

To the (South) Island: Janet Frame and Southern New Zealand

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“Manawhenua is that sense of belonging that connects people and land. The landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand is our cultural centre of gravity, our leading literary theme, our dominant metaphor.”

— David Eggleton⁽¹⁾

“She was Malfred Signal, more involved in the landscape of her country than with its people, but as the right and expectation of a South Islander.”

— Janet Frame, *A State of Siege*⁽²⁾

“Otago has a calmness, a coldness, almost a classical geological order. [...] Perhaps this landscape was of the time before Jesus. I saw an angel in this land. Angels can herald beginnings.”

— Colin McCahon⁽³⁾

Introduction

New Zealand has long been at the provincial edge of the world atlas. Geographically, its isolated position as a small group of islands located in the southern reaches of the Pacific Ocean has signalled a physical separation from the “centre,” that is, the former British Empire of

which the country was once a colony. Historically, New Zealand was one of the last frontiers to be settled by white immigrants, who are commonly referred to as Pakeha. These factors have helped to perpetuate the idea that New Zealand is, to borrow a line from Katherine Mansfield's 1909 poem "To Stanislaw Wyspianski," "a little land with no history." This perceived sense of marginality and a preoccupation with exploring Pakeha New Zealanders' unsettled identity has been the concern of many writers, including Dunedin-born Janet Frame (1924~2004), New Zealand's most proclaimed contemporary literary figure.⁽⁴⁾

Frame's dramatic life story became known world-wide with the release of the film *An Angel at My Table* (1990) based on her autobiographies and directed by Jane Campion (*The Piano*). That life included the death by drowning of two sisters ten years apart, a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia in her twenties which led to nearly eight years spent in and out of psychiatric hospitals, and the international accolades brought about by her award-winning fiction (eleven novels, four volumes of short stories, a collection of poetry and a children's book) and best-seller autobiographies (*To the Is-land*, *An Angel at My Table*, and *The Envoy from Mirror City*). Frame's recent death has not signalled any flagging of interest in either her life or literature; she continues to tease and engage critics who have read her texts from structuralist, feminist, postmodernist and postcolonial perspectives.

Frame was an "outsider" in many respects: for example, in her economically poor background, the stigma she bore as a former "mental patient," and the anguish she suffered while trying to carve out

a career for herself as a writer and not as a teacher (the path expected of women in her era). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claim that it is from this “vision of marginality” born of personal hardship that Frame’s works draw their energy (103). I would add that her consciousness of a peripheral identity can also be traced back to her position as a Pakeha in a post-colonial society that is no longer simply New Zealand, but Aotearoa New Zealand in recognition of the country’s first inhabitants, the Maori. That is, like Toby Withers in *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962) and Malfred Signal in *A State of Siege* (1966), Frame was doubly marginalized because she was neither British (from the “mother country”) nor Maori (and thus lacking an “authentic” indigenous sense of belonging to the land).

In this paper I wish to explore another dimension of Frame’s vision of marginality, one that is embedded within the idea of “Pakeha New Zealander.” To unearth this element requires us to avoid definitions of a general all-encompassing “Pakeha identity” and instead pay attention to the region in which Frame was born and bred. Criticism dealing the issue of representations of Pakeha identity in literature tends to view New Zealand as one coherent cultural mass. However, I believe that Frame’s works would benefit from an interrogation which takes into account their relationship to “southern New Zealand.” Michael King began his award-winning biography *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame* with a comment made by Mark Twain in 1895 about Dunedin’s residents: “The people are Scotch.”⁽⁵⁾ It is no coincidence that King chose to begin his definitive account of Frame’s life with a comment that draws attention to the unique heritage of the largest city

in Otago, a region of southern New Zealand which fuelled Frame's imagination and reappears in many shapes and forms in her writings.

I begin with a brief overview of the South Island's place in New Zealand, focussing particularly on Otago. My analysis is then divided into two major sections: I first draw on Frame's autobiographies and King's biography to reconstruct a picture of how Frame was affected by the southern landscape; I then look at how that sense of place — or displacement as the case may be — is reflected in *A State of Siege*, Frame's pivotal novel of the 1960s. I hope to show how the landscape and sense of isolation of southern New Zealand shapes Frame's vision (which often appears as a resistance to the "centre" in her novels), while avoiding the trap of framing her as a "provincial" writer. Instead I suggest that the strong influence of southern New Zealand actually contributed to Frame's sense of unsettledness; this in turn raises questions about how individuals are determined by the spaces they occupy and is related to the ways in which Frame's texts work against fixed definitions of (Pakeha) identity.

A Scottish Bard in the South Pacific

The divide between north and south in New Zealand is marked by Cook Strait, which separates the South Island from the North Island. Three quarters of New Zealand's four million inhabitants live in the North Island, the seat of government is in Wellington, and Auckland is the largest Polynesian city in the world. It is not within the scope of this paper to thoroughly investigate the differences between the North and South Islands. However, historian Keith Sinclair notes the existence in

literature of a “South Island myth”: according to Sinclair, most of the writers who used the metaphor of an empty land came from the south, and he sees this as grounded in the fact that the South Island was traditionally viewed as “unpopulated” and thus as having no “real history.” Sinclair argues that “the idea that man had no past in these islands was less likely to occur in the north, with its numerous pa (terraced forts), monuments to ancient Maori occupation” (253). In other words, since the Maori population of the South Island was much lower than that of the North, there were less signs of visible inhabitation in the south and this contributed to the sense of human absence, Maori as well as Pakeha.

