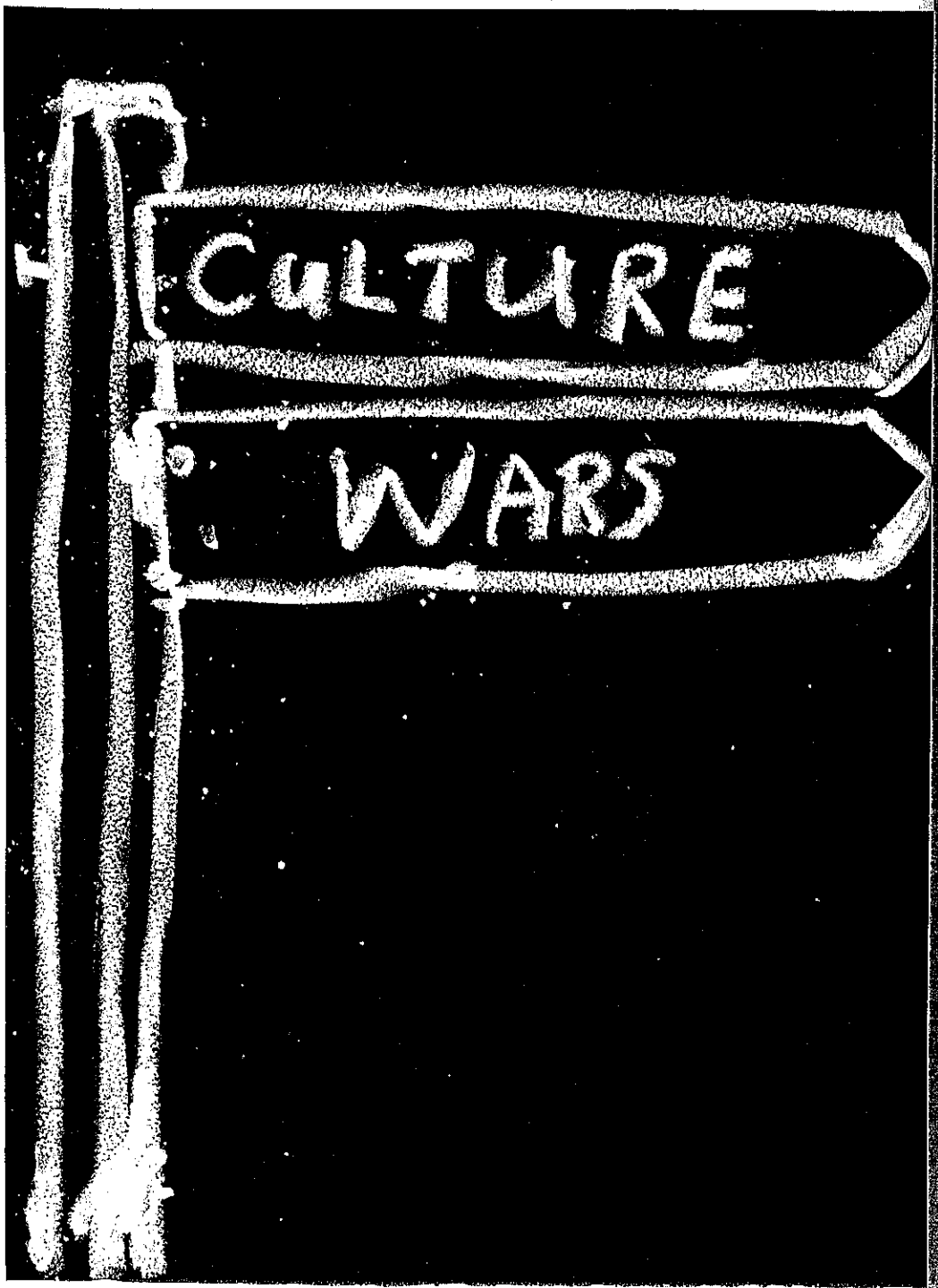

ONE

A Short History of 'the New Zealand Intellectual'

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Every culture has areas of repression that make it distinctive or notorious, such as local forms of puritanism, racism, or sexism. While outsiders are quick to notice the gaps, insiders will go about their lives without being aware of them unless personally affected. If ever the gaps are directly challenged, the culture will produce elaborate (and often passionate) justifications. For insiders, such repressions may inspire secret strategies and perverse pleasures, adding piquancy to what goes on behind closed doors; but in most cases this blocking of human energies has the effect of limiting the potential both of the individual and of their culture as a whole.

New Zealand has outgrown much of the puritanism that dominated its way of life at least until the 1960s. But another old repression – anti-intellectualism – still rules. Its style has changed over the years, but the basic belief persists that thinking leads to trouble once it departs from the quiet, normal suburbs of common sense. Less down-to-earth ideas stir up scorn and suspicion, an extreme response that I hope to explore through a range of examples.

