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CrOCEVIA•Guest Editor: Roger BROMLEY, Editors: Carmen CONCILIO & Pietro DEANDREA

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CHANGING NOTIONS OF WELLBEING IN NEW ZEALAND LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT • Conceptions of wellbeing and good life vary considerably in different cultures. A recent study demonstrates that in the post-contact period, in particular between 1870-1940, New Zealand was the healthiest country in the world in terms of life expectancy, but only for non-Māori citizens. The introduction of Western culture and liberal economy was lethal for Māori who risked extinction. One people prospered to the detriment of the other. This trend changed when subalternity became resistance, and the government and public opinion acknowledged Māori ‘cultural diversity’ as an aspect of New Zealand national identity. The official recognition of specific indigenous views of health, development, social structures and wellbeing led to the establishment of formal institutions, strategic plans and frameworks to promote them. Māori have also influenced national policies on some cross-cultural issues, for example the protection and preservation of the environment. All this has been recorded in short stories, the most widespread genre in Aotearoa New Zealand. My article explores different notions of wellbeing in New Zealand short fictions by non-Māori and Māori authors such as Frank Sargeson, Roderick Finlayson, Noel Hilliard, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace.

KEYWORDS • Health, Wellbeing, New Zealand, Short Stories, Māori culture.

1. Health, Wellbeing and Good Life in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Brief Historical Overview¹

A 2014 study on the historical variations and improvement of world-wide life expectancy in modern times entitled *The Healthy Country?* has revealed that the New Zealand population could boast the lowest mortality in the world for roughly 70 years, from 1870 to 1940. In fact, this record was held by non-Māori citizens only.² In 1881 non-Māori life expectancy was 53 years for males and 56 years for women. In the period 1876-1940 it increased by 15 years. In 1881 life expectancy for Māori was 35 years less than non-Māori (18 years at birth). By 1946 the gap had closed to about 20 years (Woodward & Blakely 2014: 74). After 1940 non-Māori fell off the top of world rankings in life expectancy, although their longevity remained comparatively high. Māori mortality rate decreased slowly but steadily throughout the twentieth century. Today, according to the NZ Ministry of Health’s data, the life expectancy of a non-Māori male and female born between 2012 and 2014 is respectively 79.5 and 83.2 years. In the

¹ *Aotearoa* is the Māori name of New Zealand. It literally means ‘land of the long white cloud’.

² The correct way to write the word *Māori* is with a macron on the long vowel ‘a’. However, in the past this rule was not generally respected, so in the quotations of some texts it might appear without the macron.

Māori population it is 73 years for males and 77.1 years for females.³ If the present trend is maintained, the gap will be closed by 2040 (Woodward & Blakely 2014: 219).⁴

Measuring the average length of life may appear as a statistical construct that does not give a full account of population health and wellbeing. The first and most obvious objection to this point is that few would regard high mortality or short life expectancy as positive signs of a country's health. However, the authors of the research Woodward and Blakely, two New Zealand epidemiologists and public health doctors, demonstrate that their work does not only capture the mortality experience of a population over a certain period. Their collection of data from various sources and their comparison of different ethnic groups or nations at different times and in a specific economic, social and historical context provide us with information on the health and 'good life' of a country, with all its numerous variables. Life expectancy stands out therefore as a "sentinel measure of the social, political and environmental undercurrents in a society" (Woodward & Blakely 2014: 1).

The analysis of mortality rate and life expectancy in New Zealand between 1870 and 1940 is extremely interesting since it basically records what happened in the country after its formal annexation to the British Empire. It is difficult to determine precisely the number of Māori living in New Zealand when Cook arrived in 1769. Most sources estimate they were between 80,000 and 150,000 (Woodward & Blakely 2014: 54).⁵ In 1840 the British Crown and the chiefs of most (but not all) the Māori tribes signed the Treaty of Waitangi, the foundational document that officially sanctioned the Queen's sovereignty over New Zealand, extended "Her royal protection" to its indigenous population and "impart[ed] to them all the Rights and Privileges of British Subjects" (King 2004: 32).⁶ In 1830 there were around 300 Europeans living in New Zealand. In 1840 European settlers were about 2000 (King 2004, 36): Māori outnumbered them 50 to one. The Treaty prompted a huge flux of immigration from Britain and Ireland. By 1860 European settlers had reached parity with the Māori (Woodward & Blakely 2014: 52) or, according to another source, had surpassed them (King 2004: 40). The Māori population had already decreased in the period following Cook's arrival due to the spread of infectious diseases and increase in lethal warfare, especially in those areas of the country where there were greatest contacts with Europeans. Māori decline, however, accelerated after the Treaty: between 1840 and 1900, the period when statistics were first (although erratically) collected, the Māori population shrank by about two-thirds (Woodward & Blakely: 53-4). Beside the pernicious effects of the new pathogens spread by European immigrants (causing diseases such as tuberculosis, measles, typhoid fever, whooping cough and influenza), the Māori demise was determined by their impoverishment, displacement and dispossession, especially with reference to the loss of land by confiscation or sales. As the best parts of New Zealand land passed into the hands of the Europeans, villages were built in less desirable locations liable to flooding. There are many reports of crowded and poorly ventilated housing. Water was taken from shallow wells or from streams contaminated by sewage or other waste. Lack of money and loss of traditional knowledge also excluded them on one hand from the opportunities open to

³ See the site of the NZ Ministry of Health/Manatū Hauora, "Independent Life Expectancy in New Zealand 2013", p. 7, in <http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/independent-life-expectancy-new-zealand-2013-0>.

⁴ According to Woodward and Blakely, today the world record holders are Japanese women, who live 86 years on average (p. 228). Present-day longest-lived men are in Iceland (p. 263).

⁵ Only one of the sources mentioned in the book claims they were 500,000.

⁶ Quoted from the text of the Treaty by King.

Pākehā⁷ on the other from the shelter of their own culture. Alcohol, malnutrition and tobacco were also health-damaging: “Although Māori were attracted by the prospects of new resources, and took advantage of British mercantilism in many ways, the new economy undermined the collective core of traditional society” (Woodward & Blakely 2014: 67).

As to the non-Māori population, the reasons of their longevity include many factors: the so-called “healthy migrant effect”, that is, the medical/natural selection of migrants;⁸ a plentiful protein-rich diet; wealth of local natural resources; low crowding and lack of health-damaging industry; low level of pollution compared to the European cities; an egalitarian society based on equal distribution of resources and land among non-Māori; a simple and flexible political system that could guarantee reforms rapidly; early introduction of an effective public health system; and early initiatives to extend education and promote the position of women in society. New Zealand was, in fact, the first country in modern times to grant women’s suffrage with the Electoral Act of 1893 and to have the first woman mayor in the British Empire in the same year: Elizabeth Yates, elected mayor of Onehunga. Interestingly, an effect of women’s early emancipation was the reduction of fertility in the late 1800s,⁹ which led to both improvements in maternal health and lower child mortality, since more time and resources were available for each child. New Zealand was also one of the first countries to introduce primary education in 1877, which was free, compulsory and secular; and the first in the British Commonwealth to establish the principle of public responsibility for health services with the Social Security Act of 1938, ensuring free care for all based on an income-related social security levy (2014: 143). What emerges from the study of Woodward and Blakely is that a population’s life expectancy is affected by a multiplicity of factors: material and cultural, physiological and medical, political and socio-economic. European immigrants prospered because in New Zealand they found better material living conditions than at home and a more egalitarian society while, at the same time, they could maintain their own culture and economic system. New Zealand social structure was more flexible and less classist than the British one. Here European citizens were closer to the centres of power and were guaranteed more possibilities and rights, but this occurred to the detriment of indigenous people.