Given this, it is perhaps ironic that the South Island is usually referred to as “the Mainland” and its inhabitants “Mainlanders,” as can be gleaned from the title of Lawrence Jones and Heather Murray’s 1995 volume *From the Mainland: An Anthology of South Island Writing*. Jones and Murray contend that “[a]nyone who has ever lived in the South Island or travelled through it can’t help but be struck by the awesome beauty of the landscape, the individuality of the people, and the close connection between the two.” This comment suggests how identity is often considered as physically located within, and as naturally evolving out of, a specific landscape, and recalls Simon Schama’s observation in *Landscape and Memory* that “Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock” (61). Jones and Murray go on to note that in their selection of texts “certain aspects of South Island life emerge repeatedly” (11): specifically, the hawk or *kea* (mountain

parrot), references to colonial origins and pre-settlement whaling days, a sense of historical decline (after the heady days of the Gold Rush), and (the rather vague) “outdoor nature.” Doubts aside, it can be concluded that writing about the South Island is seen by the editors as unique enough to warrant representation in its own right.⁽⁶⁾ Interestingly, as Nicola Cummins notes, the painting used on the dust jacket of *From the Mainland*, “Cass” by Rita Angus, perhaps most clearly evokes the *genius loci* (spirit of place) that the editors tried to define: a lone human figure sits on the platform of a tiny railway station with no train in sight. This figure is literally dwarfed by the strikingly powerful lines of the high country mountains in the background, rendering human presence insignificant.

The South Island and the Mainland are still broad terms, as each province in the South Island has its own history of settlement and writers who strongly identify with (and are identified with) that region. Keri Hulme’s West Coast, Allen Curnow’s Canterbury, the North Otago (Oamaru) of Owen Marshall and Fiona Farrell, and the varying faces of Southland as presented by Dan Davin (Gore), Ruth Dallas (Invercargill) and Bill Manhire (Balclutha) spring to mind. The Otago area has been the birthplace of and home to a number of influential New Zealand literary figures, including politician John A. Lee, Charles Brasch (who founded New Zealand’s foremost literary magazine *Landfall*), and poet James K. Baxter. Others such as Fleur Adcock, Alistair Campbell and Hone Tuwhare have spent significant amounts of time in Dunedin, partly due to the fact that the Burns Fellowship at Otago University (established in 1959) was until the 1970s the only writing fellowship in

New Zealand.

Janet Wilson has noted that the process of New Zealand's colonization by Britain reflected the different strains that comprised Victorian England: "Scottish settlers chose the rugged South Island terrain for farming sheep and cattle because of its likeness to the Highlands, the similar agricultural conditions; the Gaelic-speaking Irish settled in Southland and the West Coast, regions comparable to the West Coast of Ireland; the Wakefield Company recruited settlers to form microcosms of British nineteenth century society; and indeed the Canterbury Settlement was designed as such a model" (304). This regional diversity is an important factor for, in contrast to Canterbury's mainly English settlers, Otago, with Thomas Burns (nephew of the Scottish poet Robert Burns) at the helm, attracted Free Church Scots. In the words of Oliver Duff in *New Zealand Now* (1941): "If you stay years and not days, you feel that the day you crossed from Canterbury to Otago you moved from England to Scotland politically and from the parlour to the kitchen socially" (*Reed Dictionary of New Zealand Quotations* 81).

Two words which cannot be ignored in the history of Otago are Calvinism and colonialism, a potent combination: as Margaret Atwood astutely points out, in the context of Canadian literature, "Calvinism gives rise to the 'I am doomed' attitude, which fits into the Colonial 'I am powerless' one" (239). Eric Olssen in *A History of Otago* claims that the Calvinistic blend of predetermination and duty of Dunedin's early settlers still presides over the province, creating "that meditative introspection, that almost fateful sense of resignation" evident in many

literary works of the region (212). Janet Frame herself comments on this more obliquely in the poem “Sunday Afternoon at Two O’Clock” : “Having been to church the people are good, quiet, / with sober drops at the end of their cold Dunedin noses, / with polite old-fashioned sentences like Pass the Cruet, / and, later, attentive glorying in each other’s roses.”⁽⁷⁾ Aside from these strong Calvinist tendencies, Jennifer Lawn has noted that “Dunedin’s historical and geographical circumstances make it ripe for gothic appropriation. The city’s character derives from a combination of religious protest, colonial idealism, commercial wealth, and subsequent slow decline” (125-26). This decline included the gradual movement north of capital as the gold rush boom of the 1860s died, thus leaving “many of the city buildings untouched by Modern architecture, making Dunedin a living Victorian and Edwardian cityscape signifying, not the ebullience of empire, but decay and the gravity of time” (Lawn 126).

