[but] if you go looking for structure then there are quite adequate structures.'[46]

Yet there were dangers in working so close to mainstream culture. In seeking to be relevant, artists were more strongly influenced by that culture than they realised at the time. There was a backlash in the 1960s and '70s among younger artists who sought to open up possibilities that had been repressed or at least under-represented in nationalist art and politics. A new generation of public intellectuals spoke out not on behalf of the nation but on behalf of their particular communities – Maori, Pacific Islanders, other ethnic groups, women, gays and lesbians. These movements were primarily social and political but each was linked with innovative work in the arts. The new artists viewed the nationalist tradition as part of the establishment. (Indeed, the tradition was just assuming that status, at least in some progressive areas of politics and education.) Although many of the new activists would not have wished to describe themselves as intellectuals, they generated a wealth of new ideas and drew upon international currents of thought.

The Maori renaissance showed that nationalist writing had tended to focus too much on Pakeha concerns. Many Maori writers, painters and film-makers emerged, along with theorists such as Ranginui Walker and Donna Awatere.[47] There were public intellectuals associated with other ethnic and national communities such as Albert Wendt[48] and Manying Ip.[49] A new wave of feminism exposed the fact that nationalism still retained many links with 'a man's own country'.[50] Feminist public intellectuals included Sandra Coney, Anne Else, Jocelyn Jesson, Sue Kedgley, and Pat Rosier. Gay writers and film-makers – such as Peter Wells and Stewart Main – joined the critique of nationalism.[51] The left-wing, class-based politics of the 1930s gave way to what has been summed up as the identity politics of the 1980s, with its own traditions of theory and history. Initially there was an emphasis on international solidarity, but localism is such a strong part of our tradition that it soon re-emerged, albeit in looser and more diverse forms. Also, with a few notable exceptions, writers continued to stay close to

the down-to-earth interests of local readers. It is a standard rule of publishing that a book, even if assisted by a Creative NZ grant or published by a subsidised university press, has to be accessible to non-specialist readers if it is to have any chance of covering its costs in the small New Zealand market. Lilburn's strategy remains necessary – a work can have depth but it needs a clear surface.

The thing about culture vultures

Although a tradition of experimental writing and associated theory has maintained a lively but marginal presence with the help of 'little magazines',[52] the only art form in New Zealand that has consistently given prominence to experimental work is the visual arts. Not surprisingly this area has been the site of much public debate, richly documented by Jim and Mary Barr in their book *When Art Hits the Headlines: A Survey of Controversial Art in New Zealand*.[53] The hard-line common sense attitude is that difficult art is a kind of confidence trick, and art experts are intellectual bullies who try to intimidate those who can see through the racket. Since common sense also assumes that art should at least be serious, it is baffled today by the many works that have a playful or ironic tone, interpreting them as further proof that artists are sneering at the public. Older art experts whose taste has been shaped by earnest forms of nationalist art also tend to have difficulty with post-modern playfulness.

Just as artists are hesitant to describe themselves as intellectuals, their critics would never see themselves as anti-intellectuals – rather, they are bravely speaking out against snobs and bullies. A prominent example is Michael Laws, who has frequently attacked 'pseudo-elite' art and the intellectuals who defend it. On 3 October 2004 he wrote a *Sunday Star-Times* column on 'professional dunces', New Zealand's know-it-alls: 'Most of history's great crimes have been perpetrated by those who assumed that they'd been gifted an especial knowledge. And books are no better. The Hitler Youth was probably onto something when it decided to chuck onto the bonfire as much of the West's great literature as they could find. . . . Too bad they stopped before

they got to D.H. Lawrence.'[54] He added an attack on today's education experts: 'The great irony is that Kiwi society worked best when fewer had degrees and more had jobs. Yes, but these are post-modern times and that means that fad is the fashion and that trend is the trade. We suddenly have a gross over-supply of fashion designers, media studies graduates and arts effetes.'

Laws's typically jokey manner allows him to get away with comments like the one about Hitler Youth as we assume he is just being playful and provocative; but since becoming Mayor of Wanganui in October 2004, Laws has shown that he means business. Claiming that he was championing the ratepayers of Wanganui against those he called the 'culture vultures', he immediately went to war with the local public art gallery (the Sarjeant) and scotched plans for an extension. As the *Sunday Star-Times* reported, 'Law's assessment of the gallery's contents is blunt ("it's crap!")'.[55] The Gallery's trust board members 'all resigned after they were dressed down several times by Mr. Laws'.[56] The Mayor is now planning to sell some of the paintings in the gallery collection.[57] He defended his approach in his *Sunday Star-Times* column of 28 December 2004 as a 'collision between elitism and reality'.[58] Laws represented common sense, whereas the arts community consisted of pretentious intellectuals in alliance with idle wealth. In his words: 'there is one group that hovers above all in the hoity-toity stakes that regards the rest of humanity as little more than shaved monkeys – as uncivilised, unwashed plebians with neither taste nor refinement. I refer to the arts fraternity.' Artists and 'their hangers-on' are always 'bleating' for more public money. Laws broadened his attack from the visual arts to highbrow art in general, to other forms of elitist nonsense such as 'that loathsome caterwauling known as opera'. He went on to claim, with startling inaccuracy, that no public funding was available for popular music.[59] As for classical music fans: 'Why these bludgers can't support their own musical tastes is utterly beyond me. Indeed, how ironic that the poor of Otara pay for their tastes while the rich of Remmers soak the taxpayers for theirs. But that's the thing about culture vultures. They automatically assume that their tastes are worthy

– that because they have chosen something so spectacularly inaccessible, then it's up to others to pay.'

