A Present Absence: Fleur Adcock Today

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It is almost half a century since 1963, when Fleur Adcock, then a promising young New Zealand poet but without a collection to her name, sailed for England. Over the intervening decades she has established herself in the UK as a well-known, much admired poet, and a respected voice on the national poetry circuit. Her verse has been published in the UK by Oxford University Press and Bloodaxe, and continues to be 'claimed' by New Zealand where her poems are regularly anthologised, most recently in the Auckland University Press *Anthology of New Zealand Literature* (2012) and taught in schools and universities. Two recent volumes, *Glass Wings* (2013) and *The Land Ballot* (2014),[1] were published by Victoria University Press as well as Bloodaxe in the UK, and VUP will publish her new *Collected Poems* in 2019.

Yet Adcock today has an ambivalent, liminal place in the national narrative -- of someone who began writing poetry in New Zealand, then left, and so cannot now claim to 'belong' to the country of her birth. This sensation of unbelonging is one that has always haunted her, and began with her first emigration from 1939 to 1947; after returning to New Zealand aged 13 from England where she and her family had lived since she was five, she could identify with neither location nor landscape. It is made more explicit in her second emigration in 1963 and her second return to New Zealand, a visit for six weeks in 1975-76, when she contemplated the gap caused by separation and the threatened fragmentation of recently renewed ties. Upon her arrival back in London after several months away she asked: 'By going back to look, after thirteen years, / have I made myself, for the first time, an exile?'.[2] The complications of this return -- identity refracted into distanced yet emotional points of engagement, psychic disruption caused by loyalties to different places, the conflict of the divided self – all underlie this unanswerable question.

Adcock's doubled and divided forms of belonging, seen as characteristic of all diaspora subjects, whether expatriates or exiles, refugees or nomads, give her a somewhat ghostly presence within the national context, not unlike that of Katherine Mansfield, her illustrious predecessor.[3] The similarity of their trajectories has led her to be pigeonholed as a writer who is not in the centre, whose work continues to be read, taught and discussed, but who exists on the margins of New Zealand literary culture rather than contributing to new developments or participating in local debates.[4] In terms of New Zealand's national tradition, such a multiple positioning between two or more cultures and nations has in the past been stereotyped as the 'myth of the exile', that is, of someone who is no longer 'one of us' . But while Mansfield, the avatar of exile, was unable to return physically because of her failing ill health, and could do so only through semi-nostalgic recreations of childhood in her stories, Adcock has stayed in regular contact with family and literary circles in New Zealand, and since the mid-1970s has frequently returned to sustain these relations and to perform her work at literary festivals and poetry readings. The meaning of the return is a significant preoccupation of her poetry which since 1975 often focuses on the journey back as consisting of lived moments of experience. Affected by perceptions of what is both familiar yet strange, she records the shock of encountering change, and of particular moments of rediscovery or recognition that trigger memories of the past. Her 1975 visit was marked by a renewal of her relationship with her father with whom contact had been intermittent over the years, as Hilary Bracefield notes in her article in this special focus, making it even more momentous and poignant than expected. Such intensely experienced reunions also differentiate her from other expatriate writers in London in the mid-twentieth century, near contemporaries like the novelist James Courage and the poets Hubert Witheford and Basil Dowling, who did not return, and positions her closer to the New Zealand poet, Kevin Ireland who did, in 1985 after twenty-five years, in his case to continue writing and publishing in New Zealand.

Adcock's early years, including her marriage to the poet Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, father of her two children, her relationships with her parents and sister, the author Marilyn Duckworth, her children and grandchildren, all of whom live in New Zealand, are crucial reference points in her work. Reinforced by regular return visits, reunions in both countries, the revival of buried memories, and more recently genealogical research into family migration, these engagements make up the texture of her long-term, long-distance encounter with the country of her birth, one whose interplay of memory and emotion through arrivals and separations suggests a more spatially and temporally inflected narrative to that of the completely absent writer. Furthermore, the shift in perception provided by Adcock's multiple journeys can also be located in terms of the greater mobility made possible today by global flows: transnational travel, multidirectional circulation of culture, and heightened connectivity provided by the internet and social media: instant forms of contact. That is, the myth of the aloof expatriate cultural icon that became entrenched in New Zealand culture in relation to Mansfield, can now be rewritten with reference to these new global frameworks of communication to suggest a view of Adcock as resembling the transnational, contrapuntal figure of the writer, someone who lives in the spaces of diaspora and moves between several cultures and nations.