At the centre of this gothic cityscape sits the statue not of the “founding fathers” but of none other than Robert Burns: as Christine Johnston notes, “The statue of an eighteenth century Scottish bard in a South Pacific city raises many questions. Why was his statue commissioned over a century ago — before they had even sealed the roads? He may be representing nostalgia or Scottish nationalism as much as literature” (7). The Scottish influence on Otago was noted by Captain Henderson, who in *Otago, the Middle Island of New Zealand* (1866) recorded: “In 1861, I found the capital, Dunedin...inhabited by a population of very needy, ‘rigidly righteous,’ but whiskey-loving unprincipled Scotsmen. With these mixed a few of the worst specimens

from England and the neighbouring colonies” (*Reed Dictionary of New Zealand Quotations* 118). This “rigidly righteous” Scottish strain was to leave an indelible mark on the region: as poet Bill Manhire said of Dunedin one hundred years later, “living in Dunedin in the early sixties, which was really still the late fifties, you needed a bit of mystery in your life.” The region was not sufficiently mysterious itself because “Every street in Dunedin is named after a street in Edinburgh. Every street in Invercargill is named after a Scottish river...”⁽⁸⁾

It was here in this “Edinburgh of the South” that Janet Frame was born. However, the family soon relocated to Southland and Frame spent her first few years living in the tiny railway townships of Glenham and Wyndham. When Frame was six, the family uprooted themselves again and went to live in the coastal Northern Otago township of Oamaru (described by Frame quoting from Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Annabel Lee’ as a “kingdom by the sea”). Frame moved back to Dunedin to attend Teachers College in the 1940s, and also spent periods of time in psychiatric institutions in Otago. Given this background, it can be said then that Frame is indeed a writer from “southern New Zealand,” a term which I use to include Southland, where she spent her first few years, and Otago, where she was born, became an adult, and eventually died. However, the fact that Oamaru is straddled between Christchurch (Canterbury) and Dunedin (Otago) serves as a reminder that such geographical terms are slippery. In the words of cultural geographer Doreen Massey, places are “always unfixed, contested and multiple [...] open and porous” (5); moreover, maps are more often constructs of the imagination than reflections of reality. Put another way, the way we

create borders often has less to do with “natural” external boundaries than with the limits of our own identities.

Nevertheless, the place where a writer was raised will often come back to haunt their imaginations and, as Olssen notes, “it is not coincidental that Frame grew up in a stagnating region amid the mocking relics of a prosperous and proud past. No coincidence that she found attractive the general mood of introversion and the preoccupation with the self” (215). Indeed, many of Frame’s texts lend themselves to rich readings of the discourse of place and displacement, and raise questions about the sense of security, nostalgia and reassuring stability that being “at home” is supposed to provide.

To the (South) Island

Janet Frame’s three volumes of autobiography *To the Is-land* (1982), *An Angel at My Table* (1983), and *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985) cover her life up until her return to New Zealand in 1963 after seven years spent mainly in England and continental Europe. Literary texts in their own right, a number of themes pertinent to Frame’s fiction emerge from the autobiographies, such as the author’s ambivalent attitude towards language and its capacity to both reveal the truth and betray the user. In this section I wish to focus on the manifold faces of southern New Zealand which arise from the autobiographies, while also drawing on primary resources from King’s biography.

To the Is-land strikingly evokes Frame’s memories of “the colours and spaces and natural features of the outside world” of Southland where she spent her pre-school years (14). Her undeniable passion for

her surroundings was fed by family day trips to “rivers and seas in the south”: “we learned to love those beaches and rivers and the long shadows of a Southland twilight and the golden roads lit on each side by the gorse hedges” (15). Frame absorbed the colours — “macrocarpa green, tussock gold, snowgrass gold [...] snowberry white, all lit by the sky of snow light reflected from Antarctica” (16) — into the palette of her imagination. At age six the family moved to Oamaru which heralded a considerable change in landscape for Frame: “houses and people and streets replaced our familiar landscape of wild spaces, Southland skies with their shimmerings of Antarctic ice, paddocks of cattle and sheep, dark swamps, brown rivers, where each day and night could be felt in its existence, and the grass and insects in the grass could speak and be heard” (29). Oamaru was to provide the setting for Frame’s debut novel *Owls Do Cry* (1957), where it appears as industrial Waimaru with its freezing works, woollen mills, chocolate factory, butter factory, and flour mill, “all meaning prosperity and wealth and a fat filled land” (21).

However, the region of southern New Zealand which most profoundly affected Frame was undoubtedly Central Otago, an area in which she never actually lived. In *An Angel at My Table* Central Otago emerges as a land of myth and wonder, a “ladder into heaven” (168). She made her first journey there to pick raspberries at Miller’s Flat as part of the “War Effort” and instantly fell in love with the hills, “with their changing shades of gold, and the sky born blue each morning with no trace of cloud, retiring in the evening to its depth of purple” (166). She revelled in walking amongst the matagouri, “a desert thorn bush

with ragged stunted growth and small grey leaves like tarnished flakes of snow” and rediscovered the snowgrass from her Southland childhood which she describes as “golden silk like the strands of tussock which I used to think was named after ‘tussock’ silk” (167).