One is reminded of Pearson's comment back in 1952: 'It is common for some people to accuse people who go to symphonic concerts of not understanding the music and going out of snobbery'.[60] For Laws, to encounter art that is difficult immediately triggers the traditional assumptions that it is bogus, elitist, made for the rich, and a con game by which bludgers seek to rip off the public. His polemics vividly confirm Pearson's insight that 'being different' in New Zealand is interpreted as 'trying to be superior'.

The laughing donkey

One of the most dramatic recent art controversies began in July 2004 when the artist et al was selected for the following year's Venice Biennale. In art circles the choice of artist was hardly a surprise as et al had been active for over twenty years and had recently had an outstanding retrospective at the Govett-Brewster. But et al was little known outside the art world. Critics pounced on the fact that public money was involved and that the artist was described as representing New Zealand. Creative NZ made $500,000 available towards expenses, with the rest of the budget to be raised from sponsors and the public. The media assumed that the artist was receiving a huge windfall, whereas in fact the Creative NZ money was to help with the overheads – the rent of a venue in Venice for six months, project management, the opening of the show, publicity, airfares, the production of a catalogue, etc. As John Daly-Peoples later pointed out, et al had received no direct grants from Creative NZ in recent years, and only about $25,000 from public galleries over the last decade.[61] (Merylyn Tweedie, the coordinator of et al, had needed to hold a 'day job' as a high school teacher.)

There was outrage at the fact that the collective (or was it the single artist Tweedie?) avoided publicity except under controlled conditions.[62] In today's commercial culture it is seen as only proper that an artist should work for her supposedly huge salary by doing PR for her country. But above all what the debate focused on was et al's type of

art – 'conceptual art', or what a *Dominion Post* letter-writer described as 'self-indulgent pseudo-intellectual claptrap'.[63] The artist had worked in a variety of media but was best known for installations using recycled junk. The most recent example – and the only example et al's critics appeared to have heard of – was 'Rapture' at the Wellington City Art Gallery, a closed box reminiscent of a New Zealand 'dunny' or 'portaloo,' which emitted sounds said to be recorded at the French underground nuclear tests at Mururoa. Other sounds were reminiscent of a braying donkey. This work was confused by the media with another work on exhibition at that time as part of the contribution by three New Zealand artists to the 2004 Sydney Biennale. Daniel Malone's 'A Long Drop to Nationhood' made witty use of the awkward corridor space the artist had been allocated by placing a 'long drop' at the end. The public condemnation of these two works curiously echoed one of the very first modern art controversies, about the 1917 exhibition of a urinal in a New York gallery by Marcel Duchamp under the pseudonym 'R. Mutt'.

The *Dominion Post* fuelled public protest with its front-page lead story on 14 July 2004 under the headline 'Portaloo to Promote NZ: Cash Down The Toilet, Say Critics'. In fact the portaloo was never intended to be et al's art for Venice, but the *Post* was not interested in such subtleties. The story quoted ACT MP Deborah Coddington: 'It's crap – and most New Zealanders know it.' ('Crap' is the automatic association for strange art, and the word would be heard constantly over the next few weeks, though few users of the term seem to have reflected on its irony in this instance.) The *Dominion Post* caught Associate Arts Minister Judith Tizard unprepared and very much on the defensive: 'Tizard is demanding answers . . . . "I think that Creative NZ have to answer the charge that this is arrogant and elitist," Ms Tizard said last night.' She had not yet seen the work in question. Two weeks later, Tizard – who is normally a strong supporter of the arts – was able to assure critics in Parliament that Creative NZ did have satisfactory answers.[64] But meanwhile the *Dominion Post* story created fallout on a Mururoa scale.