The decline of Māori was followed by a slow resurgence which started at the beginning of the twentieth century and was first of all due to the reduction in deaths from tuberculosis and other infections (except for the influenza epidemic of 1918, which was the most serious setback to their recovery). Other causes contributing to this upturn include a more effective involvement of Māori communities in public health interventions, which helped infant nutrition and other aspects of primary care, the expansion of primary education, and a drive to open up opportunities for women (for example through nurse training). Improvement in housing and

⁷ New Zealanders of European origin in New Zealand English. As for the word *Māori*, also *Pākehā* should be written with a macron on the long vowels ‘a’. However, in some quotations it appears without the macron, as in the past this rule was not generally respected.

⁸ Woodward and Blakely use the expression “healthy migrant effect” with reference to the selection of immigrants that took place prior to their departure from Europe: “Newspaper advertisements and posters in the UK in the 1870s called for married agricultural labourers and single female domestic servants, provided they were ‘sober, industrious, of good moral character, of sound mind and in good health’” (2014: 86). After the formal health checks that potential settlers had to pass, the long and arduous journey constituted another ‘natural selection’: the frailest ones generally died before the arrival in New Zealand.

⁹ Changes in expectations and public attitude towards women may have contributed to their delaying marriage and child-rearing. Generally, empowered and educated women tend to take greater control over reproduction. When women have their first baby at older ages, average family size is reduced. In smaller and more widely spaced families children receive more care, are better fed and have fewer accidents (2014: 100). All this had an effect in reducing mortality rate.

sanitation was effected by legislation such as the Native House Act of 1935. Another important factor was the activism of the so-called Young Māori Party in the first three decades of the twentieth century, in particular of James Carroll, Peter Buck, Āpirana Ngata and Māui Pōmare. These educated Māori politicians, “sophisticated in things Māori and Pākehā” alike (King 2004: 59), laid the foundation for a new style of Māori leadership, aimed at taking advantage of Western thinking and technology while at the same time promoting advances of Māori culture and identity.

As mentioned before, after 1940 non-Māori fell off the top of world rankings in life expectancy. Interestingly, the authors underline that “New Zealand’s role as a major exporter of meat and dairy products may have affected the country’s capacity to adopt new paradigms of healthy behaviour when the predominant causes of mortality changed from infectious diseases to chronic conditions such as heart disease and stroke” (2014: 143-44). So the post-Second-World-War trends in life expectancy depended heavily on what happened to cardiovascular disease and this, in turn, was influenced by economic policies determining consumers’ dietary habits. Cancer and the effects of tobacco smoking also had a great impact on mortality in New Zealand throughout the twentieth century, together with road traffic crash deaths.

Māori longevity, on the other hand, increased markedly after 1940 thanks to more and more inclusive policies such as the 1938 Social Security Act, vaccination and sanitation programmes, and the urbanisation of Māori, which led to better housing, access to social and health services, educational opportunities and higher incomes (2014: 175). The Young Māori Party in the 1920s and 1930s had promoted land development schemes and cultural revival programmes. They wanted to protect and reassert Māori in traditional territories located in rural areas. Their aim was to offer “an opportunity for Māori culture, identity and confidence to recover after the trauma of nineteenth-century European colonisation” (King 2004: 116). This was certainly the first step of a process that took some time to develop and achieved maturation only later. The Second World War prompted a relocation of Māori people from rural to urban areas as a consequence of the new manpower regulations, the activities risen from the war effort, and the labouring and manufacturing jobs that became available in essential industries. King believes that the real Māori revival, the so-called Māori Renaissance of 1970s-1980s, occurred as a result of urbanisation. Although the migration from rural area to towns and cities initially weakened the Māori language and traditional values (the importance of communal spirit and the extended family, the cult of the ancestors, the bond with and respect for nature), it was “a prerequisite for Māori once again to imprint their culture and values on the nation as a whole. Urbanisation eventually brought the possibility of Māori remaining Māori, and at the same time participating in mainstream New Zealand social, cultural and political life” (King 2004: 116). The Māori Renaissance was in fact political as well as cultural. Māori made their voice heard in marches, demonstration, petitions and occupations. In 1975 the government established the Waitangi Tribunal to deliberate and rule on alleged breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi. Its powers were further increased in 1985, when its decisions could be applied retroactively. In 1981 two Māori educational institutions were founded: pre-school language immersion classes and primary schools with a curriculum based on Māori language, culture and traditions. In 1987 Māori was recognised as an official language of New Zealand along with English. At the same time, the Māori Renaissance marked a flowering of Māori cultural and artistic expressions, and produced the first indigenous published writers (Della Valle 2010: 95-6).

At present the increased political and economic weight of Māori in New Zealand life and politics has led them to have a say in the promotion of health strategies and the management of medical care according to specific ethnic and cultural principles of wellbeing. District Health Boards (DHBs) have been established with the aim to improve the health of Māori and reduce health disparities for Māori compared to other population groups in New Zealand. Māori Health

Plans (MHPs) are fundamental planning, reporting and monitoring documents, which underpin the DHBs' efforts to improve Māori health.¹⁰ Official protocols have also been devised by the NZ Ministry of Health to develop constantly updated programmes, policies and interventions. In particular *He Korowai Oranga* (Māori Health Strategy) sets the overarching framework that guides the Government and the health and disability sector to achieve the best health outcomes for Māori. DHBs in particular should consider *He Korowai Oranga* in their planning, and in meeting their statutory objectives and functions for Māori health. The strategy was updated with input from across the sector during 2013/14 to ensure its relevance for the future. As explained in the Ministry's document, *pae ora* (healthy futures) is the Government's aim and reflects the specific notion of Māori wellbeing: "Pae ora is a holistic concept and includes three interconnected elements: mauri ora – healthy individuals; whānau ora – healthy families; and wai ora – healthy environments. All three elements of pae ora are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, and further strengthen the strategic direction for Māori health for the future" (Ministry of Health 2014: 4).¹¹ Interestingly, the document stresses the notion of Māori wellbeing as informed by a "holistic" approach, which sees individual, community and nature as interdependent and mutually collaborating to a healthy quality of life. The document acknowledges the crucial role of the family (intended as an extended community in Māori culture, including a large number of living relatives and the ancestors as well) for the individual's wellbeing claiming that:

Each whānau is different and has a unique set of aspirations. To achieve whānau ora, the health system will work in a way that acknowledges these aspirations and the central role that whānau [family] play for many Māori, as a principal source of strength, support, security and identity. (Ministry of Health 2014: 5)¹²

Environmental issues such as the safeguard of primary natural resources (water, air, forests) and the threat of climate change are also explicitly mentioned as a cultural priority for Māori and a responsibility for them as New Zealanders:

The concept of wai ora encapsulates the importance of the environments in which we live and that have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals, whānau [families] and communities. Wai ora literally refers to water, both as a resource and as an essential part of the environment that provides sustenance for life. The concept reflects the need for Māori to have access to resources and to live in environments that support and sustain a healthy life.