It was in Central Otago that Frame first came into contact with the “turbulent green churned-white” Clutha (166), the second largest river in New Zealand:

From my first sight of the river I felt it to be a part of my life (how greedily I was claiming the features of the land as ‘part of my life’), from its beginning in the snow of the high country (we were almost in high country), through all its stages of fury and, reputedly now and then, peace, to its outfall in the sea, with its natural burden of water and motion and its display of colour, snow-green, blue, mud-brown, and borrowing rainbows from light. [...] I now came face to face with the Clutha, a being that persisted through all the pressures of rock, stone, earth and sun, living as an element of freedom but not isolated, linked to heaven and light by the slender rainbow that shimmered above its waters.

I felt the river was an ally, that it would speak for me.⁽⁹⁾ (166)

Frame’s encounter with the Clutha came at a crucial time, as she had just spent a year in Dunedin wrestling with college life and the burden of becoming a teacher “like Cousin Peg.” In the passage above Frame paints the Clutha as a kindred spirit, a fellow being struggling to survive amidst the harshness of the surrounding environment. Testimony to the importance of this river is to be found in the fact that Frame legally changed her surname to Clutha in 1958. King points out

that Clutha is also the Gaelic name for Clyde, the area of Scotland where Frame's paternal grandparents hailed from (192). It seems fitting that an author as unconventional as Frame exchanged the rigidity of her given surname for the fluidity embodied in the image of a river.

In contrast to Frame's love affair with Central Otago, she is more ambivalent about her birthplace: Frame moved back to Dunedin to study at Teacher's College, a domestic migration that signalled the end of her childhood. The last sentence of *To the Is-land* confirms this: "*In early February [...] I travelled south on the Sunday slow train to Dunedin and my Future*" (140), with the capitalization of "Future" adding weight to the heavy air of responsibility that awaited Frame. Dunedin was her "first city" (150) and, as such, she associated it with industry and painted it with a Dickensian-like gloom, as in the following scene in which the train pulls into the station: "Dunedin was half hidden in misty rain. [...] Everywhere there were brick and concrete buildings, tall chimneys layered across the sky, grey streets, a view that I had seen in my mind's image of a city" (152).

Frame boarded with her aunt and uncle in the "wrong part of Dunedin," close to the red-light district and Chinese opium dens (155). Feeling adrift, she set out to find "her place," an isolated haven amongst nature where she could contemplate life unhindered. In Southland and Oamaru her place had inevitably been a log by a creek; in Dunedin, she chose the Southern Cemetery, the city's oldest cemetery (156). There she "looked out over the peninsula [...] and the waters of the harbour, and beyond, to the open sea, the Pacific, *my Pacific*" (158). The presence of the Pacific Ocean was reassuring but nonetheless in

Dunedin she felt “as if I belonged nowhere” (198) and the poverty of communities such as Caversham and St Kilda, “where lives were spent in the eternal ‘toil’ with the low-lying landscape” (198), intensified her sense of isolation. Frame’s portrait of Dunedin is heavy with the air of gothic gloom described by Lawn. While in London and about to return to Dunedin to take up the Burns’ Fellowship, Frame wrote to a friend: “I live there [Dunedin] chiefly by the sky and the light. My contact with people will be pretty meagre. The chief problem will be to get my necessary supply of laughter: Dunedin is a prim place and my friends there are on the sedate side” (King 349). Despite these misgivings, Frame had also described the city as “one of my oldest acquaintances, perhaps my only acquaintance” (229).

Frame’s love-hate relationship with Dunedin is understandable given that it was during her stay there as a student that she had the equivalent of a nervous breakdown and spent six weeks at Seacliff, a psychiatric institution on the outskirts of the city. It goes without saying that this experience changed her internal landscape but it also altered the way she reacted to the external landscape upon her release: “I felt a force that could only have been the force of love drawing me towards the land, where no one appeared to be at home” (197). Here Frame is perhaps consciously referring to Allen Curnow’s 1941 poem “House and Land” in which he describes New Zealand as “a land of settlers / With never a soul at home”⁽¹⁰⁾ — Curnow’s image of an uninhabited landscape was to become a major metaphor for writers that followed, and its echoes can be felt in *A State of Siege*.

Another area of the South Island in which Frame lived was

Christchurch, but there she became “aware of a dreadful feeling of nothingness, which was somehow intensified by the city itself — the endless flat straight streets, the sky without a horizon of hills, the distant horizon without sea. I felt as if I and the city were at the bottom of a huge well walled with sky, [...] I felt so lonely without even the hills close by, like human bodies, for comfort” (212). Frame’s autobiographies also mention the North Island — “up North (that magical ‘up North’)” (240) — and specifically Auckland, where she stayed with her sister and husband for a time. She knew this part of the country from reading Maurice Duggan’s stories which contained “New Zealand scenes unfamiliar to me, mostly from up north, with the subtropical heat crackling on the pages and the old jetties rotting and the mangroves deep in grey mud” (234). It is obvious that a significant portion of Frame’s impressions of Auckland found their way into *A State of Siege*:

In Auckland I was in *a state of sensitivity* to everything around me — the strangeness and the heat, the everlasting sound of the cicadas and crickets, the bite of the mosquitoes, my first experience of the subtropical light alternating between harsh brilliance and paradisaal cloud softness, like a storm oppressively, perpetually brewing. It was nearing summer, and the world was filled with blue flowers that attracted the blue of the sky, almost drinking it in until at evening their colour darkened with the excess of blue. *I experienced a feeling of nowhere and nothingness as if I had never existed, or, if I had, I was now erased from the earth.* (*An Autobiography* 215, my italics)

This comment came after a stint in a psychiatric hospital near Auckland, so her feelings of displacement were perhaps compounded by the unfamiliar surroundings. Frame was to live in the North Island for a number of years after her return to New Zealand, mainly tailing her sister's family, and certain North Island towns provide the setting for novels such as *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) and *The Carpathians* (1988).

However, it was the south and her “beloved South Island rivers” (192) which drew Frame back to New Zealand when she was experiencing a “roots crisis” in London in the early 1960s. She longed for the landscape of New Zealand, which for her was intimately tied to high country (southern) scenery: “I sit here...dreaming of snowgrass and snowberries and tussock...of the Southern Alps, and of rivers — where’s the Rakaia, the Waitaki, the Maheno? Good God, I’ve kept asking myself, what am I doing on this side of the world?” (King 243). When she finally returned to New Zealand in 1963, she wrote in a letter to one of her English friends, “by Holy Holy I’m homesick for the northern hemisphere! At the same time I’m bursting with gratitude for the sun, the sea, the pohutukawas, and I want to stay in NZ permanently...[I think] that my home is in the northern hemisphere, but this is the land I want to write about” (King 264). This comment is reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield who, physically unable to return to New Zealand because of illness, recorded in her journal just before her death: “Now — now, I want to write recollections of my own country. Yes, I want to write about my own country till I simply exhaust my store” (Stead 65).

Frame was an eternal traveller: in her own words, “My adult life [...]

appeared to be a series of journeys, a dance north and south, back and forth across the country” (239). The theme of the journey functions as an important motif in much of her writing, from *The Edge of the Alphabet* to *Living in the Maniototo*, and Frame often uses the act of travel to reflect on home location. I now wish to look at the internal migration from south to north which structures Frame’s sixth novel, *A State of Siege*, and how this novel is intimately tied to Frame’s experience of southern New Zealand.

Identity Under Siege

The 1960s was a period of great productivity for Frame, seeing the publication of the novels *Faces in the Water* (1961), *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962), *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963), *The Adaptable Man* (1965), *A State of Siege* (1966), and *The Rainbirds* (1968, released in the U.S. in 1969 as *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room*); three short story collections, a children’s book and a book of poetry. As Mark Williams notes, this decade was also a time of upheaval for New Zealand, stemming from an increasing economic distance from the UK, a growing consciousness of the nation’s place and responsibilities in the Pacific, and the internal divisions caused by the Vietnam War (39). In the 1960s the last vestiges of the “cultural cringe” (the term coined by Australian critic A.A. Philips in the 1950s to evoke the colonial inferiority complex) still clung to fragile Pakeha identities. Frame’s third novel, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, reflects on this and is very much an exploration of Pakeha identity in relation to England. As Ashcroft et al have noted, in this novel Frame dismantles the notion that England can

ever be the “centre” for Pakeha; in fact, the whole idea of the centre itself is deconstructed (103). Toby Withers can be interpreted as an example of the doubly displaced Pakeha because he is neither British nor Maori, but rather he occupies the “inbetween” — a space which, in the words of Homi Bhabha, “carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (38).

Frame returns to this theme in *A State of Siege* but goes a step further by having the protagonist, retired art teacher Malfred Signal, migrate from the fictional Matuatangi in the South Island to the fictional Karemoana, an island lying off the coast of Auckland. Malfred has devoted her life to teaching high school girls how to shade and to herself painting “those well-loved, local landscapes and seascapes that were prized for their water-color likeness to the original scenes” (7). This focus on landscape is important for, as Simon Schama has noted, landscape is a text on which generations write their recurring obsessions (12), with Malfred’s obsession being her identity as a South Islander.

A State of Siege is perhaps Frame’s most insightful portrayal of the differences between “north and south” but this aspect has remained unexamined by critics up until now. Early in the novel Frame establishes these characteristics:

In relation to the rest of the country, Karemoana and the mainland lying in its latitude were “up north” in a foreign climate with foreign inhabitants whose speech and way of life were American, Australian, Polynesian, certainly far from New Zealand. “Up north” was a place blessed with sunlight, warm

winds, subtropical ease; its people were prosperous, confident, free; they thought themselves superior, and perhaps they were, cherishing their geographical “king of the castle” delusion while the oppressed south, the true “down under,” struggled for political air and attention. The north lured. The population of the south drifted north as to a new frontier, leaving saddened Borough and City Councils, Tourist Boards, and, in some places, ghost towns. (4)

This passage evokes how the south sees itself as the place where “real” New Zealanders live, as opposed to the “foreign inhabitants” that populate the north. Particularly interesting is the north’s positioning as a kind of imperial centre, with its geographical location being equated with (perhaps unfounded) superiority. Furthermore, the likening of the north to a frontier, which Atwood defines as the informing symbol of America, suggests a line that is always expanding, a place that is new, where the old order can be discarded, and one that holds out the hope of Utopia (31-32). The narrator clearly sees the promises inherent in the idea of the “north,” while at the same time recognising that the south is in fact in decline.