That evening, the country's best-known current affairs commentator, Paul Holmes, devoted much of his TV One show to the topic. In a voice dripping with irony, he informed his audience that 'We the taxpayers are to pay around half a million dollars to send to a very elegant international art exhibition an unseen work by an artist whose latest work is a dunny that brays like a donkey'. He then gleefully quoted various 'experts' who had praised et al's work, adopting an affected posh voice as he read their comments aloud. His aside to the audience was: 'Please feel free to throw up!' Other provocative details were supplied by a sarcastic associate who added the rhetorical question, 'Do we simply not understand art like this?!'[65]

Art dealer John Gow and art consultant Hamish Keith appeared as experts who had decided it was advantageous on this occasion to side with the populists.[66] In such controversies, the art world seldom presents a united front. There will always be dealers or critics who see the artist under attack as over-rated. Typically they will justify their alliance with populism on the basis that controversy is healthy because (as Gow remarked to Holmes) it encourages New Zealanders to talk about art. In this case, the two experts also adopted a nationalist stance, with Gow expressing concern that et al's site-specific installation (whatever it might turn out to be) was unlikely to make the Italians think of New Zealand. Better to have selected 'a paua shell work by Ralph Hotere and Bill Culbert'. Gow must have known that et al's work has been frequently involved in representing 'New Zealand' (albeit from an ironic perspective), but here he was playing to Holmes's commonsense assumption that any art that represented the nation overseas had a duty to make it look good. As for Keith, he followed up his *Holmes* appearance with a letter to the editor of the *Herald* on 17 July: 'New Zealand art is alive, flourishing and connected to its culture. A great pity that Creative New Zealand and its experts do not seem to have noticed. We surely deserve more than this flatulent donkey in a dunny.' These remarks seemed to imply that nationalist art had achieved its goal of becoming fully 'connected to its culture' but clearly it had done so at a cost – the loss of the critical distance that separated art from

populism. (It has become difficult to explain to young people in the arts who know only today's establishment or coffee-table versions of nationalism that once it was a critically minded counter-culture.)

In repeating the sound of a braying donkey on his show, Holmes seemed totally unaware that he was confirming the identification with himself. Few commentators noticed that Holmes had scored an 'own goal' – most appeared to believe that he and the *Dominion Post* had performed a valuable service to the nation in exposing another art-world absurdity. Radio talkback and Letters to the Editor columns ran hot. Laws used his next *Sunday Star-Times* column to enlarge the attack: 'It's time that the elitist rubbish that parades itself as installation art was exposed as the nonsense that it is. . . . Art should aim to uplift all, not just be for the few.'[67] Many politicians joined the outcry. Georgina Te Heuheu, Arts and Culture spokeswoman of the National Party, was not afraid to flaunt her extremely limited knowledge of the artist's previous work by asserting in a press statement that 'Taxpayers have every right to be asking why Creative New Zealand has selected an installation by a group of artists whose claim to fame to date is the creation of a port-a-loo toilet which brays like a donkey. . . .'[68] Stephen Franks of ACT deplored the way the so-called 'experts' of Creative NZ 'spend the taxes of ordinary people on these artists'. He added: 'It is very easy for people in the arts world to despise and reject any notion that the hoi polloi, those of us who are not the insiders, should have a view on what the government should pay for by way of art.' Today, 'hard-earned money' is being given to 'tripe' and taken away from 'taxpayers who actually do try to beautify New Zealand and the world; taxpayers who build gardens, who buy things that they like, who buy CDs, and who pay to sponsor the music they prefer'.[69] During two periods of parliamentary debate he was backed up by other ACT politicians such as Deborah Coddington, Heather Roy and Ken Shirley. The NZ First attack was led by Brian Donnelly and deputy leader Peter Brown.[70]

All the main newspaper columnists joined in the witch hunt, including Jim Hopkins[71] and Gordon McLauchlan[72] in the *Herald*. The *Dominion Post* published a deluge of letters abusing the artist ('public scam', 'gibberish', 'crap', 'Emperor's New Clothes', etc.).[73] The most unlikely people became involved, including Kim Hill, who is known as Radio NZ's most intellectual interviewer. As MC for the Montana NZ Book Awards on 26 July, Hill could not resist making et al jokes, such as introducing Peter Biggs of Creative NZ as 'Peter Bogs'. Even the Prime Minister distanced herself sharply from the choice of et al by means of a technicality. Helen Clark is normally a strong supporter of the arts but she was obviously conscious of the strength of the public backlash. In Parliament she said it was not her role to comment on 'the quality of the artist's work' but she was concerned that the artist would not be able to meet one of the criteria, 'the ambassadorial and publicity responsibilities required in a major international exhibition project'. She added a warning: 'I think this is a salutary lesson for Creative NZ, that if it delegates to a selection committee, the least it can do is ensure that it follows its own criteria. I can assure [Parliament] that that will have a bearing on my thinking about resourcing levels for Creative NZ in the future.'[74] Such claims that et al was a PR failure overlooked the fact that the artist had in fact given many interviews within an art context, in a lateral or playful manner, in keeping with the style of the work.[75] What else should be required of a sophisticated artist at the Venice Biennale? Everyone from the Prime Minister, to Creative NZ, to the presenter of the TV arts programme *Frontseat*, to the editor of the *Herald*[76] seemed to take it for granted that artists were to be judged not on their art or their discourse about art, but on their ability to perform 'ambassadorial and publicity responsibilities'.