Achieving wai ora will mean that the environment in which Māori, and all New Zealanders, live, work and play is safe. Wai ora also focuses on ensuring Māori have appropriate access to quality housing, safe drinking water and air, and healthy food, and that we are prepared for emergency events – for example, pandemics and natural hazards such as earthquakes. Dealing with the impact of climate change on health is also a focus for the future. (Ministry of Health 2014: 6)¹³

In 2006, the Ministry of Health released *Taonga Tuku Iho – Treasures of Our Heritage: Rongoā Development Plan*. *Rongoā* means 'medicine, healing'. The aim of the plan was to formalise the Māori traditional system of healing within the New Zealand public health system

¹⁰ <http://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/populations/maori-health/dhb-maori-health-plans-profiles-and-health-needs-assessments>.

¹¹ See <http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/guide-he-korowai-oranga-maori-health-strategy>.

¹² See <http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/guide-he-korowai-oranga-maori-health-strategy>.

¹³ See <http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/guide-he-korowai-oranga-maori-health-strategy>.

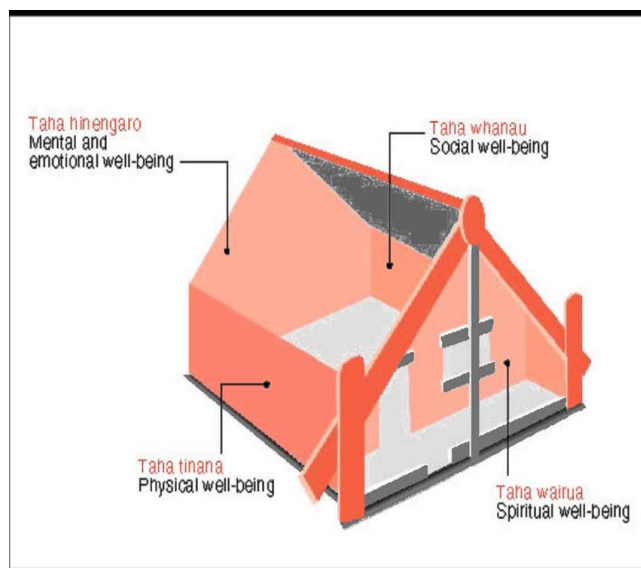
and provide a framework for strengthening the provision of quality medical services throughout New Zealand according to cultural/ethnic principles. As the document explains: “Rongoā Māori is formulated in a Māori cultural context in which the understanding of events and consequences leading to ill health are addressed through a range of culturally determined responses. These culturally bounded responses include *rakau rongoā* (native flora herbal preparations), *mirimiri* (massage), and *karakia* (prayer)” (Ministry of Health 2006: 2).¹⁴ Rongoā reflects a holistic approach to health and has a long story of usage and credibility among Māori despite the enactment of the Tohunga Suppression Bill in 1907, whose aim was to eradicate what was seen as “charlatanism in Māori folk medicine” at the time (King 2004: 67).

As I explored elsewhere (Della Valle 2013), also in psychiatry the prevailing idea is that among indigenous people cultural identity is a prerequisite for (mental) wellbeing. A major figure in this field is Māori psychiatrist Mason Durie, who has been working in public health since the late 1980s. He is the author of the concept of *Whare Tapu Whā* (the house of the four cornerstones or sides), which is his model of the Māori understanding of health, as shown in pictures 1 and 2. In his view there are four dimensions to health: *Taha Tinana* (physical wellbeing), *Taha Wairua* (spiritual wellbeing), *Taha Whānau* (family or social wellbeing) and *Taha Hinengaro* (mental and emotional wellbeing). Each of these four dimensions influences and supports the others. Should one of the four dimensions be missing or in some way be damaged, a person or a collective may become ‘unbalanced’ and subsequently unwell (Della Valle 2013: 137-8).



Picture 1

¹⁴ See <http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/taonga-tuku-iho-treasures-our-heritage-rongoa-development-plan>



Picture 2

Te Puāwaitanga: Māori Mental Health National Strategic Framework, an official protocol issued by the Ministry of Health in 2002, acknowledges Durie’s work as a guideline and claims that the project should reflect “Māori realities and Māori priorities”, promote initiatives “in an inclusive and integrated manner”, and implement “holistic models of care and wellbeing” (Ministry of Health 2002: 8). The subsequent document, *Te Puāwaiwhero: The Second Māori Mental Health and Addiction National Strategic Framework 2008–2015*, collects the gains of the previous protocol and further reinforces its view by underlining “the inextricable link between health and culture” and the centrality of healthy families for the mental wellbeing of Māori people. The framework also points to the socio-economic position as a determinant of mental health and underlines that “Māori are over-represented among those living in areas of highest deprivation relative to non-Māori. Māori therefore bear a disproportionate burden of risk for mental ill health due to socioeconomic disadvantage” (Ministry of Health 2008: 4). The solution is to be found with the development of responsive policies, plans and services, which recognise and accept a specific Māori cultural universe with different clinical and cultural needs: “Responding to the differences between Māori and other population groups is key to achieving at least equity in mental health for Māori by 2015” (Ministry of Health 2008: 17).

The conclusions we can draw from this overview is that health and wellbeing are deeply affected by power relations, socio-economic factors and governmental policies but they are also culturally embedded notions. In New Zealand history, colonisation transferred health-generating resources, such as land, from Māori to non-Māori: one group’s gain was at another’s expense. Europeans prospered in New Zealand by imposing their own culture and social organisation, as well as a system of capitalist liberal economy. The decline of Māori was due to the spread of new diseases but also to the disempowerment and deracination indigenous people underwent in their own country. This determined poor health among Māori and a gap in life expectancy between non-Māori and Māori, which has been slowly filled in the course of time through both harsh confrontation and intercultural dialogue, finally leading to political and economic changes. Interestingly, Europeans brought to New Zealand a system that first guaranteed their wellbeing as the healthiest country in the world, but the prospect of considerable gain caused them to lose the record. This happened after 1940, when the New Zealand government did not intervene to change the dietary habits of its citizens in order to protect its profile as primary producing and exporting country of dairies and frozen meat. As the logic of profit prevailed,

coronary heart disease and stroke affected mortality rate heavily.¹⁵ However, some chinks in the armour of New Zealand capitalist economy had already appeared in the decade before 1940 due to the consequences of the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the Depression, as recorded in several literary works. One can also suppose that this crisis may have affected the later loss of New Zealand's world record in longevity for non-Māori.