The stimulus for writing this essay was a friend's request to write 'a short history of New Zealand intellectuals'. I could see that a history of that subject would indeed be short. Like most intellectual tasks it would also be unpaid, and likely to wave a red rag in the face of some

local bulls. I chose to persevere because, after spending my life in New Zealand, I am still waiting for a writer successfully to nail down the slippery character of local anti-intellectualism.

My brief was to chronicle intellectualism in this country, but to understand its history I need also to study its shadow – anti-intellectualism – and that shadow is long.[1] The first half of my essay will look broadly at history (with some links to the present), while the second half will focus on contemporary examples. The role of 'public intellectual' will raise particularly interesting questions in view of the allergic reactions of the New Zealand public.

National biography

How many New Zealanders have ever willingly described themselves as intellectuals or applied that term to others except as an ironic putdown? I could not find the word 'intellectual' or the phrase 'intellectual community' in the index of any of the country's main histories or reference books. I also made an on-line search of the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* which includes more than 3000 biographies of 'New Zealanders who have "made their mark" on this country'. The word 'intellectual' appeared only three times as a noun, though it also turned up in 149 biographies as an adjective. While the adjective generally had positive associations, it sometimes functioned as a warning. Dorothy Kate Richmond, for example, had (in her father's words) developed 'a great taste for the life of a refined intellectual swell'. Frances Hagell Smith was remembered as 'thoughtful, kindly – though reserved and intellectual'. William Salmond saw classical Calvinism as 'intellectual terrorism'. And Philip Wilfred Robertson struggled 'to escape a narrow intellectual view of the world'.

As for the three uses of the noun, one had an edge of irony in noting that William Pember Reeves became 'the principal intellectual and ideologist of what would be the Liberal Party' despite his 'little understanding of Marx'. The two respectful entries referred to left-wing activists – to William Noel Pharazyn, 'a committed left-wing intellectual and enthusiast for the Soviet Union', and to Chip Bailey, a taxi driver, union leader, and communist. Internationally there has been a strong tradition of left-wing intellectuals, often from a working-class background and self-educated. Antonio Gramsci helped to theorise the role played by these 'organic intellectuals'. One of the great New Zealand examples was Bruce Jesson, yet Jesson often deplored the thinness of this tradition locally. 'New Zealand radicalism must be about the most theoretically-barren in the world,' he wrote in 1977.[2] His sense that intellectualism was constantly under attack prompted his essay 'The Role of the Intellectual is to Defend the Role of the Intellectual', in which he remarked: 'Most New Zealand intellectuals, I suspect, are prone to timidity as well as conformity. Those who stand aside from the crowd may find themselves isolated, lacking the support of a cohesive intellectual milieu. Their careers may suffer. . . . Like many frontier societies, New Zealand has not provided a friendly environment to culture or to thought.'[3]

We don't need formally educated fools

The anti-intellectual atmosphere of New Zealand as a 'frontier' society has been well documented.[4] It is widely assumed, however, that these were simply growing pains as the country progressed to its current level of sophistication. Yet our cultural spokesmen still get nervous when confronted by the 'i' word. Gordon McLauchlan provides our first example with 'We Don't Need Formally Educated Fools', his *Herald* column for 6 September 2003.[5] He wrote: 'I winced when I heard of a forum of "public intellectuals" set to perform [at Auckland University] . . . . I don't attack the people involved, just the growing claim that we have this species called public intellectuals or that we should.' He remembered that the term 'intellectual' had come up at an international meeting of writers in the USA a year earlier. When an Argentinian had asked why intellectuals were not mounting a more effective opposition to President George W. Bush, McLauchlan replied: 'Intellectuals? . . . where I come from to call someone an intellectual is to faintly insult him.' He noted that 'the English writer and an American nodded with understanding. Everyone else, especially those

from Latin America and Europe, stared at me bemused and I realised that the suspicion of people who call themselves intellectuals is essentially Anglo-Saxon.'

What was striking about McLauchlan's column was not the anti-intellectualism he described but the fact that he approved of it. He saw it as based on 'a historical reverence for common sense'. He argued that New Zealand had been 'always well-managed' in the century before 1975, and 'of the 17 prime ministers during that period, only three had had a university education and two of those were in office for less than a year'. McLauchlan had long been regarded as the *Herald*'s most highbrow columnist, and letters to the editor often took him to task for being a woolly-woofter, but in this column he sought to make it clear that he sided with 'the clear-thinking everyday people' against the 'intellectuals'. He knew that too much education produced 'formally educated fools' with a tendency to 'vanity'. He saw our current prime minister preening herself in this way, displaying a 'mounting hubris'. He added: 'for anyone to claim to be an intellectual probably means they aren't, and the journey from would-be intellectual to prig is short.'