There were more sympathetic voices such as Rosemary McLeod in the *Dominion Post*,[77] John Daly-Peoples in *National Business Review*[78] and Linda Herrick in the *Herald*.[79] Creative NZ deserves credit for having held firm, though gossip suggests that behind the scenes the organisation was somewhat rattled. In 'The Best Art of 2004' in the *NZ Listener*[80] William McAloon made the interesting suggestion that the et al debate paralleled 'the 1978 controversy surrounding New Zealand's gift of Colin McCahon's *Victory Over Death 2* to Australia'. If so, it was evidence that public attitudes had changed little over the past

twenty-eight years, and also demonstrated how fragile much of the arts establishment still is.

et al had the last laugh, for in October 2004 she won the $50,000 Walters Prize as judged by New York curator Robert Storr, a former senior curator of the Museum of Modern Art who will be the Director of the next (2007) Venice Biennale. et al's work *Restricted Access* was (as described by the *Herald*) a 'grimly lit collection of exhausted technology'.[81] There was no portaloo with a braying donkey but there was a television set screening a clip of Holmes attacking et al. As for the 2005 Venice Biennale, et al created a new installation, described by international reviewers as 'brilliant' and 'fresh'. Storr confirmed that this work was 'entirely suited to the Biennale'.[82] To date, none of et al's New Zealand adversaries appear to have had second thoughts about the controversy.

3. Universities and schools

Despite an increasing number of graduates, popular stereotypes of the academic world have not changed. The term 'academics' is interchangeable with 'intellectuals' and is assumed to describe Laputa-style eggheads lost in a world of ideas. The reality of the New Zealand ivory tower is more mundane. Common-room discussions are less likely to be about ideas than about gossip, sport, overseas trips, parking problems, restaurants, wine, and other topics typical of any middle-class group. Official university meetings focus mainly on regulations and budget problems. Many university courses and staff publications are routine in character, forms of intellectual busywork. Bureaucracy has mushroomed, and money-minded managerialism plays a major role in the running of tertiary institutions. There is considerable tension between the 'critic and conscience' role of the universities and their need today to keep governments happy and to fill the large holes in their budgets by extracting money from corporations and wealthy patrons, some of whom are quick to take offence. Expensive advertising campaigns by fiercely competing universities stress academic 'excellence' but also promise prospective students that the campus will

have first-class sporting and recreational facilities and a friendly, fun atmosphere. While New Zealand universities continue to play a crucial role in our culture – a role eloquently explained by Keith Sinclair in his 1963 essay 'The Historian as Prophet'[83] – it is important not to overlook their more prosaic, conformist, commercial aspects. It is ironic that in 1988, in a *Sites* issue on 'Intellectuals at Work,' Steve Maharey attacked 'the anti-intellectualism of New Zealand universities'.[84] It is not obvious that this critic has made the universities a much stronger site of intellectual activity since becoming Minister of Education.

The cultural nationalism of the 1930s was as important for New Zealand universities as it was for the arts. These institutions had suffered from timidity, as J. C. Beaglehole noted in 1936: '[Events] made amply clear the fact that more than one [university] college council would tolerate independence of thought and courage of utterance only with difficulty . . . an attitude which they were at pains to make explicit to the public'.[85] The universities also tended to confine themselves to received ideas, as Beaglehole noted in his 1954 essay *The New Zealand Scholar*: 'Consider the life of the teacher in the old [New Zealand] university. . . . He was, often enough, a pleasant fellow, and a hard-working teacher; but, if he wanted to think on his own subject, he was a thwarted mind . . . . there was no habit of research.'[86] In contrast the new style of 'New Zealand scholar' was to be actively critical and concerned with local contexts. Even during the most important period of New Zealand cultural nationalism, this tendency remained a minority – in some respects a counter-culture – within the university, but it was an important one. Local universities have always been obsessed with overseas status and eager to recruit staff from Oxford and Cambridge. They had to learn to value both the 'New Zealand scholar' and scholars from many other parts of the world. The academic staff today is more diverse – men and women, Maori and Pakeha – but the psychology of the institution still tends to be that of an import business. Contributing to the innovative literary and arts magazines that have helped to build New Zealand culture has seldom advanced the careers of academics because universities are more interested in overseas recognition and

the formal context of refereed journals. While post-colonial concerns continue to represent an important strand in our intellectual life, they still tend to be viewed suspiciously by the university unless packaged in the particular theoretical terms currently favoured by Anglo-American academic publications.

Universities have served as a base for other rebel movements besides cultural nationalism, such as campaigns about nuclear testing, the Vietnam war, Maori issues, the 1981 Springbok tour, republicanism, women's rights, gay rights, etc. Such concerns were initially at odds with common sense but eventually many of the new ideas trickled down, providing evidence that public intellectuals can make a difference. We should not, however, give too much credit to the universities for these were movements with a broad public scope. Indeed, the new activists also attacked the universities over issues of race and gender. Like Gramsci's organic intellectuals, some members of minority groups who have gained university positions have felt a responsibility to speak out on behalf of their communities.

