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Talk delivered to the New Zealand University Graduates' Association, at the New Zealand High Commission on 15 June 2012

From Medieval English to Postcolonial Studies

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To introduce this topic, I really have to start with my life at secondary school --i.e. Wellington Girls' College, Wellington—where I began developing an interest in languages as well as History and English, and studied Latin, German and French, and in my last year even Russian. So when it came to doing Old English and Middle English at University, which was compulsory then if you wanted to major in English, I found these subjects much to my taste, partly because I had already studied language as an entrée into interpreting texts, but mainly because of my lecturers who were inspirational in introducing these new areas: Harry Orsman, Ian Jamieson, Don McKenzie and the American Nick Doane. I could also have chosen linguistics—which I have taught for many years both in New Zealand and the UK-- dynamic in the 1960s with the dramatic changes introduced by Chomsky and his school, but preferred the text-based orientation of medieval English. The Old English laments, the 'Seafarer' and 'Wanderer', incomplete and fragmented as they were, were poignant and heart rending. At 18 or 19 I was into emotional resonances of any sort. Poetry was always in the background, and often in the foreground of my life even then, but never within my actual grasp as creative act.

If anyone then had said I would become a medievalist I would have laughed in disbelief; although I did wonder what I would do when I left university and felt very ill equipped for the wider world. We were in the middle of a cultural and political revolution which was as profound for New Zealand as the swinging 60s was for fashionable London. There was Vietnam and the protest movement of course, But closer to home, by the late 60s New Zealand poetry began to be influenced by American writing, and performance poetry became big with local poets like Sam Hunt and Ian Wedde. We read Geoff Nuttall's *Bomb Culture* and Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* etc. There was an influx of new cultural theories and writers. We read books published by the American Evergreen and Grove presses such as Samuel Beckett and slightly illicit writers like Henry Miller and Annais Nin etc, My boyfriend was an intellectual and enjoyed French new-wave writers like Henri de Montherlant and Nathalie Sarraute. I remember sitting on the beach at Oriental Bay after my final exams for the MA in English, when university life seemed to be all over, trying to soak these writers up with the sun and sand. Nothing much stuck. Life was generally much more interesting outside the academic institution than within, but in those days the two overlapped. Pub closing hours changed from 6 pm to 10 pm around 1968, but the drinking age was

still 21, and my boyfriend bribed the waiters and barmen with tips so that we could be served beer in the George and the Duke pubs. There we would see our lecturers in a different mode – particularly Harry Orsman who was often in the pub, ostensibly collecting slang and colloquialisms for his *New Zealand Dictionary* -- amidst a crowd of writers, intellectuals, various hangers on and drop outs. There were puaa divers, posties, rubbish collectors, fishermen and budding film makers. Geoff Murphy, then a school teacher and a friend of my flat mate, Ian McDonald, a composer and postman, hoisted a crane in our upstairs flat –above the post office in Kelburn parade –in order to start filming. I met there the actor Bruno Lawrence and others; then caught up with them again in Sydney in the early 1970s, and at the first Australian folk festival in Nimbin, where Murphy, Lawrence and their families travelled round in a brightly coloured bus labelled Blerta.

I left Wellington for Sydney after finishing my BA/MA degrees at Vic, in the early 70s, and soon found my way into a new scene that consisted of left-wing academics and working-class Marxists, Jack Munday (leader of a left wing workers' union) was pushing for new rights for the workers, including feminists obsessed with equality and intent on gender bending and became labourers and truck drivers. It was all the old Sydney push but in a reformed mode—nothing like the serious Andersonian politics of the previous generation. Germaine Greer was a dynamic presence whenever she returned and so was Frank Moorhouse, then an upcoming short story writer who got into fierce competition with another talented short story writer, the English lecturer, Michael Wilding. Friends for some years, they parted in acrimony—but not before they had founded the innovative short story magazine, *Tabloid Story*, which for a while was distributed by Qantas and Air NZ on the transtasman flights to NZ on which I flew home from time to time. I had been lucky enough to be employed as research assistant to one of the Professors of English at Sydney University and with in a few months, I embarked on an MA in Medieval English; then after a couple of years, unexpectedly moved back to New Zealand to take up a lectureship at Auckland University, where I taught medieval English and English language for 5 years, After that I left for Oxford.