Literature is a mirror of reality and is increasingly used in historical research together with documentary essays. The first appearance of truly autochthonous literary works in New Zealand is quite recent: it dates back to the 1930s and was produced by non-Māori only. For Māori published authors we have to wait until the 1970s. Despite its short life, New Zealand literature has not failed to offer a realistic picture of a country torn between the specificity of its local problems and the inclusion in the wide global market and finance. The second part will illustrate the contradictions of New Zealand socio-economic system – a provincial antipodean version of Western capitalism – and explore different notions of wellbeing among its citizens, non-Māori and Māori, through a selection of authors and short stories.

2. Health, Wellbeing and Good Life in Some New Zealand Short Stories

The society built by European settlers in New Zealand guaranteed them prosperity and better conditions at first, especially if compared to what they had left back home. However, this antipodean country was also susceptible to the oscillations of a larger financial and economic system. The Depression of 1929 left a deep scar on a Dominion that had thrived on the privileged commercial bond with 'mother Britain' and was considered its 'grocer'. The economic crisis brought Britain to its knees. The consequence was that, for the first time, New Zealand was left out in the cold and saw the dark side of capitalism and liberal economy. This is recorded in the works of Roderick Finlayson (1904-1992) and Frank Sargeson (1903-1982), two well-known Pākehā authors who started publishing in the mid-1930s.

Both writers are quite critical of the capitalist turn of their country, which resulted in pervasive materialism and individualism as well as widespread social inequalities, not only between Māori and Pākehā (as it had previously occurred), but within the Pākehā majority itself at the time of crisis. Finlayson chose to write only about Māori in his first collection of short stories, *Brown Man's Burden* (1938), as he explains in its preface:

It may be asked why I have written almost solely of the Maori people in these stories of New Zealand life. [...] For, in spite of the destruction of Maori culture by the European, and the gradual invasion of Maori life by modern materialism, the *Maori still retains much of the poetic life of his forefathers*. By "poetic" one doesn't mean a sentimental enthusing about flowers and moonlight, but rather a life dependent on the forces and powers of Nature – a life governed by poetic justice (which in the end is God's justice) rather than by convention and mere formal justice [...].

There is no place in art for the artificial or the imitative. And for my part, I prefer to write of those, left almost landless by the European, who are still more *truly of the land* than we who have dispossessed them. (1938: i-ii, my emphases)

His choice is reinforced in a pamphlet, *Our Life in This Land* (1940), in which he launches a vocal attack on the spread of industrialism, consumer society and capitalism in New Zealand and around the world. In outlining the history of the country he points out its increasing decline

¹⁵ Woodward and Blakely note that the peak of the coronary heart disease epidemic in NZ was about 1970. Risk factors such as tobacco smoking, saturated fat and cholesterol also played a part (2014: 155-6).

due to the loss of that “salutary contact with nature” (1940: 4) that had been guaranteed by its isolation during the pioneering period and before its entry into a capitalist economy and a global market. Finlayson never mentions the word ‘globalisation’ but he somehow predicts a homogenised world dominated by the same economic logic and devoid of cultural individuality. He stigmatises mass production, intensive agriculture and the mechanisation of humankind, and denounces the system’s encouragement of ruthless competition instead of cooperation, its making culture a mere distraction and leisure a pure emptiness of body and mind. Finlayson questions a notion of progress and civilisation grounded on material achievements, efficiency and the possession of technological items. He envisages mass migrations and wars as a consequence of the unfair distribution of wealth in the world and also the advent of a world environmental crisis. His words may seem dogmatic and polemic, as he himself admits in the preface, but he actually foresaw many issues of the present.

Finlayson’s foreword to his first collection is a celebration of the core principles underlying Māori culture, which have been lost in Western materialist societies and which he thinks necessary to human wellbeing. In particular, the attachment to one’s family or community of origin, the importance attributed to conviviality and human relationships, the acknowledgement of people’s spiritual and emotional life, and an attitude towards the environment which is not merely dictated by economic profit but is grounded in the idea that humans are a part of nature not its masters. His stories do not fall into easy sentimentalism, but offer a realistic representation of the rural Māori of his time that becomes more sombre in his next work *Sweet Beulah Land* (1942), dealing with urbanised Māori. Readers can see the effects of colonisation and capitalist economy on indigenous people. As Lydia Wevers has noticed, Finlayson doesn’t depict Māori as stereotypes or as less complex than the Pākehā. Though they are “comic, tragic, cheerful, drunken, dying, polluted, and corrupted, characterised by the muddled ambiguities of a colonized existence, the stories affirm a culture whose loss brings deprivation and caricature and absence to those Maori who reject or forget it” (Wevers 1991: 236). A typical example are the two stories dealing with Tamarua and his son Peta, who represent two opposite views of life. In “On Top of the Hill”, the old man is content with his little shack located in the healthy place of the title, blessed by sunshine and fresh air, looking “out over the coastal flax swamps on the one hand and over the rich farmlands of Otane on the other” (Finlayson 1938: 16). Tamarua followed the advice of his father, the chief, who told him “never to live down on the flat” (16). At that time, however, Māori still owned their land, cultivated wheat, corn and root crops, and “nobody hungry, nobody poor then [*sic*]” (17). Now many landless Māori work and live in the swamps: relief workers and flax-cutters, making good money but also ending up “coughing their lungs away” (16). Finlayson’s story signals the passage of the best land from Māori to Pākehā and the unfortunate Māori destiny to live and work in unhealthy environments, with the consequent spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and whooping cough, as mentioned in Blakely and Woodward’s study. So, when Peta comes back from the city and tells his father he is going to work as a flax-cutter, Tamarua is very upset. He regrets having encouraged his son to get an education and look for better job opportunities. Peta tried and failed to make it in the Pākehā urban world. Now he is frustrated and angry. He denounces a system that exploits human and non-human resources to the last drop, does not provide a fair distribution of wealth and guarantees success only to very few: “It was the meanness and shabbiness of the Pakeha, Peta said. He couldn’t stand it any more. They try to squeeze the last drop of life out of man, beast or earth – those town people. He worked hard and saved money, and what thanks did he get for it, eh? Pah! To hell with hard work!” (17-18). Having been hybridised and become ‘un-Māorilike’, he cannot stay on his father’s land either, as advised by Tamarua, but decides to join the Māori labourers in the swamps. Peta’s and Tamarua’s different reactions exemplify a generation gap and the hybrid condition of Māori

youth, excluded from success in the new system but attracted by the apparent material wellbeing that this seems to offer:

But Peta said no, he could never settle down to a simple life again. He was going down to his gay friends in the village. He must have a life with a bit of speed and pep in it. "You see" he told Tamarua, "I've found out just how rotten the Pakeha civilisation is. They don't pretend to follow the virtues they preach to the Maori. Religion, government, business – it's all the same – get what you can out of it and to hell with the rest. They taught me that anyway so I'm going to live that way for a change. The man who enjoys the fat of the land is the one who hasn't had to shed a drop of sweat or save a single penny in his life. The others go cold and hungry."