The north is described as “an environment that gave the novel illusion of a world abroad, overseas, in a golden vale of orange trees: a South Pacific paradise” (5). As Marc Delrez notes, Malfred “thus unconsciously parodies the European dream of pastoral New Zealand as a South-Seas Eden, and there is a sense in which her northbound trip ironically re-enacts the moment of European arrival and settlement in the country” (6). The reason Malfred leaves Matuatangi is to seek the “New View”

(23) — she thinks that the north will grant her access to “the room two inches behind the eyes” (symbolising true imagination), which she has been unable to enter living in the small provincial town of Matuatangi. Literally translated from Maori, “matua” means “stem” or “parent,” while “tangi” means “funeral” or a lament for someone who has died. However, since Malfred, her “father’s daughter,” had an ambivalent relationship with her mother — it is her death which finally frees Malfred to leave Matuatangi — perhaps it is not so much that Malfred is lamenting her parents’ death but rather her own lost or wasted “stem” (the trunk or core of her being).

When Malfred announces her plan, she is chastised for “leaving Matuatangi to live in the foreign North Island!” (7). Her brother and sister attempt to persuade her not to go by saying “you’ll be a stranger in a foreign land” (12) and citing the climate (“It’s hot up north, Mally. The kind of heat that you wouldn’t like, at your age. Humidity,” 12) and lack of rivers and “real” mountains. As she crosses the Waitaki river which signals the end of Matuatangi’s borders, Malfred does indeed feel that “beyond the Waitaki the land was foreign” (21). The fact that she herself is puzzled as to why she feels “foreignness” in familiar sights — the “plains, magpies, gum trees, the far hem of the Alps, dark blue or white; the grass thin, gold; the small stations” (21) — hints at the psychological limits she has placed upon her own identity.

Arriving in Auckland, she is overcome with homesickness: “Malfred gasped suddenly with the pain of homesickness. Were there rivers, real rivers, ice green, snow-fed, on Karemoana?” (34); “once again the uneasy longing for the South Island came over her when the carrier

referred to the season. ‘Nice spring day!’ Spring? She could have wept to seek the definition in the vague warm air flowing through the opened front and back door of her new home” (41). The difference in seasons is one of the biggest shocks for Malfred: “Oh, the seasons knew their place in the south, just as the Southern Alps knew their place in the dignity of the nation!” (141). This passage and the following evoke the sense of belonging which South Islanders draw from their landscape:

The thought that there were no mountains on Karemoana gave Malfred a feeling of desolation. Lying in bed she looked suddenly from left to right to try to glimpse the snow, the familiar bulwark, chain, march of blue-white light that followed the country from north to south and gave (she thought) the South Islanders their exclusive strength as if their skeletons were rock and bone layered with snow. She was sure, as southerners are, of superiority, of a constitution that withstands cold, of the softer finer complexion of those whose faces are brushed season after season with soft fine mist rains. [...] Unknown people were never as terrifying as unknown seasons and landscapes. (140-41)

Malfred becomes haunted by the different flora and fauna, especially “the mangrove in its sordid, calm, sinister bed of gray mud” (61), which contrasts with the pureness of the snow-capped Southern Alps, Malfred’s psychological heartland.

Malfred tries to convince herself that the land will provide all that is missing from her life: “The land is all I need, [...] I’ll stare at it, I’ll see it. I’ll paint it as I see it. [...] We are so few in this country. It is the land that is our neighbor, the rivers, the sea, the bush that we have loved as

ourselves” (29); “The island, the scenery, will be my intimate companion; it is the only formula for living fully in an underpopulated country” (34). These comments also evoke the “South Island myth” of a land with no one at home. The southern landscape has been like a lover to Malfred, whose own sweetheart “had not stayed, when the mountains, the sea, the bush, the rivers had stayed, and the nor’wester blowing across the plains, and the bitter east wind from the sea, and even the houses had stayed. [...] And then, how passionately she had felt towards the beautiful bush, the rivers, the trees! And how the images crowded in her mind of the fists of snowgrass, full of snow, thrust into the open mouth of the sky!” (50). However, Frame hints that the land is not enough, and that moreover, the north is a comfortless landscape to Malfred because it is not hers. For Malfred, leaving Matuatangi in search of a New View signalled the beginning of the end for her, the disintegration of her identity, because her identity was built around her myths of belonging to southern New Zealand.