Let me fast forward ten years. After completing a PhD at Oxford and a stint of lecturing there and at Trinity College Dublin, I returned to New Zealand at the end of the 80s—to the University of Otago, where I began lecturing in Old and Middle English and even Tudor Literature (under the auspices of the expert in this field, and my mentor, Professor Alistair Fox). It was a world vastly changed, although even before I left New Zealand in the late 1970s there had been signs of an awakening on civil rights, and racial equality, inaugurated by the Maori Land March from Cape Reinga to Parliament in 1975, and the occupation of Bastion Point in Orakei in 1977-78. A decade later New Zealand was in the midst of Rogernomics, and David Lange was about to step down, undermined by Roger Douglas and his Treasury

allies, but society had changed in other ways, especially after the riots over the famous Springbok tour of 1981. More importantly, with the revision of the Treaty of Waitangi and the formation of the Waitangi Tribunal, New Zealand/Aotearoa was proudly declaring itself bicultural. Universities were now also known as Te Wananga, there were kura kaupapa (total immersion schools), for Maori was now an official language along with English and there was a controversial move to introduce it into the teaching of language in schools.

Within a few years of my return one of my lecturers from Victoria University of Wellington arrived in Dunedin, as his wife, Dr Penelope Jamieson, had been appointed as the first woman diocesan Bishop of the Anglican Church there in 1989. Dr Ian Jamieson took over some of my medieval teaching thus freeing me up to develop into new areas. This unexpected dispensation enabled me to make the transition that other medieval scholars have also made—into a study of the contemporary. This change in academic fashion, of course, is a consequence of enormous social change, for as colonial ties with Britain were disappearing or being renegotiated, there was a corresponding move to examine local culture, history and literature—and of course all the national upheavals since the 1960s, especially in race relations, demanded revisionary methods of study. When I was at university in the 60s, New Zealand literature was covered in one course taught by Father Frank McKay; by the early 1990s it was well established at Otago, taught by Lawrence Jones and others, and was beginning to be presented under the umbrella of postcolonial theory, which offered new ways of thinking about the power structures of colony and empire, centres and margins, and about modes and processes of identity formation following independence. In general the ancient cultures and their languages, like Old Norse and Anglo Saxon, the study of which had been a staple of the English curriculum since the colonial university system in New Zealand and Australia, were being seen as of diminishing relevance. Through the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st c, medieval studies—i.e. Old and Middle English and Old Norse -- waned everywhere except in Oxford and Cambridge where they are still a popular component of the undergraduate degree. In their place were new disciplines like women's studies and theory, area or regional studies, film and media, and cultural studies, postcolonial and diaspora studies. But in my case the change of academic interest brought to the fore another side of my life, my pervasive and entrenched connection with New Zealand literature and with New Zealand writers.

As the daughter of a writer, I had always been conscious of New Zealand writing, not just as a way of life, but as a crucial point of connection with the world around me. As a child, I would look at the books on my father's bookcase, *I Saw in My Dream* by Frank Sargeson and *The Gorse Blooms Pale* by Dan Davin, fascinated by what the titles evoked. My father was a long-term friend of Frank Sargeson, and

they corresponded for years. When I was about ten my mother took us four children to visit him in his bach on Esmonde Road in Takapuna, Auckland (we must have been visiting my aunts, her sisters, who lived in Auckland and their families); to my astonishment he gave each of us four children half a crown, an unheard of sum in those days. Later as we walked among the vegetables admiring the garden, my little sister Katie lost hers and began to scuffle through the earth looking for it and then to cry. Noticing something was wrong Frank Sargeson spoke to my mother and lo and behold another half crown was produced. An amazing act of generosity which has stuck in my mind ever since. I met Sargeson on several occasions after I returned to Auckland in 1974, going to the Esmonde Rd cottage with my father in the evening often to drink a glass of the awful brew he called lemora—a yellow sweetish drink like sherry with had very little real flavour or kick. When he heard I was teaching Chaucer he became very interested and opened a book of Chaucer's works, pointing to various bits of verse, I think in 'The Pardoner's Tale'. I wish I had kept a record of that particular conversation, for when I came to write an introduction to a new edition of his stories a year or so ago, I was puzzled by the enigmatic title of one of his earliest sketches 'Chaucerian'. I think he uses it as a coded form for 'real life' as captured in literature in the way Chaucer did, rather than life as lived unthinkingly—or written about in clichés as a school of New Zealand writers allegedly did before Sargeson came along (and which he knowingly displaced). But also he alludes to the sexual ambiguities and misdemeanours that Chaucer writes, especially in relation to the clergy and other religious figures like the Pardoner, defining a double standard in behaviour which Sargeson would have relished.

Maurice Shadbolt was also a friend of my father and visited us once when my father was firewatching in the Kaingaroa Forest and we, the family, were there as well during our summer holidays. He was quite young then, and self possessed, puffing a pipe and talking loudly, curious about all that my father was doing—the bincoluars for picking up fires, the planned burn offs when he had to be in position to report on the smoke, the activities like deer hunting. Nightly deer hunting was a feature of our rather dull existence in the middle of nowhere during those weeks -- my father and brother with the gun and the dog, a foxie called Sally. We ate backstakes and legs of venison after they had been hung for days to become less gamey. My father was proud of how he could live virtually off the land as Sargeson did with his productive, fertile and well-tended garden. Barry Crump was just coming onto the literary scene in those years (the late 50s) and I remember reading his first book *A Good Keen Man*, in either the Ngapuketerua or Wairango lookout, laughing hilariously, but also with recognition: we had deer cullers just like Crump and his mates living down the road, very young men who sometimes dropped in

and made my 12-year-old heart flutter, but also making my father afraid of accidentally being shot at by them when he was out hunting.