Tamarua couldn't believe it was as bad as that. His forefathers knew neither poverty nor disease. They lived in this fertile land and wanted for nothing. (18-19)

Like many deracinated young Māori, away from the watchful eye of the community and devoid of strong cultural models, Peta has become addicted to a lifestyle that induces everybody to earn more and more in order to become great consumers but doesn't give everybody the same chances of success. He ends up taking the wrong path: he joins a gang and is arrested. In "New Year" Peta is sent to prison for using an iron bar to hit a rival who was harassing his sister. Peta boasts about his deed before the judge, openly challenging Pākehā authority: "He stuck to his story of how'd done it on purpose, as if he was proud of acting like a young Maori blood instead of a law-abiding Pakeha" (27). By doing so, he is sentenced to three years' hard labour and subsequently perishes in prison from tuberculosis.

In his last collection *In Georgina's Shady Garden*, published in 1988 but including stories written over a span of 40 years, Finlayson also shows the effects of Western materialism on non-Māori. He deploys a gallery of Pākehā characters who are one way or another, professionally or existentially frustrated, imaginatively inhibited and sexually repressed. They appear perceptively numbed, unable to solve their tensions and inexorably destined to disaster or failure. Those who are trapped in the cult of respectability and materialism act as persecutory agents of the unconventional or imaginative ones, enforcing an inquisitorial control on their morality. Human relationships become struggles for supremacy and are characterised by diffidence or distrust, due to miscommunication, enclosure or rigidity, or lack of perception. Marriage is the tomb of love and imagination in "A Nice Little Nest of Eggs" (1947) and "The Girl at the Golden Gate" (1948), where dull asexual wives act as strict normative agents leading their repressed husbands to seek affection elsewhere, only to be fooled by those women. The optician's assistant of "You Little Witch" (1978), who has renounced an emotional relationship and passively accepts a dreary life with his twin sister, escapes into a world of dreams and loses touch with reality. The only imaginative act he can make is misinterpreted and punished. In "Flowers and Fruit" (1982) the hypochondriac Weston, indulged by a mother-like elderly wife, vents his frustration on the inhabitants and flowers of the island where he has been appointed fruit inspector, projecting his destructive instincts on them. Finlayson seems to suggest that the material wellbeing and fulfilment provided in the Pākehā world have a price to be paid in terms of people's emotional, imaginative and instinctual life.

Sargeson was amply celebrated as the founding father of New Zealand national literature for his faithful rendition of the local idiom as well as his remarkable social fresco. He offers another bleak view of New Zealand society in the aftermath of the economic crisis of the 1930s. His work has been seen as an exemplary model of realist and socially committed literature, and deals mainly with the dominant Pākehā majority made of few soulless rich and a great number of destitute workers. Most of Sargeson's characters are itinerant labourers or job-hunters, often unemployed, seldom married and frequently without any apparent family connection. They are depicted either in their lonely condition of seasonal workers, in isolated farms or the bush, or

against the desolate background of cities inhabited by materialist and unimaginative bourgeois, like the narrator's uncle in "Conversation with My Uncle" (1935).¹⁶ Sargeson dismantled the pioneers' faith in the 'New Zealand Dream', showing the immanent void of a puritanical bourgeois society, built on imported values that have lost their roots and deepest sense. As James K. Baxter noticed, the country described by Sargeson is one where "the prevalent philosophy is an amalgam of liberalism and broken-down Protestantism. Ethics remain with us though faith has departed" (Baxter 1954: 8). In this dislocated world of spiritual aridity, too narrow and too empty at the same time, economic success is reached only by few and only at the expense of their emotional and imaginative life. Man's primary affective needs are underestimated or neglected, and sacrificed to the principles of respectability and economic fulfilment. Families or couples, far from being foundational elements of the society, appear as broken structures, unable to offer any warmth or protection, as epitomised by the dull parenthood of "A Good Boy" (1936).

The above-mentioned stories depict the public and private side of a typical middle-class man. The uncle epitomises the pragmatism, cold rationality and emotional frigidity of the successful businessman who "wears a hard knocker", doesn't show interest in "what you've got to say any more than it interests him to look into people's faces in the street", "loves the sound of his own voice", "never reads books", "never went to picnics" and finally "can't suppose". The narrator's concluding remark leaves no doubts on Sargeson's critical view: "Oh Lord! It's a good job everybody isn't like my uncle. We don't want a world full of dead men walking about in hard knockers" (Sargeson 1973: 9-10). The father in "A Good Boy" seems trapped in a monotonous family life devoid of affection or excitement:

I was always real sorry for mother and father. They didn't seem to have any pleasure in life. Father never went out after he'd come home from work. He just sat and read the paper. His stomach was bad too, and made noises, and he kept on saying, Pardon. It used to get on my nerves. I used to watch him and mother when I was supposed to be doing my homework. Sometimes the look on my mother's face gave me the idea that she wasn't properly happy and was wanting pleasure just the same as I was. (Sargeson 1973: 26)

The boy's description of his parents as "good people" who wanted to make a "good boy" out of him contrasts with the result of their repressive education: the boy ends up killing his girlfriend. Post-Depression society is marked by inequality. If the ruling middle class can still manage a dignified lifestyle, people from lower classes struggle to make a living. In "A Piece of Yellow Soap" (1935) the narrator is a milkman, who never succeeds in collecting the money owed to his firm by one customer: the woman with the yellow soap. The sight of her "fingers just out of the washtub", always "bloodless and shrunken" (Sargeson 1973: 12) and holding tightly the piece of soap, paralyses the man and deprives him of all his power. The soap, evoking fatigue and poverty, becomes her talisman and defence against creditors of an unjust justice. In "An Attempt at an Explanation" (1937) a hard-working single mother cannot afford to buy her son some food. After trying unsuccessfully to pawn the family Bible, mother and son sit on a park bench alone and miserable, and watch the minister of their Methodist Church passing by, strolling and admiring flowers. "They Gave Her a Rise" (1936) mixes the struggle for survival together with a further bleak view of a Pākehā family. Here, Mrs Bowman puts the

¹⁶ The year in brackets of the short stories refers to their first publication, generally in newspapers or magazines. All the stories cited are included in the collection *The Stories of Frank Sargeson*, Longman Paul, Auckland 1973 [1964].

logic of profit before her daughter's personal safety by pushing the latter back to work in an ammunition factory after the explosion that has killed two of her friends.

