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Poetry New Zealand Yearbook 2018

Edited by Jack Ross



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Editorial

A live tradition

To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.
— Ezra Pound, 'Canto LXXXI'

Just as our previous issue focused on younger poets, this one has as its overarching principle 'the tradition' — however you want to define that term. In pursuit of this aim, I've chosen to feature the poetry of Alistair Paterson.

Alistair was the managing editor of *Poetry New Zealand* for 20 years, from 1994 to 2014, and before that he edited *Mate / Climate* between 1974 and 1981. He is, however, principally a writer. Alistair had a poem in the very first issue of *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook*, in 1951, and since then he has published nine books of poetry and three of prose, as well as editing numerous other books and journals.

He represents, then, a very important thing: perseverance in the writing life. Alongside this, though, his tireless work showcasing the talents of others shows a generosity of spirit which is also an essential part of the sense of poetic community I wish to celebrate here.

Another aspect of Alistair's career is perhaps less well known: a pronounced taste for experimentation and theory. As a result, Alistair's poetry has never stood still. The free-flowing, associative poems he is writing today seem to me to represent a considerable technical advance on the more formal long poems of his middle years. Whether or not other readers agree with this diagnosis, the one constant factor in his writing is undoubtedly change.

For an author to be creating interesting new work after 70-odd years of writing is not a phenomenon for which there are many parallels.

Thomas Hardy published a book of poems in his eighty-eighth year; John Masefield in his eighty-ninth; Allen Curnow in his ninetieth. Alistair Paterson's poetry now spans a similar period, but neither Hardy nor Masefield could be said to have kept up with new developments in poetics to the extent that Paterson has. Only Curnow provides a real precedent.

There's a strong focus on mortality in many of the 21 new poems included here. How could there not be? What's perhaps even more noticeable is the delight and curiosity about nature, travel, time and the sea that most of them display. Paterson's energy seems inexhaustible. His wide acquaintanceship with so many of our poets, old and new, makes him in many ways the perfect embodiment of the ideal of a local tradition.

The Pound quote I began with speaks specifically of a live tradition. That's the real point, I think. Of course it can be interesting and valuable to celebrate the past, but it's what the past has gifted to the present that really matters. Good poems don't die, but grow in the memory, inspire us to speak out about our own times, our own problems, our own causes for celebration or despair.

The same can be true of essays and reviews, more strongly in evidence than ever in this issue. As well as a long interview, I've been fortunate enough to be able to include Owen Bullock's essay on Alistair Paterson's long poem *The Toledo Room* (1978), and thus to provide maximum coverage of his work to date.

Alongside this, you'll find a passionate defence of confessional poetry against its many, many detractors by poetry student Jeanita Cush-Hunter; an eloquent centenary tribute to T. E. Hulme, the (so-called) 'father of imagism' — and certainly founder of a certain notion of the Modernist poetic tradition — by poet and classicist Ted Jenner; and an amusing account of a family poetic tradition by Reade Moore.

More controversially, perhaps, Robert McLean has written a reply to Janet Charman's essay 'A Piece of Why', included in the previous edition

of *Poetry New Zealand*, in which he takes issue with Charman's avowedly psychoanalytic reading of Allen Curnow's choices as an anthologist.

Celebration and inclusiveness are one thing, but it must be emphasised that the right to *disagree* is also part of a 'live tradition'. Both Charman and McLean argue passionately in support of their positions, but on the issues, never *ad hominem*. Both, it seems to me, deserve a hearing. Perhaps it's my evangelical upbringing, but I've never felt that there was much to be feared from robust debate.

The review section here, too — larger than ever — is not short of strong opinions, cogently expressed. In her generous and thought-provoking review of our previous issue, *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook 2017*, poet and literary critic Paula Green announced as her own guiding principle that: 'A good poetry review opens a book for the reader as opposed to snapping it shut through the critic's prejudices.'

I would certainly agree with that — in principle, at any rate. A book should always be given the benefit of the doubt, if at all possible. Unfortunately one cannot always leave it at that. In the essay 'Confessions of a Book Reviewer', George Orwell put the issue very neatly: 'If one says . . . that *King Lear* is a good play and *The Four Just Men* is a good thriller, what meaning is there in the word "good"?'

If we like and admire *all* books, then it's much the same as liking and admiring none. Differentiation is the point of criticism, after all, and sometimes one bad review can teach us more than catalogues of praise.

