is not an unfair judgement. The novel eschews a normal story-line. It is presented deliberately as the revelation of a myth; it is a myth which has two simultaneous purposes. Firstly, it expresses an unofficial history. Secondly, it is a history which claims precedence and correct placement above the official history. If a normal story-line is not to develop, then the novel must have a political development, an ideological expression, and must be made to prove itself in combat. What there is instead is a New Zealandism which has marked no progress in terms of that country and the rest of the world.

## PARANOIA IN AN ENCLAVE

Russell Haley's novel, *The Settlement*, avoids many of these problems, but poses some of its own. Born of the effects of police brutality during the Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand, the novel supposes a time of civil unrest and official subjugation of it. The word, 'suppose', is used advisedly, as the reader is meant to suppose himself or herself through the novel. The unrest is an assumption in a background that is never painted in. The novel's action occupies a foreground in a mental hospital, so the supposition is that the major characters can't be reliable either. Now, this is either an extremely subtle device — the contradictions are all interior ones, interior to a hospital grounds, interior to the heads of a small population of protagonists, and interior to the head of the reader — or it is a deliberate sidestep to elevate what would have been a tense and suggestive short story into a novel. The novel's failure can be blamed on the reader. The author, meanwhile, abdicates a great measure of his responsibility, effectively restarting the story from a shifted premise one third of the way through. It is, one supposes, to put across the idea of interior perspectives. The point is, however, that Haley regrasps the rights of a novelist for the book's ending, as he manipulates the camouflage of his characters, abruptly introduces a new one, and deposits all



and sundry, the reader included, into the real world — whatever sort of interior perspective has been achieved. Haley abandoned the novel's visible directorship so that his readers could explore an enigma. After patiently doing just that, the reader finds all enigma removed by the *deus ex machina* resuming his role. The technique of the novel has been a setup and has dissolved into a sham.

The annoyance of all this is that the reader is set up with care. Details of extreme pedanticism are introduced. (Should I remember the Latin name for that flower? Am I missing something? Was there a clue back there which should have illuminated this heavy going?) The fundamental annoyance of the novel, however, is that it, of itself, illuminates nothing — in particular, nothing of the use of politics which hovers in the background. That's fine: the novelist can say that the reader should do that; the paranoia induced from plodding through the novel exemplifies the political paranoia that backdrops it all. It is a dark warning when the reader finds there is no escape from the political process implied throughout. Haley can say he has written a novel of despair and a novel of warning, and it has been accepted as such by New Zealand reviewers.

To accept it in this manner is to accept a not insignificant achievement. The actual writing, moreover, is that of a craftsman, and the book bears all the hallmarks of having been patiently written and (on the part of the publishers) lovingly produced. But, as the end to the novel illustrates, it is not that there is no escape from the politics inferred by the novel, but that there is no escape from the novelist. All the tension of reading has been subsumed into a tension between the reader and the writer. Why did the author do this? What did he mean by this? Is my response the correct one in the author's context? I have imagined a world, I have made a personal sense of this enigma, but is it the sense that the writer intended, i.e. will it lead me to the end of the novel in a satisfactory and satisfying manner? And it doesn't — because there, at the end, is Haley in full novelist's uniform. *The Settlement* is, therefore, a failure as a political novel. It is a success as a form of written duplicity; but, because we are arguing with the author, and have transferred our paranoia to him, the deep recesses of the New Zealand political condition are dissipated. So, let's call Haley's bluff: the failure of the novel is the fault of the novelist.

## IRRADIATED MYTH

The third novel to be discussed here is by a writer who has only recently come to public attention. Moreover, his publisher is a small press without the facilities of the others responsible here. The pedigree of the operation lies firstly in the risk of the publisher: *Lear — The Shakespeare Company Plays Lear at Babylon*, all 220 pages of it, was set by hand on an antique letterpress machine. All who helped set it became sick — no doubt from exhaustion — but the first edition was marshalled to a run of 3,000 copies, making it an epic of hand production, and demonstrating the publisher's faith in a virtually unknown writer. Moreover, the book is bound into a spine which refuses destruction: it cannot be torn straight DOWN. The book's production is, therefore, an assemblage of sweat, faith, and superglue. But what of the novel within?

