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Fleur Adcock, *Glass Wings* (Taset: Bloodaxe, 2013); Rod Edmond, *Migrations: Journeys in Time and Place* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2013)

**Address at book-launch hosted by the New Zealand Studies Network,
Keynes Room, 43 Gordon Square, Birkbeck, University of London: 28th
June 2013.**

Janet Wilson, Vice-Chair, NZSN.

Fleur Adcock needs little introduction tonight. She came to the UK permanently from New Zealand in 1963 and is now one of this nation's best loved and best known poets. She is well known in New Zealand although she is more often seen as a British poet whose work can be aligned with different movements and fashions in British poetry. But she has also written over the years about her ongoing relation with the country she left. In fact she may well come to be seen as one of New Zealand's great poets of expatriation, as she has returned frequently on visits since the mid 1970s conscious of the need to keep in touch with family and friends. Along with other preoccupations that recur in her verse -- discovering new places and parts of the world in the 1970s, politics (the woman's movement and Thatcherism) in the 1980s, trans-hemisphere travel in the 1990s -- she has defined and developed the terms of her reconciliation with the country which as a young woman she left, rather like Katherine Mansfield did, in a spirit of rebellion, committed to the wider intellectual, cultural horizons of Europe.

Glass Wings, Adcock's 13th collection, develops themes and ideas in her earlier books, particularly her previous one, *Dragon Talk*, published in 2010 (her early childhood in New Zealand, the war years spent with her family in Britain, her teenage years in Wellington after the family returned there); in *Glass Wings* is a mix of New Zealand-based poems alongside many that are strongly English. There are tributes to fellow poets like Michael Longley, Roy Fisher and Basil Bunting; poems that speculate about age and growing old: for example, realising that she is now older than her grandfather was when he died, the case of a friend with dementia; a poem titled in 'nominal aphasia' about the search for that elusive missing word, the problems of deteriorating eyesight, and a surprise tribute to the infamous Dr Shipman in a poem called ominously 'Charon.'

Like Edmond, Adcock has developed over the years a serious engagement with her British ancestors. In *Glass Wings* her observations about old age are matched by poems about bequests: who we leave our worldly belongings to. The section called 'Testators' is about how people --mostly Adcock's ancestors (with names like Alice Adcock, Henry Eggington, Robert Tighe)-- have shaped their legacies in family wills, some of them dating back to the mid 16th century (all the result of serious research in parish registers and public record offices). Another legacy, this one driven by personal memory, appears in the sequence of poems that begin with an elegy to the New Zealand poet, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, Fleur's husband, and father of her two sons who died in 2009. These take us back to New Zealand in the 1950s when they first met, recalling their early life together.

Finally, and not least, the title *Glass Wings*, and the cover image of a dragonfly indicate what is special about this volume: this is Adcock's enormous affection for insects and her lifetime of devotion to them, a preoccupation that can be traced to her early, much anthologized poem 'For a Five Year Old' -- in which she explains about snails to her son Andrew, concluding: 'But that is how things are. I am your mother/and we are kind to snails'. The last section, 'My Life with Arthropods', shows that even as a young girl living in Britain, Adcock treasured creatures-- she had a nature diary, and she kept caterpillars (that died when they went on holiday and the boy she asked to feed them forgot). Some of these are already immortalized in earlier poems; caterpillars, for example, are 'that moistly munching hoop of innocent green'. Adcock pays homage to the myriad of small beetling, flying and fluttering creatures that fascinate her: the damsel fly nymph, the dung and stag beetles, caterpillars, fleas, the praying mantis, blow flies, crane flies, ants, crab lice, slaters—an entire miniature zoo.

Hence 'To the Mosquitoes of Auckland' celebrates her discovery that her allergy to mosquitoes doesn't include those of her early childhood:

Come, then, mosquitoes of my youth,
Feel free to munch me with impunity.
Your forebears, nibbling at my infant flesh,
Blessed me with permanent immunity.

Glass Wings is full of such delights and shows Adcock on top of her form. It introduces us to many undiscovered corners of her life, as clear eyed she faces the present moment of being nearly 80: her childhood again, her parents, reminiscences of her early years in New Zealand, her marriage at 18, her many friends, now old like herself, a new great grandson, the sounds of ancestral

voices recorded in wills, and of course the recall of tiny winged, creeping or crawling companions who have been with her throughout the entire journey.