Such a revision of the myth of the exile might take into account, for example, the moments of dislocation and relocation in Adcock's verse, due to her personal to and fro trajectory entailing multiple separations and reunions over the years as found in the pathos of saying goodbye to her son Gregory in 'On a Son Returned to New Zealand' (*Poems*, 44-45). Her early verse, written in the late 1950s and early 60s when she belonged to literary circles in Wellington and the South Island that included writers like Alistair Campbell, James K. Baxter, Peter Bland, and Louis Johnson, is rifted with sensations of divided feelings -- between New Zealand and what is mysteriously described as 'another country' -- traceable to longing for England where she had spent her formative years during the war.[5] Poetry written in the mid-1960s, after she arrived in the UK when the process of relocation was still raw, images this displacement as a quixotic, surreal sensation of being in place and out of place simultaneously: 'I am floating in the sky/Below me the house /crouches' (*Poems*, 46). But her return to Britain also ignited Adcock's intense drive to explore her British heritage. In crossing the ocean she seemingly traversed an invisible threshold, for this relocation process enabled her to begin an enquiry into her parents' origins and genealogy which, as Bracefield points out, has led to crucial moments of self-discovery in her verse. A decade after her arrival in England, two poems in T*he Scenic Route* (1974), 'The Bullaun' and 'Please Identify Yourself', about the search for her mother's ancestors in Northern Ireland, were seen as breakthroughs - into understanding her Scots-Irish Protestant heritage, and as recognising other kinds of ethnic, religious division.[6] Most recently *The Land Ballot* (2014), inspired by study of newly arrived settlers-turned-farmers who acquired their farms through a land ballot, as her grandparents did, is an equivalent enquiry into her paternal side enabling her to tell the story of her father's life. This volume might be seen as the culmination of her urge to reconstruct the journeys of her parents and settler grandparents.

These are signs that Adcock has begun to come full circle through transnational travel and exploration of family history involving earlier journeys back and forth between England and New Zealand. Over a lifetime of writing and attending to questions of identity that departure from the homeland always intensifies she has gone further than the diaspora subject who asks 'Who am I?' and 'What is this place and how does it affect me?' to probe more deeply into the question of her origins, asking 'Where do I come from?' in order to fill in the gaps in her family history, most caused by colonial migration and relocation.[7] Genealogical research has shaped this process, enabling her to develop a permeability of identity so she can move between different time frames and control the illusion of distance through an enquiring narrative presence. In the new millennium, having lived

through her 70s and now entered her 80s, Adcock is now writing in ways that can be read as representing a deepening and strengthening of her dual affiliations, realigning what was earlier experienced as divided loyalties. She has arrived at some reconciliation of them rather than outright renunciation of New Zealand as was the case half a century ago, which is summed up in the ending of 'Stewart Island': 'I had already decided/ to leave the country' (*Poems*, p. 44).

The process of reconstruction and resolution in her verse is an intricately layered and various one, made up of subjective glimpses, moments of perception and apparently off-the-cuff comments, perhaps signs of willing dislocation and division, which usually integrate into the larger narrative of a life only when framed by the histories and voices of others. This web of personal relations in Adcock's verse may yield to a narrative of self and belonging with the appropriate contexts of interpretation; it may also be deconstructed, and the poems read in terms of the distinct, isolated incidents or memories that occasion them rather than as evidence of an exilic consciousness. In British and European appreciations of her verse, for example, the New Zealand migratory dimension is usually left out. Adcock is known more for her bravura stylistic performances, and when it comes to topics for writing, her witty takes on the self and romantic delusions, women's role and place, political satire, the state of the nation, global nuclear fallout or ecopolitics. Yet the question of (un)belonging is a persistent strand that with its focus on origins and homeland, dislocation and relocation, memory and longing is also found in much other diaspora writing. These preoccupations are buttressed by the single constant of her concern for relatedness, in forging and sustaining connections: with her extended family, her ancestors, and through her passion for nature and the environment, with wildlife, animals and creatures. In these ways she most comprehensively straddles the dual spheres of England and New Zealand and creates in her writing, as Peter Porter says, 'the warmer world of the affections'.[8]

Recently Adcock's 80th birthday was marked in London by a celebration of friends, family and fellow writers, both New Zealand and British, who paid tribute to her life-long achievement with a festschrift of poetry and prose.[9] Other forms of recognition also suggest an equivalence between her dual belongings: for her sustained contribution to British poetry she was awarded the OBE in 1996 and the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 2006, honours that were matched in New Zealand in 2008 when she was named Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to Literature.