New forms of cultural theory (such as structuralism and post-structuralism) rose to prominence overseas in the 1960s, but many New Zealand departments were slow to see their relevance. They gained a foothold here in the 1970s and '80s, becoming a small but active counter-culture within certain areas of the university. Advocates saw the new types of theory as important because of the direct and uncompromising way they challenged New Zealand notions of common sense and realism, or the taboo against complex language. These traditional local notions (or 'doxa' as Roland Barthes would call them[87]) were fiercely defended. This is not to suggest that such resistance was necessarily anti-intellectual, but it reflected the cautious, dry, ironic style favoured by local academics.[88] By the 1990s, Barthes and Foucault had become more acceptable in local academic writing in the arts and social sciences, but sometimes the new ideas were absorbed in a diluted, second-hand form or applied with a heavy hand. Those who still delayed engaging with this work could take comfort from the fact that its influence was starting to recede in Britain and the United States.

In the case of Jacques Derrida, a few New Zealanders engaged seriously with his ideas,[89] but his name remains more widely known than his writings. I remember there were quite a few copies of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* on academic shelves in the 1960s, but only the first few pages would ever show signs of use. Today there are even fewer copies of *Of Grammatology*, and few look well-thumbed. Derrida's books are scarce even in university bookstores. When this philosopher spoke at the Auckland Town Hall in 1999 he attracted a sizeable audience, but anecdotal evidence suggests that most people came out of curiosity rather than from a prior involvement with his work. Nevertheless, by the time of his death in October 2004, his name was sufficiently familiar to have registered on the mainstream. This inspired a kind of panic. Local commentators saw this icon of intellectualism as exercising a vast and pernicious influence. The Maxim Institute spoke of 'the havoc being wreaked on marriage in New Zealand by his ideas'.[90] The *National Business Review* noted his death in an editorial, 'Deriding Derrida', which began: 'One of the more curious intellectual fads to arise from the rubble of post-Stalinist Marxism was the fancy French confection known as deconstruction. . . . Outside France, [its] strongest followers are to be found in the safe academic halls of North America, Australia and, yes, New Zealand. Bookshops that stock "brainy stuff" are full of deconstruction tomes. These have done a lot to wreck decent critical writing about most of the humanities. Business, architecture, law and philosophy have also fallen victim to the spread of academic gobbledegook.' The *National Business Review* praised local academic Denis Dutton for his heroic efforts in resisting the influence of 'Derridaism'.[91] The *Sunday Star-Times* ran a jubilant column by Frank Haden entitled 'Now For The Good News: I'm Right and Derrida's Dead'.[92] Haden's *schadenfreude* is worth detailing as a classic example of local anti-intellectualism. After discussing some improvements to the New Zealand traffic situation, the columnist remarked: 'That's good to hear, but no more satisfying than news that a man whose crazy ideas have helped drag our education system down to its present parlous state

has left us. The shonky but disastrously influential French philosopher Jacques Derrida died last week, headed for the great resting place in the sky of kooks, eccentrics and air-headed distorters of truth.' The column was remarkable not only for the glee with which it announced Derrida's death from cancer but also for its ignorance of the man's ideas. Haden appeared to believe that this writer was responsible for all that was wrong with New Zealand education, both at university and at school level: 'When we think of the mess we're in . . . and our shockingly high percentage of incompetent teachers, we should be thankful Derrida won't be doing any more damage. Few countries have allowed their education systems to be perverted to such a degree by the mad ideas of Derrida and his colleagues, such as Michael [sic] Foucault, in the movement known as "deconstructionism".' Haden seemed to interpret the main thrust of Derrida and Foucault's work as 'the idea that facts don't matter', the very idea that 'has made teaching children in New Zealand so difficult'. He also appeared to blame 'deconstructionists' for the spread of political correctness. After a fierce polemic on these themes, he also blamed Derrida for the problems faced by New Zealand employers: 'It's no wonder we are always bewailing our lack of skilled workers. . . . We can't get people to fill these positions because the education system is flawed from the bottom up, thanks in large measure to the departed Derrida. We are well rid of him.'

Haden's attack is ironic when one considers the pragmatism that actually dominates New Zealand education. During the years I have been involved with English and Media Studies teachers in Australia and the UK, I have often been struck by their basically different approach. New Zealand teachers have little patience for the ivory tower. A common response is: 'That academic has no idea what it's like out here in the schools. What we need are some practical lesson plans!' Overseas teachers are more likely to be excited about new ideas and often see New Zealand material as simplistic. I am not unsympathetic to the priorities of local teachers,[93] but what strikes me is the absurdity of Haden's claims. His attack on Derrida as the enemy of fact seems based on no facts at all. The only world to which I can relate his

monstrous conception of the philosopher is the realm of stereotypes in which someone who is intellectual or academic releases a swarm of negative associations – lack of common sense, crazy ideas, political correctness, and so on.

This kind of anti-intellectual panic is a regular ritual in our community. Another example occurred in September 2003 after a radio broadcast in which Paul Holmes made several references to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as a 'cheeky darkie'. Fifty-four people signed a letter of protest to place on record their 'profound disgust' at this 'racially insulting and personally derogatory attack'. The letter called for Holmes to resign. Not all of the signatories were academics but the letter was coordinated by Professors Michael Neill and Albert Wendt of the University of Auckland's English Department. The public outcry against 'intellectuals' daring to criticise a popular media personality soon dwarfed the protest stirred up by Holmes's comments.