Mike Johnson avoids New Zealand politics by setting his novel in a post-nuclear holocaust landscape which is, nominally, near Babylon — but which could be anywhere. It is possible that centuries have passed since the bombs fell, but epidemics of radiation-plague still decimate the remnants of humanity. This same humanity perversely continues to seek to multiply, and the perversity of challenging a self-ordained but gradual extinction is the central image of the book. Nothing in the novel is erotic in the normal sense, although some New Zealand reviewers carelessly paraded the word. There was a rumour that it might be declared obscene, but the book is not that either. Its sexual course (or courses) are simply perverse — because they reflect the universe in which they occur, they reflect the futility of reproduction, and they form the plot's underlay and mirror, as, in an irradiated slum, The Shakespeare Company, the very last bad-trip high-school-circuit travelling ensemble of hacks and shit-artists, run through *Lear*. And if *Lear* is not a play about futility, then what is? In a way, the novel's setting, while inventive and individual in New Zealand, takes no chances in a landscape where everything is predetermined.

All of the action takes place over twenty-four hours, and concerns the power struggle within The Shakespeare Company — both over who runs The Company and, simultaneously, who gets to sleep with whom; and over which actor gets to play which part. They cannot really change the play, since this would change the power struggle. The one actor who seeks a new play is the only one who dies. The Shakespeare Company is doomed to be a one-play ensemble, the actors growing into the characters they play, and being unseparated from them in everyday life until the next power-struggle is resolved. In an environment where everything is

doomed, The Shakespeare Company is doomed to keep enacting doom, and, with variations of personnel, to give doom a particularized but endlessly repetitive flavour. It is a reasonably sweet joke, therefore, for a novel about destruction to be bound into an indestructible spine.

Unlike the Wedde and Haley novels, Mike Johnson's work has a traditional format within his extreme setting. The population of characters do play off against one another. To a large extent, the tension this generates is a predictable one, since they live out various of the stage personae they nightly assume. But the tension is made properly real by the fact that some characters want to transform themselves into other roles. It is a traditional novel and a reasonably successful one.

If it is more successful as a novel than Wedde's and Haley's, it is less successful as a piece of writing. It sets out to be beautiful writing, but there is a one-dimensional quality to the scenes of playing *Lear* (we know it is a play), and a one-dimensional languor to the sexual couplings (we know that the author is making it up, probably having a good time doing so, writing it to a deadline and smiling).

As a novel, it escapes the sword-and-sorcery genre. As a piece of writing, however, there is a marked similarity between some of Johnson's work and that of Moorcock, sword-and-sorcery's doyen. The affectionate and offhand heroism of Moorcock is here transferred into an affectionate and offhand sexual perversity. It is necessary for the story and for the book, but it writes and reads more cheaply than the book would have wanted and, given the book's ambition, more cheaply than it deserves. Still, the product augurs well for Johnson's future and that of his publisher. Wedde and Haley wrote substantial parts of their novels while on fellowships at the New Zealand universities of Wellington and Auckland respectively; Johnson's novel has just won him a fellowship at Canterbury.

## FAME, EFFORT, AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The Wedde, Haley and Johnson novels were all published in 1986, and continue the experimental New Zealand novel. It has had a short history, but surfaced to international attention when Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* won the 1985 Booker Prize in Britain. Wedde, in particular, would have wanted to give his work the tight structures that were largely absent from Hulme's book. Very present in Wedde's work, however, is the consciousness of Maori precedence: they were in New Zealand first, and

it was their culture that officialdom has most ignored. Its claim to an unpatronized position in New Zealand history has only recently been given an official credence. There is a New Zealand peculiarity that Wedde shirks from: he does not make the Maori his centrepiece of unofficial history. The Maori are associated with unofficialdom in so far as Worsler Heberley marries into a Maori tribe, but Heberley is, essentially, out there on his own, and, if he represents any distinct underdog community, it is the community of exiled whalers around the Wellington coastline.

