

From Nowhere (Erewhon) to NEW ZEALAND

by Jason Lofts in Cheseaux-Noréaz, Switzerland

In 1996, having been in self-imposed exile from New Zealand for 11 years, I penned an anagrammatical poem NEW ZEALAND and published it as a postcard (8 lines of silver lettering on glossy black card). Apart from a mention at the time in the New Zealand News UK, a British weekly for Kiwi expatriates, it went unnoticed until 2002, when – despite its imperfections – it provided a quirky supporting act to the serious literary stars Samuel Butler and Janet Frame in “From Erewhon to Nowhere: A Leitmotif of New Zealand Poetry?”, a scholarly contribution by Peter H. Marsden on pages 365-376 of a weighty academic tome entitled “Missions of Interdependence. A Literary Directory” (edited by Gerhard Stilz, Amsterdam/New York, NY, 2002, XVII, 424 pages) - see pages 370-371:

“...Ever since Thomas More, ‘Utopia’ has meant both desirable paradise and unattainable ideal. Utopian literature:

‘has a rich tradition in New Zealand, both in writing by New Zealanders and by others using a New Zealand setting. [...] New Zealand utopian literature is a living tradition that has now been established for over 150 years. It includes almost 150 adult titles and many more for young adult readers; and is being added to regularly.’

[quotation from: Lynn Tower Sargent, in Robinson & Wattie, Oxford Companion, 555-56]

At the beginning of that tradition stands Butler’s Erewhon. This national myth-making, this long-term process of projecting New Zealand as a distant and remote place, with little identity of its own apart from the borrowed glory of being ‘This Other England,’ nevertheless providing the site for a distant and remote vision of the future – whether positive or negative, eu-topian or dys-topian – conceptualizes the country, as it conceptualizes its constituent landscapes. Mental maps arise out of mental landscapes, which, if we are to believe Simon Schama, are always constructs. In this process, the image or leitmotif of Erewhon/Nowhere is a central element.

A recent instance is a sort of concrete poem distributed in postcard form by the expatriate New Zealander Jason Lofts, resident in “the unlikely place of the Principality of Liechtenstein,” who “has designed an alternative souvenir of his home country. [...] Lofts [...] literally took New Zealand apart and produced a ‘poem’ consisting of seven anagrams of the words New Zealand and has made it into a postcard.” The result looks like this:

**NEW ZEALAND
EZ A NEW LAND
NEW AND ZEAL
WEL AND ZANE
NZ NEED A LAW
Z, ELAN WANED
EZE AND LAWN
NZ: A WEE LAND**

[cited source: "Poetry in the Post," New Zealand News UK (4 December 1996): 1]

In thus defamiliarizing the familiar, alienating the everyday reality of New Zealand by reshuffling its component parts – re-constructing, as it were, national identity – Lofts is availing himself of a device that was first used by Butler. [Footnote 24: Lofts in turn might well (consciously or not) be quoting Janet Frame, who has Godfrey, the protagonist of her novel *The Rainbirds*, muse in a sub-Joycean interior monologue: "No doubt my name is Dogrey Brainrid of Feelt Rived, Resonsand Bay, Dunndie, Ogoat, Shuto Sanlid, Wen Lazeland, Rotushen he-mis-phere, the Drowl": Frame, *The Rainbirds* (1968), also published as *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room* (1969): 161] ..."

[Note, however, that "Wen Lazeland" is not a correct anagram of New Zealand. Nor is "Dogrey Brainrid" a complete anagram of the novel's protagonist's name, Godfrey Rainbird.]

At the beginning of May this year I returned "literally" to NEW ZEALAND and, ever the avid amateur anagrammatist (alternatively, "anagram artist"), have expanded and reworked it as follows. Poetic licence and faithfulness to New Zealand pronunciation are the excuses for the rare instances of quasi-anagrams, e.g. "ez" for "is":

AADEELNNWZ
'AZE! NEW LAND?
EZ A NEW LAND
WE LAND ZANE
NEW AND ZEAL
LEAN ADZE NW
ADZE NW LANE
NZ, A WEE LAND
NZ, A EWE LAND
NZ NEED A LAW
Z, ELAN WANED
'N' LAZED ANEW
EZE AND LAWN
WE A ZEN LAND
NZ, A NEW DEAL
LEAD A NEW NZ

NEW ZEALAND

Commencing from a complete deconstruction into its component elements, the hitherto undiscovered country's littoral (and literal) landscape emerges from the haze ('aze), a nod or allusion to the Maori name for New Zealand of "Aotearoa", meaning "Land of the Long White Cloud", based on the nautical notion that the first sign of an island seen by a ship's lookout is often cloud in the sky above the land mass. As with many far-flung outposts of the British Empire, the country goes through a transformational process of conquest, colonization, confiscation, confusion, conversion, construction and consolidation. The "adze" lines evoke the clearing of large tracts of native bush, such as in the northwest (Taranaki region in the west of the North Island), transformed by European settlers into cattle runs, dairy farms etc. "Ewe land" is a most apt connotation for a condescendingly small colony ("wee land")

considering that its human population is vastly outnumbered by non-indigenous sheep (at its peak in 1982 some 70 million ovine inhabitants to around 3 million people, nowadays somewhat less disproportionate at roughly 30 million versus approx. 4.5 million). The land itself tamed, it is then time to introduce law and order, only as a consequence to confront the confounding and often condemned New Zealand characteristic of backyard complacency or “she’ll be right, mate!” mentality. In conclusion, the conceptual constituents of the country reshuffle themselves (“a new deal”) into a consummate concrete construct of self-reinvention and reincarnation – a new NZ (NEW ZEALAND).

Leaving aside literary considerations, conjecture and confabulation, NEW ZEALAND is – for logologists, at least – a self-solving conundrum: What English-language poem has its title at the bottom, consists of only two words made up of 7 different letters (2 vowels and 5 consonants), and the first and last (16th) lines of which end in a “Z”? It is more than an anagrammatical poem. Recreational linguists are familiar with the following “-gram” family members: anagram, pangram, isogram, even the obscure automynorcagram. So, why not conceive a new elite progeny – the “patriagram” [From Latin patria- (fatherland) via Greek patris (native land) + -gram (something written)] meaning an anagram of one’s own country? Accordingly, this is, to be precise, a patriagrammatical poem, the poet being a “patriagrammarian”!

In a recent email exchange with Richard Lederer, my humble efforts earned me the ultimate accolade (“Jason, you are a true logologist”). In return, I told him that on May 6, 1985 I arrived in Europe, where I have since spent more than half my life (28 years versus nearly 26 in New Zealand) and ventured the explanation that “perhaps the process of coming to terms with expatriation and self-exile subliminally inspired me to pay homage to my home country when and the way I did.”

A FRENCH FRIVOLITY