I met other writers I met in the course of my own pursuits as a university lecturer, although my father's name may have opened doors. Janet Frame I first met in 1974 when the English poet Jon Silkin and his then wife, the short story writer, Lorna Tracey, were visiting Australia—they came on to New Zealand, and I organised their trip. They both wanted to meet Janet who was then living in semi-rural retreat in Shakespear Bay on the Whangapora Peninsula about 50 km from Auckland (King, 389), so I drove them to her place. She came out when the car drew up, waving some papers. When the introductions were over she explained what they were. The first was a doctor's letter saying that she did not have schizophrenia; this would have been written by Dr R.H. (Bob) Cawley, the psychiatrist who treated her in the Maudsley Hospital and who had helped overturn the original verdict. Janet often showed this or similar letters to visitors and critics who she thought would misrepresent her; the other was a record of her father's possessions that he received upon discharge from the Great War—a double bed and something like a dresser. In Michael King's biography of Janet, *Wrestling with the Angel*, are her comments on this visit as 'tremendously rich and interesting', with 'an unusual kind of penguin-like bird appearing for his [Silkin's] benefit and a magnificent sea creature being stranded at his feet' (King 393). I later met Janet again on several occasions with my father, after I returned to New Zealand, and in 1993, at a time when several of us in the Department of English at Otago were editing the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* we held the first ever conference on Janet Frame, to which academics from Australia and further afield came. This was my first foray into Frame studies, and I really slaved over my paper 'Postmodernism or Postcolonialism in *Living in the Maniototo* and *The Carpathians*', as I do whenever I write on her work. At some stage we decided to invite her and I remember ringing her up; she was quite pleased about the conference but said that no she didn't think she would like to attend. Wisely. I mention these three writers because I have written on their work, and of course the personal acquaintance has not informed what I have written, except perhaps for Maurice Shadbolt, as I did write an essay which claimed that his work shows that he did not understand women very well. Later, after it was published, I met him at an Art Gallery opening in Auckland and I said I hoped he didn't mind. He patted my hand reassuringly, as though he had forgiven me. I hope so.

In England it was another story because I met a different kind of writer, the expatriate. The key figure in this very different orientation to New Zealand was Dan Davin whom I met on my first trip to the UK in 1976 (the introduction was provided by Maurice Shadbolt). Dan and his wife Winnie were great enthusiasts about New Zealand, where Dan was a name, although his works were not as well read in the

60s when I was growing up as they had been in the 40s and 50s. They were also very fond of New Zealanders and entertained a circle in the local pub in Oxford where they drank every night, of people from Oxford University Press where Dan Davin worked until 1978, various literary and academic friends and often visiting kiwis. The first night I met them they invited me to stay and so I did on another occasion, climbing up to the fourth floor of their house in Southmoor Road, to sleep in a bed they said had been previously slept in by Dylan and Caitlin Thomas. The dislocation of being a writer on the other side of the world from your homeland, was one that Dan suffered from, I think, for he was always asking friends and relatives about details of events, when he went back (for his novels and short stories). From 1947, the date of his first novel, *Cliffs of Fall*, all his published work was written in the UK, including what I would say are his best short stories, about growing up in Southland, collected in *The Gorse Blooms Pale (1947)*./ Some of these were written when he was fighting in Crete and Greece and on leave in London during World War II.

The other writer I met here and who is a friend of many years' standing, is of course, Fleur Adcock. Fleur came to the UK in 1963, and her first volume *The Eye of the Hurricane*, consisting of poems written before she left, was published in NZ the following year, Since then all her work has been published in England and she sees herself very much as an English poet. In my study of her work I trace the idea of home—her ambivalence about not quite belonging to New Zealand, her sense of a true destiny in England, the home of her ancestors. This appears in many poems, some written about going back to New Zealand to see family and friends. I see her as an expatriate who has chosen to belong to this society, but in later poems, as for example in *Time Zones (1990)*, she becomes something of a citizen of the world. The ways that she brings together the two hemispheres—finding coincidences and differences between them, commenting and sometimes consciously bridging the gap, is a distinctive feature. A relatively early poem, written in the decade after she arrived here, 'On a Son Returned to New Zealand', shows the conflict of loyalties that she undoubtedly experienced, with the comment 'no-one can be in two places at once'. The poem begins in Athens where she and her son Gregory have been visiting, then moves to London where she is now tidying up, after he has left, the holiday being over, and ends with the thought of him now returned to his father: 'He was /already in his father's house, on the / cliff-top, where the winter storms roll across / from Kapiti Island, and the flax bends/before the wind. He could go no further. / He is my bright sea-bird on a rocky beach.'

