

## Introduction

When Dr Johnson, the 18<sup>th</sup> century critic, was asked to describe the quality of the poets from Pembroke College, Oxford (where the great doctor was briefly an undergraduate), he proudly said: “Sir, we are a nest of singing birds.” In this collection we make the same claim about Waikato poets, accomplished and at ease in writing poetry and, by turns, confident, assertive, lyrical and sceptical in the ways they address the wide terrain of the Waikato. Readers north of the Mangatawhiri stream or south below Lake Taupo might be surprised by the poetic claims this anthology makes. We hope they will be also delighted and enthralled.

It’s common to claim the Waikato and its largest urban area, Hamilton, as a distinctly uncreative and uncultural place suited for bovine pursuits and technoskills, and nothing more. In *Good Shirt*’s song from the late 1990s, the speaker, trapped in a Hamilton Motel with his girlfriend, serenades her with a now famous plan: “let’s just pretend it’s Fiji, baby.” Local poets at times have joined in this negativity. Chris Thompson put it this way in his Hamilton song in the 1980s:

Hamilton, Hamilton

the prettiest little town in New Zealand

but I’ve got to get away.

For earlier generations, force of circumstance and/or greater opportunities drove writers like Frank Sargeson and Murray Edmond away. Sargeson needed to be away from Hamilton to shed his identity as Norris Davey and Edmond’s trafficking with the avant-garde and the post-modern was enacted through the late 60s and 70s elsewhere. Late in his career, as Edmond’s contributions to *Ngā Kupu* show he can look back on his Hamilton phase with wry fondness.

Of course, it's a poisonous little myth ingested from elsewhere that holds out the idea that the Waikato is not burgeoning with talented writers. People have been writing the Waikato in English since James Cook's *Endeavour* sailed a few miles up the Waihou near Thames in 1769. Since then a rich profusion of nonfiction, novels, short stories, plays, screenplays and yes poetry has come out of this territory. In the centuries before the arrival of Pākehā settlers as succeeding generations of Tainui moved across from the landing place of Tainui waka at Kawhia up the Waikato river and over to the Kaimai range, they celebrated the land in waiata, story and whakataukī, the most well-known of course being:

He piko, He taniwha

He piko, He taniwha!

Waikato Taniwha Rau!

Waikato of a hundred bends, at every bend a taniwha. It is no accident that this proverb rises, like a surging taniwha midstream, in several of the poems gathered here.

In their bio notes contributors have described their Waikato affiliations. Some of them elected to write specifically about this territory. Others just chose to write poems, and since they are Waikato based poets, these too we claim as Waikato poems or kupu. The poets are arranged in surname order, with epilogue pieces by two separate collectives. A happenstance of the alphabet, then, means beginning with Aimee-Jane Anderson-O'Connor's "Raglan": "When it's hot/everyone buggers off to Raglan". With colloquial insolence Anderson O'Connor sums up the frequent drive from Hamilton, the province's largest town and largest inland city in New Zealand, to the Tasman coast. It's a desire to escape the confines of the city but, at the same time, shows a new generation's confidence that there's stuff to be done here, between the sand dunes, the surf and the pent-up humidity of mid-summer Hamilton. From that stuff

a rollicking kind of poetry can emerge. In “Raglan” Hamilton is just “the city” as it is, unnamed directly, in a quite a few of the pieces here. Anderson O’Connor does serenade a cow town, Morrinsville, with its wealth deriving so directly from the dairy industry, focusing on the large silhouette cows that dot the townscape. The prose poem, “Daisy” is suss to the arts council style project, “all painted up to look cultural” but also alert and adventurous in the way the cows are treated. The poet makes us love the absurdity of the sculptures.

These two poems establish the reigning energy of the collection. Waikato poets, it seems are frequently on the move, not trapped in lime tree bowers as Coleridge once famously was, but getting out across town, across the land and down river, getting things done, setting the world in motion, moving confidently through English and Maori-named places: Tirau, Piako, Kihikihi, Te Awamutu, Kirikiriroa. They rummage through their personal histories, such as Nicola Blaikie’s spare, yet lyrical depictions of her “Te Awamutu childhood” or André Surridge’s wry recollection of his first learning in reo: “Kia Ora”. They think back to pre-contact world of Tainui and they exhort us to recall the painful events of the Land Wars. If you look close you can still find the scars of Ōrakau, Rangiaowhia, Rangiriri.

Most of all, the poets keep moving to the river, bewitched by the Waikato in motion. Though the river is hard to see from the main street of Hamilton, so many journeys take these poets up or down river, from the drowned sections behind Karapiro, the last hydro dam on the river through to Taupiri where, as Bob Orr notes in the first of his beautiful quartet of poems, “the dead lie above me”. Below him, as the incantations of his “Waikato karakia” further show, are the beautiful yet potentially treacherous streams of the river itself, changing mood and light as the flow from Lake Taupo varies through the year, making the valley around it fertile; at the same time, as Orr and several other poets here note, the river can show its fearful side, where the taniwha must be respected and appeased. The river is a constant and yet of course

it shifts and moves always, by day and by hour. Our poets have been equally varied in their approach using lyric forms, free verse, prose poems, borrowing from haiku and tanka. They speak idiosyncratically, individually and then at the close, three and then six poets merge their voices to make a larger whole. This is the first anthology specifically devoted to Waikato poetry. We hope you relish your immersion in it. We hope too that, in years to come, more will flow.

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