However, there is another aspect of Karemoana which unsettles Malfred: she is warned that there is an “element” on the island, which manifests itself as a violent night storm and fierce knocking on her door. At first Malfred thinks the “element” is a prowler, perhaps island delinquents, but as she slips into a deeper state of panic, she sees the element as the spirits of people she has known, particularly her dead mother and lover. She fears that if she opens the door, her mother will entreat her to return “down South”: “she would say again and again that I was born and bred in the south and the south is my true home. She would use that expression ‘in your bones,’ knowing that I could not

discount it, for my bones were composed of whatever came out of the Canterbury Plains and the lime-filled soil of Matuatangi, with an occasional ‘imported’ sediment. [...] I know that when my mother makes these demands upon my loyalties of place I’ll concede that so much of the south found its way into my bones” (117). Another possible interpretation of the “element” is that it is a storm of creativity that represents the “New View” — the different way of looking — that Malfred has come to the north to find. The novel ends with a stone being thrown through Malfred’s window, which is wrapped in newspaper written in a language she does not know. Scrawled across the print, in red crayon, are the words “help, help.” Malfred picks up the stone — “she wanted it to be a river stone but she knew it was not. She could not name it” (245) — and is found dead a few days later still clutching the stone. There are many ways this stone can be interpreted but the fact that it is not a river stone from Malfred’s beloved Waitaki denies the reader any comfort in knowing that Malfred found security at last in her “home.”

The Problem of Indigeneity

Powhiri Rika-Heke in her survey of Pakeha and Maori literature has argued that “to date, literary texts show clearly that we, the Maori, remain part of the tension of an indigenous consciousness for the Pakeha. [...] [T]he white culture attempted to incorporate the ‘Other,’ rather superficially, through referring to Maori place names, to Maori legends, ceremonies. [...] [This] had an important function in inscribing difference from the center. They signified a cultural experience which

the white settlers could certainly not hope to reproduce” (150). However, *A State of Siege* is interesting in that Frame, as a Pakeha writer, exposes this kind of superficial adoption of Maori cultural artifacts: for example, Malfred sends Christmas cards showing pohutukawas in blossom, mud-pools, geysers, and Maori maidens to friends overseas (120), even though she has never seen these images first-hand. This kind of cultural appropriation recalls W.T. Mitchell’s claim that “Landscape is a marketable commodity to be presented and re-presented [...] an object to be purchased, consumed, and even brought home in the forms of souvenirs such as postcards and photo albums” (15). Through Malfred, Frame also humorously comments on Pakeha who, “were so desperate to stake a claim in the identity of their country” that they “were now trying to falsify genealogical tables so that they might be able to trace an obscure relative who was a Maori! They could just as well and happily found that their great-great-grandfather was a boiling mud-pool or a piece of glacier or a spray of kowhai or pohutukawa blossom!” (124).

A State of Siege shows how Malfred, as a Pakeha, cannot take part in myths of indigenous belonging. Frame hints that Malfred’s move to the North may be related to her “trying to re-enact a legend” (47) but all she has to comfort her is the landscape since she is denied Maori culture. Thus *A State of Siege* comments on the displacement felt not only by Pakeha in general but also by Malfred as a southern New Zealander, a position even further removed from the legends of the north:

Pohutukawas, geysers, Maori maidens — she knew none of

these. Down south there had been few Maoris. She had learned about them at school — about the “good” and the “bad,” the “friendly,” the “hostile”; [...] [Her sister] Lucy had a book of Maori fairy tales that Malfred had never been able to cope with, as she had with the Greek and Roman legends. Once or twice, in a burst of patriotism, she had asked the girls to illustrate a Maori legend — Rangi, Hinemoa, Maui. All except one girl — Lettice Bradley — had produced a painting that had no truth or conviction or foundation; as if the national history were too fragile to attract dreaming or the belief that follows dreaming. (121)

Lettice Bradley’s painting highlights the Pakeha fear of non-belonging: she “had made an unusual painting of Maui’s fishing. She had lived and believed it. She ‘knew’ the legend, with the Biblical force of the word ‘knew’” (122). (Maui’s fishing refers to the Polynesian legend of half-man half-god Maui who fished up the North Island). Malfred is jealous that Lettice has been “apprehended by the soul of her own country” (122), that is, by the myths born of the land, and realizes that

her envy of Lettice Bradley had concealed [...] an envy of the Maori who “knew” the land. For a time, then, she had felt ashamed that none of her great-grandfathers were native chiefs or her grandmothers Maori princesses. She thought of the Maoris as she thought of Lettice Bradley. It wasn’t fair that they should know so much, instinctively, about their country; that, when they looked at the sky, they might think, without self-consciousness, of Rangi, while Malfred’s image seemed a poor secondhand one

of Gods reclining on clouds, eating lotus and hurling thunderbolts (125).

Malfred's attitude towards Maori conceals her own fears about just how "at home" she can feel in the country of her birth. This dilemma is specifically referred to towards the end of the novel, when Malfred asks: "Who am I, then?" (178). Northrop Frye suggests that the answer to the question "Who am I?" is at least partly the same as the answer to another question: "Where is here?"⁽¹¹⁾ This is nowhere more obvious than in Malfred's cry for help: "I left my family, my hometown, my island, my climate. (My spring!) [...] I left that world to come to this foreign land, this island. [...] I came here to a night of storm, a state of siege. What besieges me? Who besieges me?" (179). The answers to these questions are, in typical Frame fashion, multifarious but one possible interpretation is that the landscape, which she has used to define herself and her identity, which she has spent her life capturing in faithful reproductions in paintings, is fighting back at her. Or it may be a sign that Malfred should not have left southern New Zealand as it seems to be this internal migration that has caused her southern identity to come under a state of siege.