The idea expressed by Finlayson in his preface that, unlike Māori, Pākehā New Zealanders are no more "truly of the land" and have lost the "poetic" quality of life is also formulated by Sargeson. In "Gods Live in Woods" (1943) he juxtaposes a taciturn farmer, Uncle Henry, and his verbose young nephew Roy, who is visiting him. Henry lives alone on his farm, which he has broken in from the heavy bush country. He epitomises the pioneering spirit of the white settler who tamed the bush to build his personal New Zealand Dream. Yet, he seems to question it too. The experiential knowledge he obtained by living in close contact with nature taught him to respect the environment. He looks knowingly at the slips that scar the soil he has cleared from the bush and mentions a flood that carried away the fence the winter before. Roy tells his uncle he has just joined a "Rationalist" group and turned his back on religion or any sort of spiritual approach to reality. His theoretical approach to nature makes him consider it as mere matter to be exploited. Consequently, he is surprised at hearing that Henry will not go on cutting out the bush, despite the profit he could get from it. Landslides, one consequence of deforestation, are recurrent images in Sargeson's fiction, symbolising the blindness of the Western notion of development as well as spiritual/moral blindness.¹⁷ Henry's attitude epitomises the notion of agriculture as culture and knowledge as experiential knowledge (an approach very similar to the indigenous one). At the end of the story Roy gets lost in the bush. When he comes back late at night, scared and bleeding, his clothes filthy and torn, he has experienced the bush as a natural and spiritual force, and to exorcise his fears he takes refuge in his rationalist approach – his new religion – and claims that all bush should be got rid of. But Henry knows better than that. "Just Trespassing Thanks" (1964) features an old suburban recluse, Edward Corrie, who prefers to remain indoors immersed in his poetry to avoid seeing what "many abstract forces" together with bulldozers and builders, have done around his "ancient two-room cottage" (Sargeson 1973, 272). Interestingly, Sargeson uses the term "abstract" to indicate man's stultifying, rational detachment from practical knowledge and the adjective "ancient" to endow his cottage with a dignity from the past. Edward's senses are so offended by the sight of tarmac and cement and by the fumes coming from the nearby motorway that he seldom goes out and always wears dark sunglasses. Edward's dismay is conveyed in the following lines:

While he was putting his feet up he glanced out the window, where the countryside had been replaced by cement and tarmac: *wilderness* was perhaps the appropriate name for what had once been woodland – and hardly the right kind of breeding-ground for a race of deities. (274, my emphasis)

While denouncing the uncontrolled development enforced by Pākehā society in the name of progress, Sargeson seems to connect it with the loss of a spiritual connection with nature, evidenced by Edward's definition of the urbanised area as "wilderness" unsuitable to gods. The trespassers, however, are not only the cement and tarmac invading Edward's house, but also a group of young people wanted by the police – two Pākehā and one of Polynesian origin – who are using his house as a temporary shelter. A subtle link is activated between the man and the three fugitives as they are poets. Poetry becomes the means to open channels of communication between different generations and races, to recreate a communal space or "a country of the imagination" (Sargeson 1973: 282) alternative to the dominating rationalist and economic logic,

¹⁷ In Sargeson's novel *I Saw in My Dream* (1949) a couple of Pākehā farmers, the Macgregors, are buried under a landslide, which seems to epitomise the ultimate blindness of people who had proved backward, puritanical and racially prejudiced throughout the novel.

where “deities” can be repaid “by token money” (283). Imagination is seen therefore not only as a refuge but also as a subversive weapon, embodied by the young poets on the run from the law who defy the system.

Noel Hilliard (1929-97) seems to draw on both Finlayson and Sargeson. He delved into contemporary Māori life and issues in a way unprecedented in New Zealand literature, with the exception of Finlayson. Both Hilliard and Finlayson anticipated many of the themes later treated in fictions by Māori writers. Hilliard, however, was the first New Zealand writer to openly deal with the theme of race relations at a time when the urbanization of Māori had led the two cultures in close contact. He also continued Sargeson’s socially committed realist tradition, although his choice of topics and characters was more radical and includes ‘unseemly’ categories such as prostitutes (“Girl on a Corner”, “Anita’s Eyes”, “At Angelo’s” and “Send Somebody Nice”), hippies (“The Dropout”), gays and lesbians (“The Telegram” and “Corrective Trainings”), and displaced young delinquents (“Absconder” and “The Girl from Kao”).¹⁸

Hilliard describes the contradictions of a society that has imposed a model of fake wellbeing, based on material achievement, and has produced large inequalities among its members. The dominant attitude is one of closure towards any issue that does not conform to a logic of profit and cannot be analysed within a rational framework. Against this background, the Māori are the most disadvantaged category. Hilliard was particularly interested in contrasting Western and indigenous worldviews, which is the subject matter of his novel *The Glory and the Dream* (1978), dealing with the interracial marriage between Paul and Netta. The book succeeds in exposing culturally relevant differences that emerge subsequently in Māori literature too, in particular notions of time, money and ownership, family and communality, education, rationality and imagination, spirituality, progress and wellbeing. These contrasts can also be found in some short stories; for example, “Man on a Road”, from the collection *A Piece of Land* (1963). A travelling couple stops the car to see the view of a beautiful bay from the top of a hill. When a Māori farmer passes by, they ask him information about the fish and seafood available in the bay. The man’s account illustrates the effects of the Western notion of ‘progress’ on the area and exemplifies many other cases in New Zealand, where mass tourism and intensive fishing have caused pollution, consumption of the land and depletion of seabed resources. This happened when coastal land, traditionally belonging to Māori tribes, passed into the hands of private Pākehā investors and drift-net fishing started. Land and beach were divided into sections to favour touristic development. Camping-grounds, bungalows and baches¹⁹ rose everywhere. Hordes of people came to practice fishing as a ‘sport’. Some lots got a private beach and private access to the sea, too, an idea completely alien to Māori thinking, as claimed in the following dialogue between the Māori man and the narrator:

He pointed to a tangle of wire-netting on the beach. “See that? He’s got his own private beach down there now. Nobody else’s, just his. Think of that. His own private beach. I used to spend half my summers down there on that piece of sand when I was a kid, and my boys did the same.”
 “Yes” I said, “I suppose he wishes he could buy his own private sunset, too.” (Hilliard 1977: 56)

In traditional Māori culture private property should not be applied to the land in the same way as it can’t be applied to water or air. A further comment of the Māori man on the useless

¹⁸ All of them are from the collection *Send Somebody Nice* (1976).

¹⁹ In New Zealand English a “bach” is a beach house or holiday home, made of wood and very often modest.

decimation of fish in the bay expresses a different sensibility towards the environment between Māori and Pākehā:

“The beach down there” – pointing to a furlong of sand between two tidal creeks – “used to be thick with flounder years ago. They started selling sections, put big advertisements in the city papers. People came in and built, they brought nets with them, they’d take hundreds at one sweep. Now the flounders’ve gone away, they’ve cleared them out. You can go out night after night and never see a one [*sic*]. I had to give it up. Too much like hard work, out half the night to get one or two if you’re lucky. No, I’d never use a net. I only take what I need. Now, what did they do with those hundreds and hundreds they netted?” He peered at me intently with his deep-set eyes. “Well, they couldn’t eat them all, so they just threw them away. The beach used to stink with the heaps of them. Flies... you never saw so many flies. I’ve seen them take flounder here by the hundred and count them and then dump them on the beach to go rotten – still alive – never even had the sense to throw them back. No they didn’t want flounder. All they wanted was to go back to the city and say to all their friends, We caught so-many hundred flounder at the weekend. That’s all they wanted. Not the fish.” (Hilliard 1977: 56)

The total disregard for other species, the yearning for accumulation just for accumulation’s sake, and the blindness to the consequences of such a behaviour for future generations imply an approach to the natural world in terms of absolute domination, which contrasts with the idea of being in harmony with the environment at the basis of the Māori notion of wellbeing.

