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Rotorua Mad Poets: Words of Their Own

Terry Locke

University of Sydney
(AU)

Abstract

*If truth is beauty, beauty truth
Just as the poet said',
Then patterned sense in research
Can be sewed by lyric thread.*

*Mad Poets Rotorua is
The topic of this story,
Acknowledging that all research
Is largely allegory.*

*The group has met religiously
Since Nineteen Ninety-Four
Enabling some to read their poems
Who'd never read before.*

*From my perspective many themes
Emerge in all that follows,
While these are mine, there will be those
That you my reader hallows.*



1. Prologue: Departing from Madness

Let's start with Emerson,
 writing in *The Poet*
 of a kind of excess
 of "abandonment to the nature of things"
 the "unlocking of human doors"
 "suffering the etherial tides
 to roll and circulate"
 the necessary wildness of speech
 with the intellect inebriated
 by nectar.²

Or Dickinson, succinctly:
 "Much Madness is divinest Sense –
 To a discerning Eye –"³
 driving Higginson to distraction
 with those disruptive dashes
 knowing full well
 "the pride that stops the breath,
 in the core of woods,
 is not of ourself."⁴

Abandoned to retirement
 I am resituated with Millie
 in the Ngongotaha Valley
 Rereading the *Georgics*⁵
 living out on the land
 a Middle State idyll of sorts
 landscape as culture⁶
 finding my way into town
 nosing into Atlantis Books
 and the hardly undersea world
 of Rotorua Mad Poets Society.

2. The Meeting as Ritual

"Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
 The proper study of Mankind is *Man*,"
 Said Alexander Pope⁷ perhaps forgetting
 The place of context in behavioural begetting.
 A sandwich board outside Atlantis Books
 Announces Wednesday's meeting, overlooks
 The need for something grander than A4.
 The meeting space is opposite the door
 With chairs and couches carefully arranged
 To challenge hierarchy. The rites unchanged
 Since May 15, of Nineteen Ninety-Four
 When Monkey Jo's saloon saw poets galore
 Respond to Frank May's clarion call to crawl
 Out of the woodwork and deliver all
 Their covert masterpieces with aplomb.⁸
 The current president seems quite at home,
 Looks at his watch, announces meeting number

One, one, thirty-five, then calls upon a member
 To read aloud a pristine composition
 Based on the theme. There is no inquisition.
 All offerings are esteemed. Some favour rhyme
 With regular accentual fall and climb,
 While others like their verse non-metrical.
 In such a climate nothing is heretical,
 No tone nor topic viewed as out of bounds
 Instead a murmuring of praise resounds
 Acknowledging the bravery of those
 Who write and share the poems they compose.
 Madness, of course, occurs in many forms
 From silliness to disregarding norms
 Of etiquette. The custom is, with flair,
 In the interstices of poems to share
 Quotations, apt and quizzical,
 Obscene, obscure or metaphysical.
 Then comes the mid-way point, a break
 For notices, a bit of goss and cake.
 We're half way down the winding of the road,
 The interlude behind, it's time to read an ode
 Or verse or ballad from a cherished tome.
 Then with the last poem's knell to slip off home.

3. Russell Tibby

After a morning of hard frost
 the air is clear on Te Waerenga Road
 the blueness of the lake intensifies
 and Tarawera's hump shrugs off its shroud.
 Past the farm cottage, past the shed,
 past a salvo of silvereyes fed
 by Kay with dripping, I hear his voice
 welcoming warm as river gravel.
 Words are not for wasting unless
 there is a tale to unravel:
 Talks of his Waikato origins and the choice
 to move to Rotorua, enjoying success
 buying and selling motorbikes
 but more at home on horseback
 chasing hares at Tallyho or on hikes
 in the wild, or cutting gorse back.

*In his own Words:*⁹

i Poetry and the Child

It's the simplicity of children's poetry
 the rhythm and rhyme is what
 has always attracted me.

I was a young schoolboy about 11 or 12
 the teacher asked us to write a poem
 I was never a great scholar
 good at social studies but mathematically devoid

I wrote out this poem
 all about a little train
 in my imagination
 that had run away from home
 I wrote it in a rhythm
 train noise
Choof choof choof choof
 choof choof type of thing
 I imagined him going up a hill
 and slowing down
choooof choooof **choooof** choooof
 and down the other side
choofchoofchoofchoof
 I handed it in to my teacher:

The following day
 talking about our poems
 how good they were
 turned round and said to me,
 “Unfortunately, somebody’s handed in
 a poem he never wrote.”
 I’d never written it.
 I was telling lies
 And so, after that,
 my poetry went into a secret place.

ii Poetry as Secret Activity

I still liked reading it and hearing it
 never told anyone about it.
 Kids the road block
 doesn’t have to be very big
 It stops you in your tracks
 I just got very shy
 But kept on writing poems.
 After I got married to Kay
 if she was away
 and I was away duck-shooting
 I’d come home and write her a poem
 leave it on the bench for her
 I’ve always carried on
 in my little, secret poetic world.
 It stayed hidden away until
 I turned up at Mad Poets Rotorua.