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The articles that follow, written by three UK-based scholars, originated as papers presented at a symposium in celebration of Fleur Adcock's poetry which took place at the University of Winchester in May 2016. Each critic identifies a relatively overlooked area in the critical reception of her work and each uses an approach arising from her engagement with Adcock's work and familiarity with its cultural, critical and social contexts.

Samantha Morrish bases her research on the influential circle of poets known as Group on the archives held at the University of Reading, which have hitherto not been examined at all in relation to Adcock, and she discusses Adcock's brief but important encounter with the Group during its last three years, 1963-65. A complete unknown, she was introduced by the fellow New Zealand poet Herbert Witheford, soon after her arrival in England, and attended several meetings in Edward Lucie-Smith's house in London. Later she was the only woman to be named as one of the 'interesting poets' in this illustrious but male-dominated circle (including BBC producers, literary editors and poets like Peter Porter and George MacBeth). Drawing on records of the Group's conversations, then led by Philip Hobsbaum, Morrish notes that Adcock imbibed their values of 'morals, coherence and form' that set the tone for a generation. This encounter mattered more for its gendered nature than

the fact of Adcock's nationality. In discussing the poems that she submitted for the attention of members, Morrish argues that she anticipated even then the more permissive views of what was considered suitable for poetry, and her role in the urgent, outspoken articulation of women's issues by the 1980s in which she tackled sensitive or taboo subjects. As an outsider Adcock not only offered new subject matter concerning 'sexuality, gender and familial relationships', but she was also aware of the challenge she faced: to speak her own view at a time when 'different opinions and experiences from women and non-UK nationals' were just beginning to be listened to. Adcock, that is, pushed against the boundaries laid down by A.A. Alvarez of what was considered to be gentility, and experimented with new gendered subject-matter for poetry in ways that presaged her being an outspoken voice and role model for other women writers in the UK.

Poet Lorraine Mariner examines the distinctive quality and complexity of Adcock's literary humour across different topics, styles and literary traditions noting that, apart from widespread appreciations of her understated wit, associated with the classical poise and economy of her verse, this is a relatively little addressed topic. She identifies a range of the comic and humorous, from the caustic to the coolly ironic to the tragi-comic and black comedy. Adcock's humour, Mariner claims, is often textually performative, occurring in unlikely places as, for example, in the pause between the final two lines in 'To a Five Year Old', where it can be inferred from the interplay of voices in the exchange between mother and child, or typographically projected through the use of brackets to introduce a tongue-in-cheek aside. It provides Adcock with an entrée into anxiety-provoking topics such as the idiosyncracies of sex, romantic disaffection, fear of rejection, aging and memory, the trials of insomnia, and 'unmentionable' subjects. Like Morrish, Mariner argues that by the 1970s and 80s Adcock was able to challenge the limits of what poetry can be about; she was not afraid to break social taboos by writing wittily and entertainingly about topics such as sexual failure and addiction to smoking in self-mocking poems like 'Smokers for Celibacy', and 'Against Coupling'. She also uses humour strategically to create a dialogue with readers rather than distance them, even when there is a sense of darkness beneath. Mariner draws on the archive of reviews held in the National Poetry Library in London where she works to give an account of how the question of humour informs the critical reaction to Adcock's work. She finds that this most subjective of responses divides critics the most, as they variously define the fine line between the humorous as genuinely funny or slight, quirky and anecdotal. Is a poem such as the acclaimed 'A Political Kiss' (about kissing John Prescott) 'cool and ironic' or 'trying too hard'? These mixed responses to Adcock's work suggest that humour is often a litmus test in the critical reception whereby her poetry is weighed up, assessed and sometimes found wanting.