McLauchlan's assumptions – which are widespread in our culture – help to explain why the term 'intellectual' produces an immediate 'wince'. Any claimant to the term is trapped in a double bind. Robert Muldoon, though pointedly excluded from McLauchlan's list of good prime ministers, liked to argue similarly that the 'so-called intelligentsia' was by its very nature guilty of snobbery. He used this as a diversionary tactic when experts caught him out making mistakes. He would ridicule his critics as 'ivory tower types' and if they objected to that he would make use of another double bind: 'The left-wing intelligentsia frequently accuse me of using what they term the *argumentum ad hominem* . . . . Frankly, I think that many of the so-called intelligentsia raise this question just to show they know what the term means – a little bit of intellectual snobbery, if you like.'[6] Writers as different as McLauchlan and Muldoon can thus be seen indulging in the same New Zealand rite of fellowship, the gleeful dance round the same straw man. A crowd will always gather to enjoy the verbal fireworks

as some Professor Guy Fawkes – some 'prig', 'ivory-tower type' or 'so-called intellectual' – is put to the torch. Not that any physical harm is intended – the tone is playful and the violence purely symbolic – but we may still be reminded of historical events such as the Nazi burning of the books.

Of course all cultures have stereotypes, and anti-intellectualism is certainly not unique to this country. But its associations are embedded with particular strength in our culture, forming part of the vocabulary of any comedian or politician or columnist. To sum up the local cluster of associations for 'intellectual':

1. someone who lacks 'common sense' (based on a particular local definition of common sense which makes it the opposite of 'intellectualism');
2. someone from the 'ivory tower' (the opposite of 'down to earth') – out-of-touch, pointy-headed, airy-fairy, arty-farty, etc. – and the word 'academic' in public usage is almost interchangeable with 'intellectual';
3. a lover of big words, a show-off who gives himself away by his or her 'cult lingo', a specialist in 'bullshit' or 'crap' (terms that spring irresistibly to mind whenever one hears pretentious talk);
4. a snob or 'elitist', an 'arrogant wanker';
5. a champion of 'political correctness' (for even if intellectuals say nothing, we can imagine what they are thinking – it's their nature to be judgemental, to look down their noses at us);
6. not 'a real New Zealander' because too much influenced by overseas ideas and fashions; and
7. a bludger, who thinks the world owes him or her a living, doesn't understand an honest day's work, and is always at the public trough.[7]

I am not trying to suggest that such characters do not exist – there are some academics and artists with an inflated sense of self-importance. But I would argue that the nuisance caused by a few conceited intellectuals

can only partly explain the power of these stereotypes in our culture. Why is there an instinctive shoot-first reaction towards anyone who even vaguely resembles an 'intellectual'? The politicians and columnists who will be seen gleefully discharging their verbal shotguns in the examples collected in this essay display little interest in fine distinctions. While ducking for cover, I'm intrigued by the traditional character of this hunt and its ritualistic function in our culture.

No one can deny that McLauchlan is a thinker, but local traditions require his thinking to be bounded by 'common sense', the sensible way people think when they are not led astray by intellectuals, experts, academics and scientists who are constantly tangling themselves up in their own cleverness. This preference is summed up by the subtitle of a Garth George column in the *Herald*: 'It's time to do away with a lot of scientific discourse and revert to a bit of plain old common sense'.[8] How does it happen that Europeans and Latin Americans regard intellectuals as useful? For one thing, the term carries a different cluster of associations for them. An intellectual is someone who:

1. engages in hard thinking, an activity as demanding as (say) playing a good game of rugby;
2. can work comfortably with ideas, having developed skills in conceptual, strategic, or lateral thinking;
3. keeps an open mind and is always questioning his or her own assumptions as well as those of the mainstream – and is therefore capable of making original discoveries; and
4. is dedicated to serving something larger than ego or career – such as truth, art, science, or the community.

One idea implied by this list is that the intellectual may be abrasive and out of step, but that this independence can lead to discoveries that later benefit the whole community. From Galileo to Picasso, European history has offered many examples of mavericks later vindicated. Their 'pure research' or 'critic and conscience' role has meant that their intelligence has a disinterested quality. This distinguishes the activity of the

intellectual from jobs such as public relations, advertising, or certain forms of politics and entrepreneurship that rely on intellectual skills but use those skills in a self-interested way or circumscribed by assumptions that are not able to be questioned. Brian Easton uses the term 'occupational-intellectuals' to distinguish such heads-for-hire from thinkers of the more independent kind.[9] The idea that intellectuals may be genuinely ahead of their time tends to be a missing link in New Zealand thinking – we have business and sporting role models of that kind, but there is less understanding of the trickle-down process in other areas. In Europe or Latin America the trickle-down process provides a rationale for intellectuals, encouraging respect, status, association with the rich and powerful, even political office. This can be a Faustian bargain that leads to arrogance and compromise, but it also ensures that such a society is a better conductor of intellectual energies.

The listener over your shoulder

To understand how such energies get short-circuited in our culture, Bill Pearson's 1952 essay 'Fretful Sleepers' remains the classic starting-point. It is not merely a description but an analysis of cultural dynamics at grass-roots level. Pearson offers a key insight: '"Being different" in New Zealand means "trying to be superior". I know of no other country where this is so.' As a consequence, 'There is no place in normal New Zealand society for the man who is different'.[10] This applies to many types of difference – Pearson also understood the lack of acceptance for those who were gay – but what interested him particularly in this *Landfall* essay were the implications for artists or intellectuals. Unless they suppressed their particular talents and sensibilities, they stood out from the norm and thus risked being accused of elitism and snobbery, which clashed with the deep local commitment to egalitarianism.