It’s funny, I still see
 my poems as being private
 it’s a weird thing
 I haven’t wanted them out there.
 There’s been a couple published.
 I’ve started thinking recently
 a book would be good
 I’d like my grandchildren and children
 to have this book;
 I’ve had one attempt at it

looked at it and thought,
 “No, this is not right,”
 I’m a bit of a perfectionist,
 pulled the plug on the whole deal.

iii Fronting up to Mad Poets

One day I was talking
 to a guy from Brazil
 lived in our cottage
 down here on the farm
 said there’s a group of poets called
 the Rotorua Mad Poets Society.
 Why don’t you go along?
 He happened to know Jackie
 told me where they meet and when
 so one night I thought, “Right,”
 packed a poem I wrote
 into my pocket went along
 had a listen and a chance
 to read out my poem
 from there on I just got
 more interested in it.
 the people
 the total lack of rules
 you don’t have to apologise
 you’re not allowed to apologise
 no membership fees....

kept me going back as much as the poetry
 now it’s the poetry
 You can sing a song or
 play a flute if you want to.
 As you write more and more poetry
 you get better and better at it
 As you get older you get more depth
 and more meaning
 As you read other people’s poetry
 and listen to it you realise
 some people have better handles on
 some parts of poetry than you have
 and you swing over
 to a slightly different style.
 I always had a very good imagination
 for situations.
 Rhythm and rhyme are the challenges
 my poems are almost like
 rhyming stories, that’s my vent.

When you have a theme
 it forces you to sit down
 it kick-starts you
 because sometimes
 you can dilly dally around
 getting a poem started.

iv Inspirations

Rupert Brooke

I like listening to and reading
poetry about England.

We mostly all come from
around that way somewhere
my families did
An affinity for Old England?

Robert Browning is I find
rather diverse.

There's a lot of humour
in Banjo Paterson obviously
that was the poetry of the day
for outback Australian people
but it was *very* Australian
my mother was Australian
so I am half-Australian

Yeah, I *do* like it

but I don't admire it.

I swing back to Rupert Brooke

I feel sorry for outlaws
side with the unfortunate
feel empathy for those who struggle
that are basically on the hind tit.

v The Need to Explain

Don't take this as criticism

I have often written poems
and read them

one about an old-aged spy
a spy all his life
suddenly avenues of work closed down
and so – a dead horse.

I read it out
and looked at all the people
really nobody knew
what I was talking about.

I didn't have time to explain
why I was writing about

this guy called "Dead Lions" –
that's what they call a washed-up spy:

he was the lion who roared
now a dead one

at that game so long
they just can't give it up.

4. Jackie Evans

On a rainy day the new library
is haven to housed and chary homeless.

I enter from the manicured square
 on Haupapa Street and in the foyer there
 find Jackie, deceptively demure
 with small black suitcase, poised on a chair.
 The Don Stafford Room has its own allure,
 spacious and removed, a loving tribute
 to Rotorua's historian¹⁰, whose stories contribute
 to the remembering of the place
 and for us, as interlocuters, a boundless space.
 I show her Russell's "Dead Lions" vocal
 on Audacity, point out the symmetry of shape
 his metre makes. And then, to sound the inscape¹¹
 Of Mad Poets history, I prompt another local.

In her own Words:

i Poetry and the Young Person

As a teenager working
 in Wellington and studying
 the first time ever away from home
 I was very homesick
 my father¹² would write
 frequent letters including humorous
 mainly his own original poems
 which I loved and related to.
 This began my interest and
 got me into poetry
 which developed to interest
 in other forms.
 He did tell me about Ogden Nash
 and then I would do my own
 research into it.
 A healing process this
 interest in humorous verse.
 I would post him poems of my own.

ii Inspirations

Many other poets
 James K. Baxter¹³
 and Janet Frame another
 I was particularly interested
 in Janet Frame I knew
 she had a mental illness
 there is mental illness in my family;
 she was a brilliant writer.
 I read about her life
 she a patient in a psychiatric
 hospital in the South Island
 only saved from a frontal lobotomy
 by a book published
 a week before
 the operation was to occur.¹⁴
 I was intrigued by this
 continued reading her poetry

and her fiction and prose.

iii Mad Poets Dilemmas

It's a long time,
 twenty-four years
that I have been involved.
 I was intrigued to see
in the first seven years
 an impasse develop between
two sets of poets in the end
 one group of about eight decided
to leave and start another
 group they were unhappy because
two members suffered
 from mental illness
we encouraged and supported.
 The group that decided to leave
resented these people.
 The remaining group continued
to enlarge membership;
 the group that decided to leave
really just fell apart.
 Mad Poets Society didn't just
manage to survive but
 continued to thrive.

iv Mad Poets as Inclusive Community

We offer a very safe
 opportunity for poets to come
write original poetry
 listen to others,
as Russell said,
 there are no rules.
We seem to be a group
 which functions happily
together towards each other
 accept people with disabilities
a very important thing.