After Neill and Wendt sent their letter to the *Herald*, Garth George, who was in charge of the letter column, sent them a furious rejection: 'You are seriously cluttering up our email system with your nonsense, not one word of which will be published.'[94] Wendt then contacted *Herald* editor-in-chief Gavin Ellis, who agreed to overrule George and publish the letter. George used his next *Herald* column to explain his position: 'I thought I was beyond being surprised by anything, but the eruption over Holmes' words have [sic] astonished – and sickened – me'. With a string of anti-intellectual stereotypes, he explained the total unimportance of academics and artists: 'If you count out the inhabitants of the nether regions of academia – the inventors of political correctness in the first place – the artists, the writers and others of a self-styled intellectual elite, who all live in a different world from the rest of us, the minority becomes even more minor.'[95]

In the Saturday edition of the *Herald* on 4 October, all three columnists on the op-ed page discussed the protest letter.[96] Since they were the writers at the most thoughtful end of the *Herald* spectrum, it was startling to see them join the attack. Gordon McLauchlan accused

the 'so-called intellectuals of stifling freedom of speech' which made them 'guilty of hypocrisy'. Diana Wichtél was critical of Holmes but felt that 'the academics, artists and all' who had signed the open letter were over-reacting – each had become 'a pompous egghead'. John Roughan was particularly struck by the fact that the letter had included the adjective 'profound' – not a word that 'ordinary mortals' would ever use. His column launched a general attack on academics, particularly those in English departments: 'It doesn't matter so much so long as these desiccated souls confine themselves to lecture rooms and literary journals. But when they attempt to impose their deadly strictures on popular life, they need to be shot down.' This is a familiar double bind – intellectuals forfeit public respect because they live in an ivory tower, but when they leave the ivory tower they are seen as a public nuisance.

Columnists in other papers joined in the fun. Next day in the *Sunday Star-Times* Frank Haden attacked the academics' letter as 'a load of self-indulgent garbage'.[97] Michael Laws headed his column 'Academia's Mass Bleat Will Achieve Nothing'. He remarked: 'That's the thing about academics. They genuinely don't understand that the world has passed them by [as] plodders who but sit and pontificate.' His column was notable for its explicit support of anti-intellectualism: 'New Zealanders are anti-intellectual by nature, even those with PhDs. We rightly resent being instructed as to how to think'.[98] Letters to the editor around the country expressed similar opinions; for example, Lesley Opie offered these familiar observations: 'More often than not the academically inclined are not down to earth, practical people. Communicating with the ordinary Joe and Jane Bloggs in the street can be quite difficult for them. . . . These 50 New Zealanders have shown us how so full of their own importance they are. I sense elitism rearing its head.'[99]

The strength of the stereotypes can be judged by the fact that the actual signatories of the letter included well-known people such as Albert Wendt and Witi Ihimaera, who have held important public jobs in New Zealand and overseas, and won international recognition as

writers. Another signatory was Ralph Hotere, one of the country's most successful artists. To be able to attack them with such confidence as people who know nothing about the world, or about racism, is evidence of the extent to which the stereotypes have ossified and lost contact with reality.

Meanwhile racist websites joined in the abuse, with the Stormfront White Nationalist website posting a photo of Wendt and inviting comment.[100] There was some relief in the form of thoughtful articles by Pamela Stirling in the *Listener* ('A Sorry Affair')[101] and by Rosemary McLeod in the *Sunday Star-Times* ('"We" Are Really Not Amused, Holmes').[102] And unexpectedly, Diana Wichtel returned to apologise because she felt the public backlash against the letter had gone too far. In her *Herald* column, 'Our Anti-Intellectualism is a No-Brainer', she re-visited her earlier reactions:

> at times like this you learn a lot about the culture you live in, not all of it good. Take the astonishingly vitriolic response to the open letter about Holmes. . . . I took a shot at the letter myself [but] now I find myself feeling sorry (I stand by 'pompous', but I take back 'egghead') for the beleaguered academics. The anti-academic hostility in the media, on talkback and in letters to the editor took me back to my first primary school teaching job. Someone looked at my file and discovered – you certainly knew better than to mention such a thing – that I had a degree. A torrent of 'Been to the university, have you?' was unleashed. . . . Even worse, I'd majored in English. I never lived it down. Yes, I know we're an egalitarian nation with a proud intellectual tradition of just scraping through School C . . . . [But] if this latest bagging of the highbrow puts them up at the university off entering into public debate, we'll all be the losers.[103]

Incomplete as it was, the columnist's apology was a gracious gesture and an extremely rare occurrence. If Frank Haden read it, one wonders what he made of the New Zealand school that was a hotbed not of Derrida's ideas but of Haden-style anti-intellectualism.