The New Zealand peculiarity dates from a 1973 decision by a Labour Government to allow registration on the Maori electoral roll on the basis, not only of blood, but of identification and solidarity. This was a legislative sentiment, an anti-racialist romanticism. Keri Hulme is, by blood, one eighth Maori but, according to her own dust-jackets, identifies wholly with the Maori people. She and others do so rightly; their commitment is measurable. For many others, however, becoming an armchair Maori, or insisting that all New Zealand culture must be armchair-Maorified, has become a fashion of sleeve-displaying more than anything else. Wedde has rightly resisted this, but pays an honest due in *Symmes Hole* and in his other work — notably in his editorial policy for *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Poetry*. But how to choose in this matter, and exactly what one is choosing among, are issues clouded in the current New Zealand political and literary debate. In literary terms, the 1986 publication of Maurice Shadbolt's *The Season of the Jew* raises interesting questions. Can a European writer, such as Shadbolt, who has made no personal commitment to Maori culture, write from a Maori perspective? He certainly seeks to do this, and his Maori characters are sympathetically drawn in a gripping, traditional novel. Wedde's caution in deciding against exactly this lies in the nearness of guilt which suggests that Maori culture was unofficialized by Europeans; at this stage in history, it should be reclaimed by Maoris themselves, and not by Europeans. It is a question of symbols, but the Shadbolt book enters a debate which its author has made no real show of acknowledging.

How then to be polite to the work of Maori novelists who fail from attempting too much? Whose cultural mission of reclamation flounders on the limits of their craft? Witi Ihimaera's 1986 novel, an epic work called *The Matriarch*, won literary prizes in New Zealand, and it won bucketsful of critical praise — based, it seems, largely on its effort and reach, and the sheer size of the book as an expression of things Maori and Pacific. It is as if people were surprised that Maori culture could take up

so much room. In this atmosphere of armchairism and genuine naivety, if not gaucheness, it will be some time before novels by Maori writers can be properly assessed.

There was one oddity in the 1986 New Zealand list of novels, and that was Keith Ovenden's *O.E.* Ostensibly a thriller, it also portrayed a New Zealand subjected to foreign interventions. International politics, and shady ones at that, infiltrated God's Own Country. The trouble with Ovenden is his parade of his own worldliness. He is not a New Zealander, though married to one, and would probably like most to be back in Oxford or Paris. Not being back there, he recalls his old stomping grounds in the sort of travelogue which insists that the author has been there and he is writing for readers who haven't. The politics of the book are also a hierarchical expression. Ovenden was once a politics don, and his novel has the joint pedanticism of a travelogue for beginners, and a set of lecture notes. But he has got one basic premise right. The danger to New Zealand is out there. Someone like Wedde, to lift a line from one of his poems, would say that out there is mediated from in here. But, while we're refining our internal view, our international innocence might be running amok. That is, as New Zealanders construct their late-20th century myth, they must have a detailed appreciation of reality's international bedrock. The feeling of uniqueness, which has always been the bane of the New Zealand world view, should not be replaced or augmented by a sense of corrected righteousness. You can spend so much time searching for Worsler Heberley and his meaning, that you trivialize the external threat in symbols of hamburgers.

Haley's novel was entirely an interior exploration. National currents were in such a background that their international cousins or progenitors never got a look in. At the novel's end, two characters emigrate to England, and a fine line is drawn — then crossed by the two — between the civil unrest in New Zealand, the mental chaos of the characters, and what lies beyond, what lies outside. The exploration of what lies outside is something untouched in New Zealand writing. It is a consciousness untouched by the effort of writing and the local fame it brings, together with the local myth it helps to build and hopes will last. This hopefulness is no armour.