I found my love of poetry
 a healing influence in my life.
I particularly love memorising poems
 a very useful tool to prevent
oneself worrying about
 daily problems and finding a poem
you particularly love and
 memorising it I find
particularly therapeutic.

5. The Questionnaire

After great pain a formal feeling comes¹⁵
Wrote Dickinson who knew the mind as well
As anyone. And Frost, whose momentary stay

Against confusion¹⁶ tells of frailty,
Recalls his sister Jeanie's spells of true
Madness¹⁷, beyond his reach, unmended walls,

The new birch fence facing reclaiming nature,¹⁸
In short the limits of formality,
Of lines, tersely hammered out in verse,

As if one's feelings could be formalised.
A questionnaire is never innocent,
Though questioners may argue otherwise.

To keep the lid on fell Pandora's box
Declaring you prefer *not* to be conscripted
Becomes a blessed wall containing sadness
Protects the voice of your own sacred script.

6. An Essay on Criticism

And so, we arrive back, where we always began
with that "intolerable wrestle with words
and meanings" Eliot speaks of¹⁹. You do what you can,
knowing in your heart of hearts that the rewards

Are at best, random and capricious.
So criticism is a problem concept
calling up the dire spectre of vicious
Loss of face, or judgement to accept....

Perhaps it simply needs a dusting off,
refurbishment of sorts, a new stance:
"True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance."²⁰

So here I am, participant observer,
attempting verse to foot it with Minerva
knowing full well the sense the poetry makes
will only satisfy the ones who serve her.²¹

Let me slip into another metre:
 reflection on Mad Poets as a safe place
a harbour for the outcast and the frail
 that Jackie speaks of.
Maybe it's enough
 and tough enough for many
to simply utter hard-won crafted
 sound beyond the comfort of closed lips.
Such tentative forays into the public space
 are far from the ultimate display

of publication exercised by Jackie
 and reserved by Russell.
 Somewhere in between there lurks
 the beckoning finger of review
 a moment of reckoning for sure
 but, as Lyndsay and others say,
 a needful conversation around craft
 a forum to explain or justify
 a prompt for “swinging over” to
 a new way of saying. It will happen
 this discovery of a language
 to articulate the art
 of measured and careful critique
 given that we discipline our cranks
 and prejudices and compose
 our differences in the common
 pursuit of true judgement.²²

Appendix: The Poems

DEAD LIONS

by Russell Tibby

His life’s an illusion of ruses the users
 have left him confused on his role in the play,
 so this lion, a dead one, is trying a re-run
 to capture the past and with luck make it pay.

But blasts from the past that try to reharness
 excitement that pays need a network on line,
 so without it, it’s doubted, and those with the clout
 shut the doors when he roars, it’s a matter of time.

Dead lions, slow horses and left-over ghosts
 are the names he gets called, washed up on a beach,
 but he knows as he goes that with time and the chances
 that even dead lions have something to teach.

So he prowls and he waits round the clubs and the places
 he speaks with the Spooks and the ones in the know,
 preening while gleaning the info he’s seeking
 and hoping some ember could light up and glow.

But the playfield ain’t level so slightly dishevelled
 he loses his grip on the liferaft of hope,
 and sadly quite badly he now flounders madly
 as shrinking and sinking he’s run out of rope.

Next scene on a gurney, the end of his journey
 the lion that roared is now pale and cold,
 nicotined fingers and nobody lingers
 dead lions laid out just look older than old.

This relic, a wreck, with no one on deck,
 now over and out is this blast from the past,
 and this mountain of lies and king of all spies
 has at last gone to ground with his flag at half mast.

SENTINEL²³

by Jackie Evans

Matuatonga
 Kūmara Goddess
 sightless eyes
 sweep Mokoia,
 seeking the unknown;
 stone sentinel
 symbol of fertility;
 weathered face
 rubbed smooth
 by curious hands;
 mute Goddess
 carved in rhyolite
 what lies within your pitted core?
 kaleidoscope
 of utu?
 anguish?
 karakia?
 taunts of circling Ngāpuhi?
 Te Arawa lament?
 tangi
 tangi
 tangi

AWHITU AT EASTER 2018

by Lindsay Campbell

Sunlight blesses our car as we wind our way to Awhitu
 I remember an old friend, horses and Kariotahi Beach
 Long before they were born,
 These precious children who run to hug us.
 Together we explore a new place,
 The home of first settlers on this land,
 Echoes of pit saw and succulent stew on tin plates.