Another important point made in the story is the destruction of any other economic model by the all-pervasive capitalist development. The Māori man tells how his family once owned most of the land around the bay but had to sell it in times of need. He still has his own farm, some paddocks and the beachfront, which is constantly under assault from new investors. Some of his land was also confiscated by the council to allow access to the sea to neighbouring tourist activities. He laments that it is very hard to manage the farm alone in terms of costs and work, after his sons have moved out. The man is afraid he might have to sell it one day in the future. In fact, subsistence economy requires a large community, where every member plays a different role, but capitalism has broken traditional extended families. Young generations are attracted by the city and end up joining the flood of low-paid employed workers.

“The Girl from Kaeo”, dealing with juvenile delinquency, offers another image of the blight resulting from the disruption of extended families, traditional economic structures and, indirectly, a specific cultural framework. The point of view is that of a seventeen-year-old girl fallen prey to a gang in which free sex is practiced and even forced on girl members. Interestingly, her stream of consciousness, reported in italics, is framed within the bureaucratic language of the social service officer who is examining her case, as in the following excerpt:

Take this one now. Typical. When she was picked up she was wearing a man’s shirt and jeans and no shoes, and she had bad teeth and crab-lice and sticking-plaster on a cut in her cheek. Look at her hair and fingernails. Note the tattoos on arms and hands and fingers and knees. [...] this man he said to me Where you from? and I said Kaeo and he said That’s nice Im [*sic*] from Kaeo too, whereabouts [*sic*] in Kaeo? But I said nothing [...] and when I said nothing he looked at me in a way to show he thought I was telling a lies [*sic*] about where I come from so I said to him All I remember about Kaeo is there was fifteen of us and we all slept on the floor and I never saw my fathers [*sic*] face because I was always looking at his boots
Look into her living conditions. Was he living at home, or boarding, or sleeping around? Would you say her living conditions were very high? High? Average? Poor? Very bad?
If she was not living at home, look into her relationships with her kinsfolk in general and scale them as Very Good / Good / Average / Poor / Very Bad. (Hilliard 1977: 93)

This narrative device shows (also graphically) contrasting approaches to notions of good life and wellbeing. In the girl's words, the reader faces the excruciating results of growing in poverty, without material certainties and emotional references. On the other hand the man's report is just a cold, rational, and quantitative evaluation, as if he was conducting a survey, and does not take into account the cultural and emotional framework of the subject in question. Another quotation will illustrate the two diverging viewpoints:

Establish what her attitudes are towards authority in general and particularly towards the police, the probation service, welfare, and institution officers. Classify under Very Good / Good / Reasonable / Poor/ Antagonistic.

and we use [sic] to get our water from the bush, the creek in the bush, but a slip came down and spoilt the place where we use to go and so after we had to get it from the side creek where is all the wiwi²⁰ and was all right too but not so good the bush water [sic]. And my mother she use to say the side creek water was not so good the bush water, that bush water it was beautiful water. Lovely water

and in the city I use to think of my mother and my eyes they would prickle when I thought of the bush water and how my mother said it was beautiful water, lovely water

and how many in the city that all think theyre [sic] so smart, how many of them [sic] know about bush water or even there are different kinds of water and it doesnt [sic] just only come from out the tap? [...]

Form an opinion on her manner and ease of communication. Would you say she was very easy to get along with? Would you describe her as moderately open? Is she suspicious and evasive? Does she lie even when she can have no doubt the truth is already known? (Hilliard 1977: 94)

The above-mentioned passages, with their references to the importance of family bonds and a salubrious environment in achieving wellbeing, elucidate what has been previously mentioned about a culturally determined notion of good life. In this specific context, the disintegration of kinship communities and the loss of a healthy environment bring about only degradation and misery. For Māori, *pae ora* (healthy future) is a holistic concept including healthy individuals, as parts of healthy families and healthy environments. The material/physical, emotional/affective and environmental/external aspects are mutually interdependent and collaborate to one's health and wellbeing. The girl's practice of group free sex appears as a desperate search of love, warmth, and an absurd surrogate for a 'family':

and it was loving and it was always too hard and much too often but always good and warm and loving and it was having a lot of real and touching people close to you and yes Johnny any time Johnny please Johnny too again please yes and how often you want me Johnny how often you like Johnny you so good to me Johnny please too sleepy no not and you must and if you want yes and never stop and not them Johnny no just only you Johnny please just only us please Johnny just only us this time please Johnny PLEASE (Hilliard 1977: 94-5)

What Sargeson, Finlayson and Hilliard have in common is the conviction that capitalist economy and its value system not only have irreversibly upset the indigenous cultural world but have promoted a fake model of wellbeing, based on material and monetary wealth, which has enslaved Pākehā as well. The great quantity of frustrated and unhappy Pākehā characters portrayed in literature together with the numerous images of misery and degradation of Māori are a signal of a general lack of real wellbeing. The Māori Renaissance of the 1970s (together

²⁰ The name for several species of native plant found on moist lands, in coastal marsh, and salty sand-flats.

with the increasing influence of Māori in New Zealand life and politics) served as a useful reminder of other possible notions of wealth, health and wellbeing for all New Zealanders.

Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace were the first published Māori writers in their respective gender. They both went through a ‘pastoral’ phase in the 1970s, characterised by the retrieval of Māori culture and identity, and then through a more militant one in the 1980s-1990s, marked by the denunciation of the destitute condition of their people in New Zealand society and the struggle for self-determination. As we mentioned before, some of their issues and topics had been anticipated by Finlayson and Hilliard. In more recent times Ihimaera’s and Grace’s works seem to have developed a wider perspective and overcome the horizons of New Zealand bicultural dualism: they look to problems relevant to the world (like environmental issues) and affirm values that are universally applicable. The collection *Ihimaera: His Best Stories* (2003) mixes old stories (sometimes with slight changes) of significance for the present and brand new ones. “The Seahorse and the Reef” (first published in 1977 and reprinted in the 2003 collection) is a good example. It conveys an idea of wellbeing grounded in the fundamental values of Māori culture: the centrality of the extended family, the importance of a convivial life, of sharing and reciprocity, the attachment to the ancestral land for one’s balance and identity, and the respect of the environment. The story is set at a time when Māori were mostly urbanised and describes the Sundays spent by the narrator’s family at the reef just outside the town where they lived. That was an important communal moment after the “diaspora” to the cities, “a good time for being family again and for enjoying our tribal ways” (Ihimaera 2003: 19). Women chatted happily while looking for seafood, men dived into the water to catch fish, children played together in the pools watching the plants and animals of the sea. The title refers to a specific episode, when the children found a seahorse but their father told them to “leave it here in its own home for the sea gives it life and beauty” (Ihimaera 2003: 20). These communal days also implied didactic moments, when adults taught children to respect the sea and treat the creatures living in it with reverence:

“Kids, you must take from the sea only the kai [food] you need and only the amount you need to please your bellies. If you take more, then it is waste. [...] The sea is good to us, it gives us kai moana [seafood] to eat. It is a food basket. As long as we respect it, it will continue to feed us. If, in your search for shellfish, you lift a stone from its lap, return the stone to where it was. Try not to break pieces of the reef for it is the home of many kai moana. And do not leave litter behind you when you leave the sea.” (Ihimaera 2003: 20)

This timeless convivial experience is good both for the human spirit – insofar as it implies socialising and being in contact with natural beauty – and for the earth itself, because “with sharing there was little waste” (Ihimaera 2003: 20). However it is abruptly terminated one day, when they find a sign forbidding seafood gathering due to the pollution of the bay. The image of a yellow liquid curling like fingers around the reef recalls the compression of the neck by a hand, which is what is happening: the suffocation of natural life and healthy traditions. The story finishes with an old woman crying out a *tangi* (funeral) lament to the sea.