Pearson has a simple image to explain how this works – the listener over your shoulder. 'I can't speak for others [but] I know I hate talking anything but gossip in a bus or train or in the pictures: otherwise you sense the rest of the bus listening united in one unspoken sneer at half-cock. The New Zealander fears ideas that don't result in increased

crop-yield or money or home comforts. The wise man never mentions his learning.'[11] More than half a century after Pearson's essay, I know that a sceptical listener of this kind is still internalised in me. I may disobey it or say rude things about it but I know it's always there. Putdowns like 'pretentious' or 'bullshit' come quickly to mind, and when companions agree with such a judgement there is often a rush of solidarity, like welcoming one another back into the community of common sense. Seeking to avoid what Pearson calls 'the mutually flattering cult-lingo of a class of intellectuals pretending to be better than the ordinary chap',[12] I have developed a way of talking about art or ideas in public that is cryptic and flavoured with colloquialisms and down-to-earth comments, so I am not embarrassed to be overheard. Anyone with a university job knows what it is like to have to prove to casual acquaintances that he or she is still a regular person, not sniffy and judgemental.

A couple of years ago I visited Berlin and was sitting in a café with a New Zealand expatriate who told me how different he found the European big-city ambience. If people heard an esoteric conversation at the next table, their immediate reaction would be curiosity. They would be impressed, they would strain their ears because this might be something new and interesting, perhaps the Next Big Thing. I have had similar experiences in downtown New York. Those cultures encourage a different kind of listening (or reading). Confronted by art that ignored their usual expectations, Berliners or downtown New Yorkers would not 'wince' or 'sneer' but be intrigued. To put that another way, they would be prepared not only to meet an artist half way but to take a few extra steps, to work hard for their gratification. In contrast, most New Zealanders take it as self-evident that art has an obligation to be audience-friendly and offer immediate rewards.

Of course our society is not as claustrophobic as it was in 1952. It has a thriving café culture, and there are many immigrants from societies that take education and the arts seriously.[13] But within mainstream culture, the old stereotypes have survived and adapted. For example, the growth of café culture has made certain areas synonymous with pretentious intellectualism. A recent Fagg's Coffee campaign was built

around the slogan: 'Not as Ponsonby as it sounds – Fagg's, the great straight coffee!' This smirking campaign reminds us that Ponsonby has connections with the gay community as well as with café culture.[14] The listener over your shoulder is never far away, even though the priorities of Ponsonby Road are more about fashion and the high life than about Left Bank intellectualism. Young New Zealanders continue to learn the old stereotypes through the media, through their peer group, and in many cases through their families. Parents may want educational success for their children but they tend to conceive of it in 'common sense' terms. A little thinking or questioning is good, but too much nerdiness is likely to be seen by peers and parents as contentious, queer, unhealthy.

In the 1950s Pearson's response was not to seek citizenship elsewhere (he was in London at the time he wrote 'Fretful Sleepers') but to return to New Zealand. The 'only solution to the so-often-talked-about plight of the New Zealand artist' (p. 30) was 'living not only among but as one of the people and feeling your way into their problems'. And: 'Our job is to penetrate the torpor and out of meaninglessness make a pattern that means something' (p. 31). His essay was thus a manifesto for the New Zealand public intellectual, as a thinker who seeks to use his or her skills to serve the local community, whatever the personal cost in 'humiliations and misunderstandings' (p. 32). Pearson stressed that this did not mean 'a rush to the proletariat' (p. 31), though his ideas obviously drew on left-wing traditions. He preferred the word 'artist' or 'writer' to 'intellectual' and was in fact somewhat critical of local 'intellectuals', devoting several pages of his essay to detailing their failings (pp. 24–25). These were all key strategies of the New Zealand nationalist artists and writers, and one can see how the attempt to identify deeply with the community required some involvement in anti-intellectualism. But while some writers might simply internalise local taboos, Pearson remained aware that he was making difficult strategic choices.

The sources of New Zealand anti-intellectualism

Anti-intellectualism has been strong in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, as documented by writers such as David Mosler,

Frank Furedi, and Richard Hofstadter.[15] Characteristics of the current American President (George W. Bush) that critics see as signs of ignorance and stupidity are treasured by admirers as proof of his down-to-earth common sense. Even in France, Michel Foucault once commented: 'I have met many people who talk about the intellectual. And from listening to them I have come up with an idea of what this animal might be. It is not difficult, the intellectual is guilty. Guilty of practically everything – of speaking, of remaining silent, of doing nothing, of meddling in everything. In short the intellectual is prize material for a verdict, sentencing, condemnation, exclusion.'[16] Despite these parallels, the New Zealand situation remains distinctive in terms of the specific combination of circumstances that has reinforced anti-intellectualism. The following quick summary cannot do justice to the nuances but it sets out the main parameters.