4. Politics

Politics is a huge field, and the presence of public intellectuals in New Zealand politics and economics has been richly documented by Brian Easton in his book *The Nationbuilders* (AUP, 2001). I will therefore confine my discussion to a single aspect – Rogernomics (the economic philosophy of the 1984 Lange Government) – which is of particular relevance to my essay because of the confusing way it has been interpreted as an important example both of intellectualism and of anti-intellectualism.

Muldoon was a prime minister who (in Easton's words) 'presented himself as anti-intellectual, liking to abuse [intellectuals] in public. His followers – Rob's Mob – loved him for it.'[104] In the early 1980s, as his government ran out of steam during its third term of office – which included a conflict between Muldoon and his most intellectual MP, Marilyn Waring – there was growing excitement among the academic and arts communities at the thought that this parochial version of New Zealand was at last coming to an end. After Muldoon there would be a lifting of the lid which would release many cultural energies and allow a more sophisticated New Zealand to develop, in touch with the world. When the Lange Government was elected it instituted a programme of neo-liberal (or 'New Right') economic reform, designed by a high-powered Treasury team. Some members of the creative community endorsed this 'more market' approach as a way to rescue the country from its bureaucratic paralysis. They were delighted by the fact that the government 'thought itself "intellectual": fifteen of the first twenty cabinet members had degrees; five had, or have since, written books; four had held university positions'.[105] Muldoon had always warned against academics who peered down from their ivory towers with no understanding of what the world was like at grass-roots level,[106] and the subsequent damage done by Rogernomics seemed to him and his supporters to confirm their worst fears.

Others saw Rogernomics in a different way from either of these perspectives. Its style might be intellectual but its results were philistine. After the events of the early 1980s (such as the Springbok tour protest), it was obvious that New Zealand was going to open wide to the world as soon as Muldoon was gone, and Rogernomics had no right to claim credit for all the new energies released. Indeed, it bungled the transition because of its obsessive, cargo-cult enthusiasm for the market. It ignored the complexities of the local situation, such as the problems associated with a small population base, especially in the arts and the media. Easton provides a strong summary of this position:

> Fundamentally the rogernomes were anti-intellectual, evidenced by their treatment of the arts, of science research, of tertiary education (which they could not distinguish from training), of the National Library, the National Archives, and the National Museum and Art Gallery, of history, and of dissent. The emphasis that the rogernomes put on 'accountability' in public spending reduced markedly the freedom to make quality judgements. When rogernomes took over the funding of the arts, the administration became centralised and authoritarian, favouring the safe status quo rather than the innovative. Had their policies been applied to Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and MIT, they too would have remorselessly turned into centres of mediocrity and stress.[107]

Their imposition of the corporate model also had the effect of destroying those nooks and crannies in the public sector where at least some intellectuals had previously found space.[108] With departments either privatised or transformed into SOEs, there was little room for mavericks in the new world of commercial management, constant performance reviews, and precisely defined inputs and outputs.

Yet another view would be that Rogernomics did genuinely represent an intellectual perspective (monetarism), but its adherents imported and applied their theory without sufficient attention to detail. Back in 1904, a visiting French economist and historian had already observed this tendency in New Zealanders: 'Like almost all men of action they have a contempt for theories: yet they are often captured by the first theory that turns up, if it is demonstrated to them with an appearance of logic sufficient to impose upon them. In most

cases they do not seem to see difficulties, and they propose simple solutions for the most complex problems with astonishing audacity.'[109]

Some people who have made a good living as consultants or entrepreneurs argue that Rogernomics did open up new job possibilities for intellectuals. And there is a continuing tradition of right-wing theoretical activity (around Treasury, the neo-liberal 'think tanks' and the libertarian magazine *Free Radical*). My own view is that Rogernomics and similar movements need to be understood as a symptom of larger and more fundamental changes – the upsurge in global capitalism and corporate management, energised by the power of new technology. Corporate capitalism now colours every aspect of our lives, somewhat in the way Christianity permeated the lives of Europeans in the Middle Ages. My quarrel is not with capitalism in general, but with its contemporary corporate forms and consumer psychology. Always over the consumer's shoulder is the voice of the advertiser stressing the importance of the mainstream product and the pleasures of instant gratification. For those employed in the cultural industries, the related voice is that of the corporate manager, constantly emphasising sales or ratings, instructing staff to stick to familiar genres and ingredients. These voices coexist with, and reinforce, the older voices of conformity. They are also matched by the voices of today's newspaper columnists and television presenters who ensure that the target audience is flattered and entertained and their common sense never challenged or confused.

For all its excitement and release of new energies in some areas of the culture, Rogernomics has led in many cases to economic dependency and shallow media populism. Bruce Jesson saw the weak resistance to the introduction of Rogernomics as clear proof of the shortage of public intellectuals in New Zealand: 'the reasons for [this] colossal failure ... are not at all recent but go back to this country's colonial origins. Like many frontier societies, New Zealand has not provided a friendly environment to culture or to thought. ... New Zealand's colonial origins have also meant that thought in this country is derivative.'[110] There were of course exceptions to the failure of response described by

Jesson, such as the work of Easton and Kelsey. Also important was the Maori resistance to Rogernomics, which helped to protect some areas of the public sector from privatisation. (An example was the innovative Maori legal challenge to the proposed sale of TVNZ.)