Hilary Bracefield, a New Zealander with a long-standing friendship with Adcock and a deep familiarity with her work, introduces an angle that has not been much noted previously: Adcock's poems about her father, Cyril John Adcock, and his parents who emigrated from Manchester to New Zealand in the early twentieth century. She focuses on the 2014 volume, *The Land Ballot*, about their pioneering struggle to establish a dairy farm in an isolated area of New Zealand in the early 20th century. The volume's title refers to the ballot in which Adcock's paternal grandparents won their hilly block of virgin bushland in 1915, at a time in the when the Liberal Government of 1891-1912 sought to populate the country with small farmers. Bracefield analyses the scattered references Adcock makes to her father in her previous 12 collections, mainly subjective impressions of him told as memories or anecdotes, and points out that for the sequence in *The Land Ballot*, by contrast, she turned to the cassettes on which her father recorded his early memories that she had put aside at his death in 1987. Adcock's 'masterly memoir' or 'novel in verse' records the family's heroic efforts in tackling the grim task of breaking in land which they eventually abandoned, and her father's scientific interests, inner resources and determination whereby he continued to learn and teach

while farming, overcoming the limitations of this unpromising upbringing to become a university lecturer and eventually a Professor of Psychology. Drawing upon his memories as recorded on the tapes Adcock brings Cyril to life with a speaking voice in the midst of his family, and indirectly gives an insight into New Zealand settler society in the early twentieth century. *The Land Ballot* also represents the culmination of Adcock's archival search into the lives of her ancestors for 'understanding of her parents, and knowledge of her forebears' that began with the poems about her mother's Northern Ireland ancestors in *The Scenic Route.* Bracefield's article thus provides a welcome counterbalance to the usual picture today of Adcock as principally a British-based poet by suggesting that her two countries of habitation – England and New Zealand -- remain thematically and psychologically entangled in her verse, shaping her orientation across the decades, with New Zealand as home to family members, a repository of memories, and familiar landscapes acting as a distinctive sounding board against the immediacy and everydayness of life in Britain.

Adcock's decade of silence following the publication of *Collected Poems 1960-2000*, was partly due to her long-term exploration of her parents' lives and genealogies after their deaths which, according to Bracefield, was a process that took some time to complete. Although she began writing again intermittently in 2003, it was not until 2010 that her next volume, *Dragon Talk*, was published. It has been followed by three more, the latest being *Hoard* in 2017. In light of this late flowering and given that Adcock is now in her 80s it is timely that recent criticism be published that identifies new directions and recurring themes in her poetry from the time of her arrival in England to the present, and it is fitting that this be in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* as a homecoming of sorts.[10]

Notes

[1] *The Land Ballot* was first published by VUP in 2014 and by Bloodaxe in 2015.
[2] Fleur Adcock, *Poems 1960-2000* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2000), p. 115. All references to poems published in this volume will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text.
[3] C.K. Stead, 'Meeting with the "Great Ghost"'. In *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays,* ed. Gerri Kimber and Janet Wilson (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 214-228.
[4] An exception is Adcock's edition of *The Oxford Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry* (1982) from which she excluded some overseas-based poets including herself on the grounds that their expatriate status made them no longer New Zealand poets. This caused a minor storm and was seen in some quarters as evidence of her being an outsider.
[5] Fleur Adcock, 'Summer is Gone', *The Eye of the Hurricane* (Wellington and Auckland; A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1964), p. 9.
[6] Bill Ruddick, 'A Clear Channel Flowing: The Poetry of Fleur Adcock', *Critical Quarterly* 26.4 (1984), 61-66; Janet Wilson, *Fleur Adcock* (Devon, Tavistock: Northcote House, 2007), pp. 42-43.
[7] Ato Quayson, 'Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary'. In *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 139–59 (148).
[8] See cover blurb for Fleur Adcock, *The Incident Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[9] *For Fleur: Poems and Other Messages on her 80th Birthday*, compiled by Janet Wilson and Rod Edmund. The New Zealand Studies Network (UK and Ireland) and the University of Northampton, 14 February 2014; 2nd ed. 26 February 2014.
[10] I should like to thank the editors of JNZL for commissioning this special focus on Fleur Adcock and the anonymous *JNZL* reviewer for their incisive and helpful comments.