As Malfred becomes more desperate towards the end of the novel, she invokes the Waitaki river to help her but "even as she repeated her charm she knew it would not help, that even the Waitaki did not belong so completely to her that it could set aside time and space and season to do what she asked; it was a mountain river" (231). She resigns herself to the fact that she cannot return to the south: "I must give up forever the sight of the mountains covered with snow. [...] And then there's the

sea, a different sea, and when I think of it I try not to feel accusingly towards it; a beautiful sea, deep blue, rich, a sea of paradise such as will never flow in the south; but a different sea — oh, the human heart does not take kindly to difference!” (242). In this way, the migration from south to north provides Frame with a number of opportunities to explore the function of place, landscape and “home” in the production of personal and national identity.

Conclusions

Janet Frame’s autobiographies reveal the undeniable influence that the landscape of southern New Zealand had on the author — it is a place of mountains, snow, gorse, rivers, matagouri, frost, and Antarctic winds: “Down in the south you feel all the time a kind of formidable background, like a block of grey shadow, of a continent of ice, Antarctica in the wings. The dark there is more frightening and less friendly, you are trapped in it as in a tomb and the stone of ice will not roll away.”⁽¹²⁾ This sense of introspection, of being in an almost forgotten corner of the earth, informs much of Frame’s writings. However, this does not appear as any kind of narrow provincialism; rather, Frame deliberately dismantles notions of a fixed identity because to maintain a rigid sense of identity would constitute a territorializing process.

The influence of southern New Zealand on Janet Frame’s novels is an aspect that deserves more thorough investigation. For example, in *Living in the Maniototo* (the “bloody plain” of Central Otago), people from the north are described as living with the “freedom of mood and

impulse which would horrify the souls of many South Islanders restricted by their absolute boundaries of frost” (24); while both Dunedin (“away in the south near the Antarctic with penguins and seals and ice floes in the harbor and a freezing wind blowing yearlong from the ice,” 78) and Malfred’s Matuatangi appear in *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room*, the latter described as the “shabby provincial place” Beatrice Rainbird hails from — “it was like the end of the world — which it was” (100). In her autobiography, Frame stated that her reason for returning to New Zealand after several years abroad lay in the temptation of becoming a “mapmaker” in a country where so much was still to be explored: “Living in New Zealand, would be for me, like living in an age of mythmakers; with a freedom of imagination among all the artists because it is possible to begin at the beginning and to know the unformed places and to help form them” (414-415). This sense of an “undiscovered country” waiting to be mapped was undoubtedly felt more intensely by Frame because she was born into southern New Zealand. Angels can indeed herald beginnings.

Endnotes

- (1) David Eggleton, Introduction to *Here on Earth: The Landscape in New Zealand Literature* (7).
- (2) Janet Frame, *A State of Siege* (New York: George Braziller, 1980) 141. All further quotes from this novel refer to this edition; page numbers are included in brackets in the body of the text.
- (3) Colin McCahon (New Zealand artist) quoted in *The Reed Book of New Zealand Quotations* (153-4).
- (4) For a general discussion of settler identity as seen through literature, see Raquel Hill,

“‘A Little Land With No History’ — Pakeha Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand,” Kanagawa University *Jinbunkenkyu* No. 154 (Dec. 2004): 113-144.

- (5) For a review of King’s biography that focuses on his use of place, see Raquel Hill, The English Literary Society of Japan *Studies in English Literature* English Number 46 (March 2005): 275-283.
- (6) Increasing interest in regional anthologies of writing can be seen in the popularity of the 2003 “Our City” series which presents a selection of literature inspired by each of New Zealand’s four major cities, Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. According to Ian Watts, the series editor, “Each contributor [...] has a strong association with the city concerned, and every selection has something significant to say about the character of the city. Together they create a vivid picture of what makes the city unique.”
- (7) Janet Frame, “Sunday Afternoon at Two O’Clock,” *Under Flagstaff: An Anthology of Dunedin Poetry* (37). These four lines are inscribed on the Writer’s Walk plaque honouring Janet Frame in Dunedin’s Octagon.
- (8) “An Interview With Bill Manhire” by Iain Sharp. Downloaded from the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre <<http://www.nzpec.auckland.ac.nz/authors/manhire/sharp.ptml>> (15pp), August 4 2004.
- (9) This recalls a line from Charles Brasch’s poem which Frame quotes in her autobiography: “And there was Charles Brasch confiding in the sea as I had confided, without words, in the Clutha, ‘Speak for us, great sea’” (193).
- (10) Frame specifically refers to Curnow when she describes her awakening to the existence of New Zealand literature when she chanced upon an anthology of New Zealand verse in 1945: “Here [...] I could read in Allen Curnow’s poems about Canterbury and the plains, about ‘dust and distance’, about our land having its share of time and not having to borrow from a northern Shakespearian wallet” (192-193).
- (11) Frye quoted in Atwood, 17.
- (12) Quoted in Olssen, 214. The source of this quote is not noted and I have been unable to locate it.

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