Many of us saw the election of the Clark Government in 1999 as a last-minute rescue. This is probably the most sympathetic prime minister the arts community has ever known. Taking on the Arts, Culture and Heritage portfolio, Clark has regularly attended cultural events and is both interested and knowledgeable. To acknowledge the government's exceptional achievements in this area is not to say there are no problems. Increases in arts funding have been modest, despite the outrage expressed by opposition politicians and letters to the editor. Artists are uneasy about the way bureaucrats are re-defining the work they do as 'creative industries' and as part of 'brand New Zealand'. Rogernomics, or more generally global capitalism, has reshaped our cultural environment at such a deep level that we continue to live and work in its shadow.

Conclusion

I began by describing anti-intellectualism as an odd repression that has always been part of our culture. In the course of my lifetime, I have seen puritanism fade (though the rise of groups such as the Destiny Church warns us not to get complacent). And in the arts I have seen the taboo against modern art at least partly lifted. But anti-intellectualism retains its dull, heavy presence. Like many local writers I have learned to live with it, striving to avoid big words and never associating myself with the problematic term 'intellectual'. It is the nature of repression to be unconscious, or easily rationalised; and our culture goes about its business unconcerned by the lack of what Lydia Wevers calls 'a truly *high*' layer of 'difficult, innovative, risk-taking, reader-alienating work'. But I know that this lack (or at least shortage) is one reason why more than a few talented New Zealanders are now living overseas.

I have sought not merely to challenge this prejudice but to understand how and why the culture aids and abets it. I have analysed its

workings as a pattern of associations or stereotypes; as a voice over our shoulders (Pearson's useful concept); as a community ritual like the burning of a straw man; and as an unquestioned faith in common sense, defined as the opposite of intellectual activity. These processes are internalised in almost everyone who grows up in this country and have the effect of blocking off a range of possibilities.

There have been many gains over the years, such as the creation of an infrastructure for the arts in New Zealand. Robert Chapman's observation in 1953 that 'New Zealand writing is conspicuously plain and straight-forward [yet it] is ignored by the public or resisted quite as much as if it had been thrown down from the highest of ivory towers'[11] is now only partly true. The country has had noted public intellectuals, with the study of history as one of the main breakthrough areas. Beaglehole and Keith Sinclair have been followed by James Belich, Judith Binney, Michael King, Jock Phillips, Claudia Orange, Ranginui Walker, and others. Yet the general point that Jesson made in 1999 still holds: 'I have known plenty of New Zealanders who have been well-read, intellectually-stimulating, non-conformist, courageous and sometimes eccentric. They have tended to be marginalised, however. There is something about the structure and culture of this country that fosters the mediocre conformist.'[12]

Some would say this vision is too dark, its perspective parochial. Today we have more life choices, it is easier to look for jobs overseas, and we should make the most of those opportunities. At the same time, increased immigration is bringing the world to New Zealand. One of the positive changes has been the end of the old antipathy in intellectual circles to those who chose to 'flee' or 'escape' the country rather than stay to fight. We are now more likely to think of our expatriates as still linked in some respects to our culture, so our sense of the nation is not limited by physical boundaries.

To remedy its provincialism, New Zealand has always needed more of two elements – more international input and more local production. The country's cultural infrastructure was built with the help of those fleeing from Europe in the 1930s. Now immigrants from Asia are

contributing new energies, and recent arrivals from the USA include artists and intellectuals escaping from Bush-style politics. Increased travel and communication can help to modify the narrow, jingoistic aspects of New Zealand culture, and this hope is reinforced by changes in the media environment. If you don't like what the local community thinks, you can find kindred souls through the internet. You can order specialised books and DVDs and download the music you want from anywhere in the world.

But at the same time we need to encourage local production, including forms of both popular and high culture. Our country has always run the risk of being primarily a consumer or import culture. Those New Zealanders who evidently do not see intellectuals, artists and academics as serving a useful purpose need to realise that today, more than ever before, a nation needs to live by its wits. And in everyday terms, the local is still important – the particular physical and cultural environment in which we make our livings and raise our families. There are creative New Zealanders who lead successful careers through the internet, but most of the clients they deal with still have links to particular cultures. Anyone involved with expensive media – who writes for book publication, say, or works in film or television – has to link up with a particular production community. An interest in the local is also hard to avoid if one wants to maintain a knowledge of history, a sense of political responsibility, or a respect for the local environment (concerns that tend to be the opposite of those associated with many multinational corporations). In short, it still makes sense to be concerned about the state of the local culture and its shortcomings. The loud (donkey-like?) voice of anti-intellectualism over our shoulders needs to be recognised for what it is and rejected as a force that continues to block some of the best local energies.

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