1. Small population

The country's small population has had a huge impact on media production and career opportunities. This has created a different situation from Australia or the United States, where intellectuals may be a beleaguered minority but still have enough critical mass to be a force to be reckoned with.

2. Isolation

Our country is a long way from the main centres of intellectual and artistic life. Air travel and the media have helped a great deal but we still suffer from marginalisation. This is symbolised by the experience that many New Zealanders have had on an overseas trip of coming across a representation of the world that includes Australia but does not extend as far as New Zealand.[17]

3. Exodus

New Zealand has always suffered from a 'brain drain', losing many of the most talented members of each generation. While isolation may have eased in recent years, the awareness of off-shore opportunities has increased.

4. Ruralism

Internationally, New Zealand is better known for its nature than its culture. Asked which aspects of the country give them the greatest pride, most New Zealanders will cite the landscape and outdoor activities. Intellectual life is not limited to cities but they provide an important base.[18] Our cities have expanded but sophisticated forms of urban culture have been slow to develop.

5. Pioneer culture

'It may well be', says Brian Easton, 'that in frontier societies such as New Zealand there is more respect for the practical and less for the intellectual – for things rather than ideas – than in the countries from which the majority of settlers came.'[19] A century of pioneering has left us with stereotypes similar to the American Western's parody of tenderfoot types from back East.

6. Colonial attitudes

Our relationship with the world has been typically colonial, in cultural as well as economic terms. Intellectual activity leans towards consumption rather than production, and to a considerable extent our universities are an import business. Colonialism created the curious phenomenon of 'cultural cringe', vividly illustrated by the decades when New Zealand colloquial speech was excluded from radio, film, television and the stage because it was seen as inappropriate or unworthy.[20] The same situation has encouraged a double standard, for while there is little respect for the local expert (a term almost as problematic as 'intellectual'), the overseas expert 'often has a status out of line with her or his competence' (as Easton notes).[21]

Our colonial settlement also involved the suppression of intellectual strains within Maori culture because they were seen as subversive or an obstacle to assimilation. Leigh Davis's *Te Tangi A Te Matuhi*[22] and Judith Binney's *Redemption Songs*[23] pay tribute to the intellectual energies of the prophet Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki who was exiled to the Chathams. Linda Tuhiwai Smith has described the 1907 Tohunga

Suppression Act as the outlawing of 'a whole class of traditional Maori intellectuals'.[24]

7. Puritanism
Puritanism implies a lot more than censorship, but the battle against censorship was a primary concern of New Zealand artists and intellectuals at least until the 1980s. Freedom for gay and lesbian writers and artists has been particularly hard won. Puritanism may now seem reduced to its shadow, but its current resurgence in the United States should remind us of the fearsome power it once exercised within our culture.[25]

8. Egalitarianism
The traditional strain of egalitarianism in New Zealand culture is perhaps the main reason why so many thoughtful people have succumbed to anti-intellectualism. The culture has constantly linked intellectual activity with social 'elitism', and decades of left-wing thinking have made intellectuals very prone to guilt feelings on that score. Yet this is a strange definition of egalitarianism, concerned not with equal freedom for each individual but with a fear of difference. In the old days New Zealand was a small, isolated, relatively uniform society which embraced equality as an idea but had difficulty putting it into practice. Even today this is a society quick to feel threatened by difference (as every immigrant group can confirm).[26]

Everyone will be familiar with the eight factors listed above but we have seldom discussed the way they interact, the negative multiplier effect that these trends have on one another. Isolation and smallness produced a homogeneous, claustrophobic society that was narrowed still further by puritanism. Egalitarianism (normally a positive idea) became distorted in a conformist society of that kind. The brain drain continued to impoverish the culture, and colonial history had a profoundly negative effect, promoting 'cringe' rather than independent habits of mind. Similarly, the 'more market' attitudes of the 1980s and

'90s, when applied to a country with a small population and a shortage of cultural capital, led in some cases to the worst kinds of commercialism – not the benefits predicted by New Right politicians who were using older countries with larger populations as their model.

This is not to suggest there is no way out. Rather, I have focused on the main forces contributing to anti-intellectualism in order to know our enemy – to understand the scornful listener at our back (or in our own heads) – and why he is so confident.

Public versus pure intellectuals
Intellectuals who stay in New Zealand may attempt to make a living as artists or freelance writers. Most will need to find a 'day job' that is tangential to their intellectual interests. In sorting out their relationship with the culture, they may attempt to keep out of the public eye as much as possible to concentrate on their particular specialisations, or they may be drawn to the role of 'public intellectual'. That can mean quiet community work behind the scenes (Pearson's approach), or engaging in open debate in the public arena (for example, the mass media). The New Zealand situation has tended to encourage a 'public intellectual' stance among many of its artists, not because their opinions are welcomed but on the contrary because there is so much about our society that disturbs them. This sense of political urgency can be found, for example, in paintings by Nigel Brown, Jacqueline Fahey, Tony Fomison, Pat Hanly, Ralph Hotere, Robyn Kahukiwa, Colin McCahon, Selwyn Muru, Peter Robinson, and Carole Shepheard.