Over the years, since I returned to the UK in 1998, I have made regular trips home, and my own work has developed further in the fields of diaspora and postcolonial writing, with a focus on New Zealand and often Australian cinema and literature as well. I became editor in 2001 of a journal called *World Literature*

Written in English, which in 2005 was taken over and published by Routledge as the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. As I suggested before, this is a field that includes all ex-colonial countries—from the French, Portuguese, Belgian and Spanish empires as well as the British, and so the journal encompasses a very broad sweep of contributors, writers and regions. Being editor for a decade has given me an unprecedented bird's-eye view of how this field is developing. It has become far more prominent in the British academy in the last decade and I like to think I have been part of that change, with journal editing, conferences I have organised at the University of Northampton, at which I teach, and Birkbeck, University of London, where I was for a while, Fellow in New Zealand Studies, and essay collections I have edited. My interest in New Zealand writing from the point of view of diaspora – through the studies and editions I published on Dan Davin and Fleur Adcock in 2007-- was rekindled in 2008 when I co-hosted with Dr Gerri Kimber an international conference at Birkbeck on Katherine Mansfield to mark the centennial anniversary of her arrival in London in 1908. Mansfield holds an ambiguous position in the country of her birth, because she lived most of her life in Europe and was associated with the international movement of modernism, not realism, the genre that is the core of the New Zealand literary tradition. So although I went to the same school as her and lived very near her family home in Thorndon, and read her stories and the biography by Anthony Alpers when at school, I never really got to grips with her work or life. Coming across her work again in 2008, now much older and living in the same part of the world as she did, was like discovering her for the first time. So my work on Mansfield is very much my current project and I hope to publish a book on her in due course.

NZ then comes and goes, at times on the edges of my life, at other times more central. This must be true of all of us who choose to live away from home. I prefer to live here because of the greater opportunity and broader horizons, and because it gives me a critical distance, useful for writing and comment. NZ culture of course continues to flourish outside New Zealand, in other parts of the world—witness the wonderful NZ compositions, performances and music that featured at the London Festival last year. Research on and about NZ is carried on in academic institutions, but also through learned societies, and is showcased in conferences, seminars and presentations. To promote such research in the UK and Ireland and raise the profile of New Zealand Studies, is the brief of the New Zealand Studies Network (NZSN) which was launched last year, encouraged and supported by Birkbeck, the University of London, and the High Commission. The NZSN, with an executive base in London, holds regular seminars, poetry readings, book launches, and colloquia. Next month we will hold our inaugural conference on 'New Zealand's Culture: Histories, Sources, Futures'.

This current involvement in promoting New Zealand culture and research is just one thing that has happened in my life, seemingly by chance rather than by design, and I sometimes wonder about intention and the bigger picture; for as this talk shows, I never would have thought at the beginning that my life would have taken the directions it has, being shaped by both my earliest influences, by apparently random decisions, as well as by what circumstance throws up. I don't specially believe in destiny, but maybe it does exist in some form or another and we must see it for what it is. Over thirty years ago I met by chance in the Kiwi pub in Auckland, a New Zealand poet, Kevin Ireland, who was then an expatriate, living in London; he was on a return visit to New Zealand with his wife, Caroline, and they were staying with his friend Maurice Shadbolt. Six months ago, in January of this year, Kevin and I married. We remet in Auckland in December 2007, just after his Caroline's death, on my first return visit to New Zealand and Australia for three and half years, a visit paid for by my mother who wanted to see me. Kevin had apparently not forgotten that first, chance meeting though – as he describes it in a poem which was read at the wedding, called 'How it all began' :

I remember your first look
that throwaway glance,
those shrewd fastidious words

the smile half formed
then shrugged aside.
That's all it takes

and then you feel the tingle
and you know for sure
this is the beginning.

A Moment's open gaze,
a classy, sharp remark,
a moment that will forever

hold its breath
and secure all things,
in every single pure particular.

It has been a life of hardship at times, but it has also been one of peculiar privilege, for I have been lucky in the people I have met and the friends I have made. I have found it satisfying to discover a way of writing about what I think on various

topics and different writers in ways that I hope will encourage further thought and research, In particular I hope that New Zealand Studies will flourish and prosper in the UK and that the New Zealand Studies Network will provide a fulcrum for research and creative endeavour based around New Zealand in this part of the world. I have no doubt that abandoning Medieval English and moving into Postcolonial Studies was the decisive change that helped set my life on the course for which it seems to have been destined.