To conclude with another quotation from Pound's *Pisan Cantos*:¹

The wind is part of the process

The rain is part of the process

Of course there is another important point to make about book reviews. The masthead of the *Poetry New Zealand* website has always read 'International Journal of Poetry and Poetics'. There have certainly been questions in the past about just how many international publications can be mixed with the local product without obscuring the central *raison d'être* of the magazine.

This issue, for instance, includes reviews of 33 books. Twenty-three of these come from New Zealand publishers. Of the remainder, five come from Australia, one from Hong Kong, one from Spain, one from the UK, one from New York, and one from Hawai'i. However, seven of these 10 constitute single-author collections by New Zealand writers. The other three are anthologies. Of these the first, *5 6 7 8* is an Australian-published sampler of work by four poets, two of whom are transplanted New Zealanders; the second, *A TransPacific Poetics*, has a New Zealand-based co-editor, includes substantial local content and was in fact launched here in July 2017; only the third, *Zero Distance*, might seem an anomalous inclusion. When I explain that its editor, Yiang Lujing, is studying at Victoria University of Wellington, and has contributed translations to earlier editions of *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook*, the status of his work as a deliberate attempt to introduce contemporary Chinese writing to a Pacific audience may seem clearer. It is, of course, fortunate that we were able to find a reviewer, poet and critic Hamish Dewe, who is bilingual in Chinese and English.

It might be objected that few of these books are likely to be found on the shelves of local bookshops, but this is an uncomfortable reality for much poetry publishing in New Zealand now. In any case, in the age of online ordering, international books are often easier to obtain than those issued by some of our less tech-savvy local publishers.

The second round of the *Poetry New Zealand Poetry Prize* has been as much of a delight to judge as the first one. I've ended up making the following choices:

- First prize (\$500):** Fardowsa Mohamed, for 'Us' (page 126 in this issue)
- Second prize (\$300):** Semira Davis, for 'Hiding' (page 89)
- Third prize (\$200):** Henry Ludbrook, for 'The Bar Girl' (page 117)

Fardowsa Mohamed's poem is, quite simply, magnificent. Its breadth of theme, its honesty and its directness speak of a region of experience I long to know more about.

It's always a good sign when a poem scares the life out of you.

Semira Davis's poem is clipped and condensed, but there's a sea of pain submerged under its surface. And yet, among other things, one would have to admit that it's also very funny.

Henry Ludbrook's 'The Bar Girl' is lush and romantic — or should that be pervy and voyeuristic? — all at the same time. It expresses perfectly a very real feeling, and that's probably why I found it irresistible.

There are 87 poets in this issue (besides Alistair Paterson, our featured poet). There are also six essayists and 13 reviewers: 98 authors in all.

If variety is the spice of life, then I think you'll find it here. I'm particularly happy to be able to present new work by some of the luminaries of our antipodean poetic tradition: Jennifer Compton, David Eggleton, Sue Fitchett, Ted Jenner, Bob Orr, Albert Wendt, Mark Young and many, many others.

However, the preponderance of poems is by younger writers — some still in their teens — which is as it should be. More than 300 submissions were received for this issue, making the selection particularly difficult. So please don't be discouraged if you sent in work and had it rejected. Perseverance, and receptiveness to change: those are the two principles embodied in Alistair Paterson's long literary career — keeping at it, despite all disappointments and discouragements; above all, always being ready to try something new.

Dr Jack Ross
September 2017

1 Ezra Pound, 'Canto LXXIV', in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, [1970] 1996), 455.

Featured Poet

Alistair Paterson ONZM

Alistair Paterson is a poet, critic, fiction writer and editor, with considerable achievements in each of these fields. Born in Nelson in 1929, he has managed to combine a busy literary career with his professional life. He worked as an instructor officer in the Royal New Zealand Navy from 1954 to 1974 (retiring as lieutenant commander) and in public service education (New Zealand Police 1974–78; Department of Education 1979–89). A list of his many books and prizes is included below, but it is perhaps as a tireless champion of excellence in New Zealand poetry, both as an editor and as a practitioner, that he has left his most enduring mark. Many poets will remember with gratitude the voice of this long-term editor of *Poetry New Zealand* on the phone, questioning their word choices, inspiring us to do better, and providing mini master classes year after year. *Passant: A Journey to Elsewhere*, a memoir of his early years, came out from British publisher Austin Macauley in late 2017.

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Prizes

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- 1993 — BNZ Katherine Mansfield Award for short stories.
- 2007 — Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit.

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