A provocative 1973 essay by Wystan Curnow – 'High Culture in a Small Province'[27] – argues that such a tendency can be a trap for artists. Since the public is reluctant to meet them even half way, artists are obliged to compromise and dilute their work. Eager to be relevant, artists strive to avoid the 'ivory tower' stereotype. Curnow argues that these pressures prevent much of the arts production in New Zealand from attaining the richness and complexity that distinguish 'the highest level of culture'. Professional opportunities in this country are limited and artists are encouraged to become versatile rather than specialised;

and the cultural infrastructure is stretched too thin to provide the 'insulation' necessary for the most intense forms of 'experiment' or 'problem-exposure'. Curnow suggests that what is regarded here as highbrow art or commentary would correspond elsewhere to middlebrow or upper-middlebrow. We do not notice the missing dimension. Some highbrow art of the past has trickled down and become absorbed into our culture, but opportunities for challenging new work remain limited. Curnow does not specifically use the term 'public intellectual' but he implies that any call for intellectuals or artists to focus more on the public – whether the aim is to seduce the public or to argue with it – is risky because the arts in New Zealand are already diluted by too many mainstream, middlebrow requirements.

In the 1970s Curnow's essay aroused fierce controversy because it questioned so many aspects of common sense. Particularly controversial was the way it challenged the local taboo against anything perceived as 'elitist'. New Zealand has changed a great deal over the past thirty years – for example, private patronage is now more prominent – but the essay has retained its relevance because it identifies what are still key tensions in the culture. Lydia Wevers in an overview of New Zealand literary culture in 2003 identified similar problems: 'I think it's hard to argue we have a truly *high* end to our literature – the kind of difficult, innovative, risk-taking, reader-alienating work that perhaps has trouble getting published anywhere in the world but exists in bigger markets . . . . I have trouble thinking of anything in our literary culture that is reader-alienating, and possibly the reverse is true – our literature is required to be reader-friendly, even when it seeks to push boundaries and be ambitious.'[28] Even public funding tends to encourage 'an emphasis on the middle ground'.[29] The one area in which one can find a range of exceptions is the visual arts, which benefits from a particularly favourable economic situation. (It is cheaper to produce paintings locally than to import them, and economies of scale do not operate as they do with books, films, CDs, etc.)

Curnow's conclusions may seem the opposite of those advanced by Jesson, Easton, Jane Kelsey and others who argue that New Zealand urgently needs more public intellectuals. My overview of history would see the two positions as less contradictory than they appear, for the country welcomes neither public artists and intellectuals nor their pure ('high culture') counterparts. Public attitudes tend to create a double bind: intellectuals are chided for being 'ivory tower', yet when they attempt to get involved in the public arena they are told to go away. Both species of intellectual are scarce.

Sites of intellectual work

Potential bases or concentrations of intellectual activity in any country include: (1) the mass media, (2) the arts, (3) universities and schools, and (4) politics. In some countries there is considerable overlap between the arts and the mass media; but in New Zealand, while these two areas overlap to some extent, they have such distinctly different centres of interest that it is useful to consider them separately. Of course intellectuals with a commitment to the community turn up in many other areas also, such as business, but I will focus on the areas I am most familiar with.[30]

How do these areas operate within the broader New Zealand culture? One reason to explore these four sites would be to see them as places to make a living; but here my interest focuses on how they function as conductors of intellectual energy. We have seen that, overall, the social environment is a poor conductor. To extend the physics analogy, it is like a field that continues to lose potential energy or heat because there is so much resistance, and there are so few free electrons on hand to sustain the flow. The emigration of talented people further drains the available energy. And anti-intellectualism functions as a direct form of short-circuit. Pearson's image of the listener over your shoulder provides a practical example of how that happens. The question here is whether these smaller fields (or micro-climates) are environments that are more conducive.

1. The mass media

Overseas there have been various attempts such as Jürgen Habermas's

concept of 'the public sphere' to define a well-functioning media environment.[31] Habermas sees such a situation as characterised by broad participation, freedom of speech, and rational, well-informed debate on the issues of the day. Such debate helps to prevent either big business or the government from simply imposing its own views. The mass media can do much to assist the workings of the public sphere, provided they are not captured by commercialism or sensationalism.

In these terms New Zealand is a highly imperfect media environment. The country has always suffered from the problems associated with a small audience, and there is less support for the public funding of media than in Australia, Canada, Britain, or other European countries. We can be proud of our two non-commercial Radio NZ stations that follow the British philosophy of 'public service broadcasting'; but when the more expensive medium of television reached New Zealand in 1960, such an approach was not considered possible. While many other countries have at least one non-commercial, national channel, New Zealand television has been required to chase advertising revenue to supplement its public funding, and has diluted its approach to programming accordingly. While the BBC and other public service broadcasters in Europe do not offer a non-stop diet of high culture, they have a clear strategy of incorporating such material as a valued part of the schedule. One reason is their belief that the audience benefits and the culture grows by a constant process of trickle-down.