Rod Edmond's study of the lives of his ancestors on both sides of his family, who travelled from Scotland to New Zealand, in the 19th and early 20th centuries is an act of reconstruction (of the past) and rediscovery (of his own place in that history). What is fascinating about the multiple journeys he traces from Scotland to New Zealand (with the exception of one branch of the family, the Trevarthens, from Cornwall), are his reflections on his own trajectory, as someone who has migrated in the opposite direction: coming to the UK 40 years ago for study and then continuing with an academic career here at the University of Kent at Canterbury. His journey and the record of his ancestors in *Migrations* can both be seen as part of the process of filling in the gaps, of restoring continuity to breaks in the story of colonisation and decolonisation, that begins with the 19th-century migrations of his forebears on both sides, and ends with the present day.

Rod's account will be familiar to many of us from New Zealand who have similar ancestors, who made the great migration out to the colony. It covers five generations, beginning with his maternal great-great-grandfather, Andrew Mercer, who came to Dunedin on the *Philip Laing* in 1848; but it focuses especially on his maternal great-grandfather, Charles Murray, who left St Fergus in Scotland to work as a missionary in the New Hebrides (now called Vanuatu), arriving in New Zealand to be ordained in 1885, and later returning there. Murray's diary in the Presbyterian Church archives held at Knox College (part of

University of Otago) is a key source for this book. The second ancestor on whom *Migrations* focuses is Rod's paternal great-grandmother, Catherine McLeod, a poor crofter from Ullapool in the North West Highlands, who with her family was evicted to Tasmania in the Highland Clearances in the 1850s. The entanglements of these family members, their marriages and those of their descendants has both a dramatic and scandalous side: Andrew Mercer, for example, had a distinguished career in local politics, and was mayor of Dunedin 1873-74, but then fell into social disgrace because he took up with his deceased wife's sister after his wife died in 1886 (until 1881 this had had been illegal) -- eventually leaving for Australia. This kind of upheaval lends a frisson to family history -- it was never mentioned subsequently. Yet Rod also discerns a representative force in the way they capture the experience of displacement, migration and settlement 'and the fractured relation of settler colonists to their place of departure' (p.11).

Rod had written on early 19th-century missionaries in his book, *Representing the South Pacific*, but had not known about the missionary story of his great grandfather Charles Murray. So in a significant way *Migrations*, written in retirement as an Emeritus Professor of English, is a continuation and extension of previous research. His autobiographical reflection as a returning (post)colonialist -- coming back to the UK the original homeland -- will have resonance for other expatriates. Fleur, for example, has also written about the migration of her northern Irish Protestant ancestors, Richey and Martha Brookes, in poems like 'The Voyage Out'.

In *Migrations* Rod notes a number of startling reversals due to the irony of

being descended from migrants, and returning himself as a migrant to their point of origin. Like all those (including myself) who went to school and university in New Zealand up to the end of the 20th century, he had a Eurocentric education, by contrast to today's more nationally driven agenda with its strong emphasis on New Zealand history, politics, languages, and culture. At Victoria University in the 1960s he studied and later taught history—of medieval Europe, the Renaissance and Reformation -- coming to England on a scholarship for further study and to discover the sources here for historical research. At that time he was not interested in his Scottish heritage which he associated with the constraining influences of Sabbatarianism and teetotalism (I could add Scottish dancing and bagpipe playing!) and seemed far removed from the priorities of growing up in New Zealand then.

Yet paradoxically over the last forty years in England Rod has developed specialist research interests which relate to the world he has left: e.g. Europeans in the Pacific, disease and empire in his study *Leprosy and Empire*. These shifting interests have been encouraged by in the rise of the new multidisciplinary field of postcolonial studies in the 1980s (which provided frameworks for cross cultural study) and he has turned away from European history to that of Oceania, while also working on New Zealand and Pacific authors like Janet Frame Keri Hulme and Albert Wendt.

Migrations will make you want to speculate –and possibly find out more-- about those distant trajectories of our ancestors and the accidents of fate that made them leave what was known and familiar and set out to a little colony on

the other side of the world. Rod's study, as well as Fleur's earlier poems on the journeys of her ancestors, also suggest that it is individuals like us who travel abroad and choose to live away from 'home' who become most curious about what has motivated past journeys of migration -- the difficult and challenging voyages of their forebears (by contrast to the 'voluntary and cushioned' journeys we undertake today) -- making them cross the world. Perhaps, as Rod points out in his introduction, it is because we, more than those who stay behind, who recognize those moments of unsettlement and the discomfort of not quite belonging to the new society that our ancestors experienced. *Migrations* presents a sympathetic, insider's view of colonisation as seen through the eyes of everyday people from the fringes of British society --the Celtic fringe -- facing the upheavals and discontinuities of departure and settlement in an unknown country.