Environmental issues are a priority in Māori culture and in the collection. Nuclear threat is explored in “Wiwi” (2003 [1995]) through a reversal of perspective: New Zealand is conducting nuclear tests in the remote Île de la Cité, Paris, raising the disconcerted protest of French “natives” and governments of nearby “atolls” including Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Monaco, Italy, Portugal and Spain (156-7). “Dustbins” (2003[1995]) warns the reader about the consequences of consumerism and undifferentiated waste in the paradoxical final episode of the

unwanted baby thrown away into the rubbish-bin as any other useless object.²¹ In “Someone Is Looking at Me” (2003) environmental, ethical and cultural issues are intertwined, showing paradoxical solutions to the problems of the present in an appalling Fourth Millennium. Unsustainable development and demographic growth have been handled by exploring space and colonising new worlds, which provide resources for “World 1”. “Wise rulers”, called “patriarchs”, have preserved humankind by establishing a new world order based on the notion that all people are equal. Thanks to the progress of genetic engineering, they have managed to create only two types of men: rulers and workers. Workers have replaced computers. Nationalisms and biblical enmities have been replaced by ghastly homogeneity. The story tells of a woman who is sent with other workers to colonise “World 16” and develops an intense attachment to her last son, contravening her role as a simple “breeder” of workers. She hides her son for a year and breastfeeds him until she is discovered by the authorities, who take the child away following the protocol. However, the bond between mother and son cannot be erased and the son will recognise his mother’s gaze in a crowd by telepathy, once he has become an important personality thanks to his special power. The story, a mix of fairy tale and science fiction, warns us about the dangers of a hyper-scientific global society and affirms the importance of individuality, diversity, family ties and emotional bonds. As the narrator paradoxically underlines: “It is a true story and it will happen soon” (Ihimaera 2003: 194).

Similar issues are at the centre of Grace’s collection *Small Holes in the Silence* (2004). Consumerism is delicately made fun of in “Curly Top and Ponytail”, where the narrating woman offers to entertain two six-year-old girls while their mother is buying her umpteenth pair of shoes in a shop. The short conversation between the narrator and the two children reveals the anxieties of the youngsters’ brief existence in a tragi-comical way: what it means being step-sisters in a modern enlarged family of divorced and re-married parents, having two step-mothers, two houses, and two bedrooms but so little attention from adults. The story ends up with Curly Top pushing her shopaholic mother out of the store, to avoid the umpteenth quarrel at home with her dad about unnecessary shoes. An opposite attitude pervades “Busy Lines”, where the protagonist calmly faces the ‘death’ of all her domestic appliances one by one, filling the ‘void’ they leave with new habits, new perceptions, new tastes and sounds. When the broom took the place of the broken vacuum cleaner, she discovered that “A broom was light and easy. It had no roar. It was a dancing partner with a gentle voice taking her from room to room” (Grace 2004: 8). Then the heater stopped working and she started using the fireplace. So she had to go to the beach every day to collect firewood: “It took time finding the right-sized pieces, but each selection gave satisfaction – which is something she explained to the wind, holding each piece up for it to see” (Grace 2004: 9). Then it was the toaster’s turn to die and she began making toasts on a wire rack over the stove, which rewarded her “with richer taste and flavour” (Grace 2004: 10). Working by subtraction, the woman gradually eliminates objects and habits which were apparently indispensable to find what is really essential to her: the sounds and colour of the natural world, the richness of silence, the fullness of her thoughts. “Love Story” is about the importance of belonging and knowing one’s origin. It tells the story of a 19-year-old orphan boy who falls in love with a statue, a central carved pole of the meeting house, who then turns out to be the representation of one of his ancestors. As a visiting Māori elder and genealogist says to him and other deracinated young people: “You gotta know your stories”. This seems an essential requisite for one’s wellbeing and realisation. Finally, Grace devotes herself to one of her favourite topics: the diverse, mentally ill or “sky-people”. Grace uses this

²¹ “The Seahorse and the Reef”, “Wiwi” and “Dustbins” first appeared respectively in the collections *The New Net Goes Fishing* (1977), *Below the Surface* (1995) and *Kingfisher Come Home* (1995).

term to define all those who are “connected to the sky in their mind”, that is, “other” or unconventional. They include outcasts and people with psychiatric disorders, who are the protagonists of her story “The Sky People” from the 1994 collection bearing the same title. In *Small Holes in the Silence*, the most memorable “Sky Person” is the eponymous hero of “Eben”, the well-known crooked busker whose colourful performances passers-by could see at the Saturday market in the city of Parutai. Abandoned by his mother for his deformity, he was raised in an orphanage. The only straight part of him was his smile, which had no bend in it, like a “letterbox gap in across the lower part of his face” (Grace 2004: 39). An extraordinary attachment develops between Eben and Pani, a woman raised in the same orphanage. She knows well “what it was like to be left, not chosen, time after time and year after year, when people came to collect or adopt or foster a child” (46) and thinks Eben is a gift from heaven for her. She acts like a mother to him, even arranging the payments for Eben’s solemn funeral in case she died first, which is what happens. In the coffin, Eben’s body is straight for the first time, straightened by the morticians, while his lips are curved as in a smile. This story of loneliness and solidarity, of reciprocity between marginalised individuals, who are invisible to most people but precious for each other, sets a scale of priorities about the sense and scope of humanity.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries New Zealand was the healthiest country in the world for seventy years, but only for non-Māori people. Its entrance into global capitalist economy made it susceptible to all the privileges and drawbacks of the Western world in terms of health and wellbeing. As literature has recorded, Western social and economic models seem to have lost important values that are priorities for human wellbeing. Conversely, the condition of Māori has greatly improved in the course of time thanks to the retrieval and consolidation of their own traditions, culture and identity. While doing this they have also highlighted economic, social, psychological and environmental issues that should deserve the attention of all New Zealanders and of the West in general. Like most indigenous people they have shown us “an image of a future by which we can escape our present” and reminded us that “if a culture does not become like us, it may not be a failure but a gift to what is now an uncertain future”, to use the words of American environmentalist Paul Hawken (Hawken 2008: 99). It is about time to reconsider notions of health, good life and wellbeing in the Western world.

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