Since the early 1980s, a 'more market' approach has dominated the media environment and this has further heightened the problems associated with small population size. Multi-national corporations have taken over the ownership of most New Zealand newspapers, magazines and radio stations and instituted a ruthlessly profit-driven style of corporate control, with short-term sales and ratings figures as the key concerns. The result has been basically to shrink the space in which the kinds of in-depth discussion and analysis valued by Habermas might occur. New Zealand's serious readers envy the kinds of weekend papers on sale in the UK, as our local papers seldom look beyond human interest, entertainment, and sport. There was a brief burst of

excitement when the *Herald* announced in 2004 that it was going to launch a Sunday paper, but serious readers were astonished to see the *Herald on Sunday* pitched even further down-market than the *Sunday Star-Times*. In a small country like New Zealand, media competition almost always heads in that direction – the local approach is not trickle-down but dumbing down.

Today, for editors or journalists, the listener over one's shoulder takes the form of the bean-counter, consultant or hatchet man despatched from an overseas head-office. The few magazines such as the *Listener* that have traditionally made room for in-depth current affairs or arts coverage lead an anxious existence in today's commercial environment. Meanwhile the media favour personalities who are champions of common sense and can vividly convey its classic sneer. The present line-up – Paul Holmes, Frank Haden, Michael Laws, Garth George, John Banks, and Deborah Coddington, among others – make up a powerful group of conservative opinion-leaders. Holmes has been prominent in both television and radio, as well as writing newspaper columns; Laws is an ex-MP who writes a column, fronts Radio Pacific talkback, and is Mayor of Wanganui; Banks, a former Cabinet Minister and Mayor of Auckland, is a talkback host; Coddington, a former MP, is now a columnist; and George is a columnist who is also in charge of the *New Zealand Herald*'s Letters to the Editor page. These commentators are extraordinarily sure of their own opinions. (One of Laws's columns opened with the phrase 'It's always nice to be proven right'[32] and one of Haden's began: 'I love being proved right'.[33]) They have chosen to use their intellectual skills to become populist motor-mouths. At times they disagree among themselves but their disagreements fall within a narrow range of conservative opinions. My concern here is with their anti-intellectual rather than their right-wing attitudes, but contemporary American politics demonstrates how closely these two concerns can be linked. (Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with America?*[34] looks in detail at the way 'the Republicans today are the party of anti-intellectualism, the rough frontier contempt for sophisticated ideas', with right-wing newspaper columnists

and talkback hosts leading the fight against 'conceited eggheads' and 'pantywaist book-learning'.[35])

Television in New Zealand provides a revealing case study. There have always been some public intellectuals working in television (illustrated by series such as *The New Zealand Wars* and *Work of Art*) but in the late 1990s most gave up the struggle as the National Government destroyed all remaining vestiges of public service broadcasting in order to make TVNZ a more attractive package for potential buyers. Some directors went overseas, some looked for new careers. Programmers and commissioning editors functioned as a listener over the shoulder, making sure that every aspect of a programme was viewer-friendly. They referred frequently to generic viewers ('Mr and Mrs Smith') who should never be allowed to feel intimidated. To avoid that possibility, programme-makers were advised to stop interviewing experts, particularly academics. 'Documentaries needed to be personalised (to be structured round individuals rather than ideas), to be as emotional as possible, and to move along briskly. They had to avoid being complicated, "pointy-headed" (intellectual), or overtly educational.'[36] The culture of television reviewing adopted a similar approach as newspapers replaced expert reviewers by populists – representative viewers with mainstream taste, an entertaining turn of phrase, and no knowledge of production. This was a valid form of reviewing but it crowded out alternatives. By the end of the 1990s, New Zealand had a free-to-air television culture whose very highest aspiration was middlebrow – perfectly illustrating Curnow's hypothesis about the lack of a local high culture.

The election of Helen Clark's Government in 1999 represented a last-minute rescue for TVNZ. Preparations for the sale were halted, and a voluntary Charter was drafted as a way of rolling back a little of TVNZ's commercialism. The Charter, coming into force in 2003, met with predictable opposition from National and ACT politicians. As the *New Zealand Herald* reported: '"It is a day when we see the era of the bow-tie and ballet-tights brigade being ushered in at TVNZ," National MP Murray McCully said. "This is a sad day for New Zealand broadcasting."'[37] National's broadcasting spokesperson, Katherine Rich, attacked 'the increasingly politically correct environment at TVNZ', adding that 'The Government must abandon this social engineering . . . before the Charter does more damage to what was once the state-owned jewel in the Government's crown'.[38] National valued the 'jewel' not by its cultural potential but strictly by its market price.