Now they dance on glistening rock
 And balance on the old wharf with sticks.
 The out tide has given us an island
 Floating on mud, shining, calling
 To Audrey, whose feet plough the mud to find
 Her mystical island of dreams.

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¹ John Keats' famous conclusion to "Ode on a Grecian urn", slightly paraphrased.

² Cook, Reginald. ed. 1969. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Prose and Poetry* (2nd ed.), 132-33. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

³ Johnson, Thomas. ed. 1960. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 209 (Poem number 435). Boston: Little Brown and Co.

⁴ Linscott, Robert. 1959. *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 11. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

⁵ Virgil. 2010. *The Georgics: A Poem of the Land*. Translated by Kimberley Johnson. London: Penguin.

⁶ See, for example, Marx, Leo. 1964. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press. Marx writes that the "pastoral ideal is an embodiment of what Lovejoy calls 'semi-primitivism'; it is located in a middle ground somewhere 'between,' yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature" (p. 23).

⁷ A treatise on the human condition by Alexander Pope (1688-1744), *An essay on man* was an attempt to "vindicate the ways of God to man" (l. 16). One might consider its heroic couplets as reflecting this optimism in the form itself.

⁸ Evans, Jackie. July, 2014. "Mad Poets, Mild Poets, Wild Poets: A History of the Rotorua Mad Poets Society". *a fine line* (The magazine of the New Zealand Poetry Society): 1-3. You can access this at https://poetrysocietynz.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/a-fine-line-july-2014_0.pdf. and find out more about its stunning record as a group meeting weekly, and its support of young Rotorua poets, whose work has been published in three of its books over the years.

⁹ I am grateful to my research student, Priya Gain, for introducing me to Mears' (2009) "gateway approach" in the course of a focused ethnography investigating participants' responses to a biculturally oriented, music education workshop. Mears advocates for the use of participants' words in a way that reflects "the wholeness of the experience, bringing the narrators into being as complex, living individuals, in a holistic context" (Mears, Carolyn. 2009. *Interviewing for Education and Social Science Research, The Gateway Approach*, 10. New York: Palgrave Macmillan). Priya's dissertation can be accessed at: https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/d37311_79d5ad0580e4475bbc681875685beff5.pdf.

¹⁰ See Stafford, Don. 2016. *Te Arawa: A History of the Te Arawa People* (4th ed.). Oratia: Oratia Media.

¹¹ In his 1950's introduction to the Penguin *Poems and prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, W. H. Gardner describes *inscape* as "that deeper pattern, order and unity which gives meaning to external forms". One might compare this to the holy grail of most if not all researchers.

¹² Tim Evans-Freke, one of New Zealand's pioneering television newsreaders.

¹³ New Zealand poet (1926-1972), who often sided with the marginalised and homeless. See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-k-baxter>.

¹⁴ This happened in 1954 when Frame was a patient at Seacliff Lunatic Asylum. The book that saved her life was a collection of short stories entitled *The Lagoon and other stories*, published by Caxton Press in 1951.

¹⁵ See note 3. This is poem number 341, p. 162.

¹⁶ Part of Robert Frost's famous definition of poetry from his essay, "The figure a poem makes". See Frost, Robert. 1967. *Complete Poems*, 17-20, London: Jonathan Cape.

¹⁷ Frost had to commit his sister Jeanie to a mental hospital in 1920 and she died there in 1929. His son Carol committed suicide in 1940 and his daughter Irma was committed to a mental hospital in 1947.

¹⁸ Two "canonical" poems of Frost are alluded to here, "Mending Wall" and "Home Burial", both from *North of Boston*, first published in 1914.

¹⁹ In the second section of "East Coker" from *Four Quartets* (1943).

²⁰ Lines 362-3 of Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism" first published in 1711. In this essay, Pope gives wonderful examples as he writes of the sort of writing he abhors.

²¹ Oh, dear. heroic couples are one thing but brave intrusions by cheap Byronesque rhyming is another. My apologies to my reader. I simply don't know what possessed me.

²² See Eliot, Thomas Stearns. 1951. *Selected Essays*, "The Function of Criticism (1923)". The full quotation reads: "The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks – tares to which we are all subject – and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment" (p. 25).

²³ In 1823 a Ngapūhi taua (war party) massacred hundreds of Te Arawa people, who had sought refuge on Mokoia Island. On the island stood Matuatonga, a stone symbol of fertility: the Kumara Goddess. She remains there still. This poem was published in *Te Reo Pohewa: The Spirit of Rotorua in Verse* (2011), edited by Jackie Evans and published by Rotorua Mad Poets Society.