The Charter is a modest initiative but it does open up space for a few thoughtful programmes each year, some imported and some made locally. The government deserves great credit for having pulled television back from the brink. The most experienced directors who want to make Charter-style programmes will, however, receive only one or two commissions in a good year, and to make a living they will need to find other work.[39] TVNZ managers whose attitudes were shaped by the commercialism of the 1980s and '90s continue to have difficulty understanding what the Charter should mean in practice. The government itself has continued to give mixed messages by providing some funds for Charter programmes but still expecting TVNZ to make a profit and to return a dividend ($14.5 million plus a $70 million special dividend in the 2006 financial year). TVNZ is the only national public broadcaster required to deliver a dividend to the government.[40] This strange ritual of giving with one hand and taking away with the other reflects the fact that the Government has rejected only some aspects of the neo-liberal legacy. TVNZ remains primarily a commercial broadcaster and much of its local content consists of lifestyle and reality programmes that are cheap to make and easy to consume. Meanwhile, the election of a National Government will result in the repeal of the Charter and probably the sale of all or part of TVNZ. SKY gives us an alarming foretaste of what the country's television future would then look like since SKY funds almost no New Zealand production apart from its sports channel. In general, television provides a vivid example of the vulnerability of the country's culture at all levels.

2. The arts

Intellectual activity may be only one ingredient of art but it is often an

important ingredient. While it is more acceptable in New Zealand to present oneself as an artist than an intellectual, even that term sounds pretentious and is likely to activate the same stereotypes. A significant number of New Zealanders do not see the arts as essential, in the way that sport or commerce is, and they do not understand the trickle-down benefits. At best they see the arts as 'entertainment'. Brian Taylor expressed this idea in a letter to the *Herald* objecting to public funding of the Auckland Philharmonia: 'If people want to play instruments they can fund it themselves. If not enough people want to listen to them as paying listeners then the orchestra should not be looking to the council to fund them. It is the function of councils to provide roads, parks, water sewerage and other essentials. It is not their function to help people who want to entertain themselves.'[41]

Back in the 1920s and '30s serious artists needed a rationale for continuing to work in a country where they were not wanted. A movement took shape that created a strong sense of drama round their activities. Known today as nationalism or cultural nationalism, this upsurge in the arts was the platform for some of our best-known public intellectuals. In his essay 'The Recognition of Reality', Pearson summed up its basic sense of purpose: 'I assume that collectively it is the function of a nation's artists, modifying Stephen Dedalus's words [in James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*] to forge the conscience of the race, to provide a moral and imaginative context in which their people can feel, think, and behave.'[42] The assumption was that any self-respecting country needed its own culture, even if its citizens did not yet understand what they were missing. The appropriate basis for such a culture was not 'common sense' (or the community's 'sentimentality' and 'attitudinising'[43]), but 'reality . . . local and special at the point where we pick up the traces'.[44] Before the 1930s, most of the major artists born in New Zealand had chosen to emigrate. Cultural nationalism offered a cause, a reason to stay, a sense of community, and a creative challenge. This was not a complacent, jingoistic nationalism – it was highly critical of the status quo, and in many cases it could be better described as 'localism' or 'regionalism'.[45] It is also important to understand that

there was a strong international (as well as intellectual) dimension to this movement since it was linked with modernist ideas, and often with international politics.

The attempt to define local reality provided a compelling, non-elitist project for New Zealand artists. Although they would have shied away from such a term, creative people took on the role of public intellectual in an extremely dedicated way. (Charles Brasch, R. A. K. Mason and James K. Baxter are three of many examples.) To the activists of the 1930s and '40s we owe the creation of much of our cultural infrastructure. But art always involved a balancing act – it was important not to lose touch with the community by flaunting ideas too openly. Allen Curnow's anthology introductions had great influence but more than a few poets saw them as excessively intellectual and polemical. Artists might be realists and nationalists but such labels made them uncomfortable, as did any theoretical discussion of those ideas. In the traditional kiwi style, creative people got on with the job, concentrating on experience and practice, not theory. Despite its squeamishness about ideas – some would say because of it – this approach produced a great deal of very good art. The need to give as much 'reality' to one's ideas as possible produced some remarkable writing such as Curnow's essays in which ideas were advanced with exceptional care because of the certainty that they would come under attack. Humour was another way of penetrating public culture, with Curnow writing satirical verse as Whim Wham, and A. R. D. Fairburn and Denis Glover adopting jokey, blokey styles. Another 'Trojan horse' tactic was the use of colloquial language, developed with great subtlety by Frank Sargeson. Artists liked to employ a double mode of address that was simple and direct on the surface (such as the words in Colin McCahon's paintings) but with other levels or layers for those interested in going deeper. Composer Douglas Lilburn commented: 'I've always felt . . . that I'd like my music to be a bit like a parable – both very simple and to have many degrees of meaning, according to how far one wants to move into it. I think that might be true for something like the *Nine Short Pieces for Piano* – they can be listened to very simply on the surface;