

## By the Burn's Side: Or, An Attempt to Create a Mid-twentieth Century (Family) Legendary from Scottish Southern New Zealand

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(1) 'Memory Hold-The-Door'.

John Buchan, 1940, in the book of the same name.

(2) 'It is the basis of the desire of any group of human beings to have a place of their own, a place which gives them reality, presence, power of living, which feeds them body and soul.'

Paul Tillich, *Theory of Culture*, 1959.

(3) 'I urge my readers, my generation, to gain insights into life's conflicts, to interpret their community.'

Jyrki Kiskinen, writing in 1996.

These mottoes should alert us all to the too oft-forgotten or ignored fact that, as we age, certain early experiences not written down in those moments, can indeed be rebuilt out of memory into reflective and comforting narratives. My paper<sup>1</sup> will both follow, or reflect on, the theory of personal memory and it will outline a specific pattern of culture which I have been able to re-create.

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My thoughts begin with the benign reflection that the relation between personal story and public account, between the social act of relating one's perceptions or events to a younger family member, and the collective narrative or history available in books, relates not merely to embedding society and culture but to one's selfhood and essential identity. For, as we age, we live less in the present which is often pointless, tiring and worse,

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<sup>1</sup> This is largely the text of a similar paper given in Melbourne to the ISFNR Congress held there in 2001. [Those *Proceedings* were never published.]

and are not excited by the likely future. Indeed, as Buchan, the Scottish novelist and diplomat, put it so near his own end:

The abiding things lie in the past, and the mind busies itself with what Henry James has called 'the irresistible reconstruction', to the all too baffled vision, of irrevocable presences and aspects of serenity. *Memory Hold-the-door* (1940), p. 7.

The following presentation—much as delivered in Melbourne in July 2001 to a Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research was an attempt to report on what is still strong after a life-time largely sundered from the once sole culturally-sustaining source of my being.

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It is the contention of this paper, one quickly penned after a year of first deliberative and then free-flowing memorial reconstruction and pattern-seeking,—that the early, pre-twenty three, images, experiences and dramatic landscapes of my birth country, New Zealand, never fade, even if they have become largely a symbolic geography; and that the later learned behaviour/ culture is of much less deep significance for the mature person in his/her private moments. For I had broken the pattern of life of so many New Zealand intellectuals, by not returning subsequently to the only location and milieu which lived in their bones—home.

For me, my childhood's hamlet or village of Belleknowes is still there, ever more desired and graspable, never deserted of my erstwhile peers and then neighbours.<sup>1</sup> For, indeed, one's first culture is never forgotten, as the later experiences and socially expected behaviour are but super-imposed on it, the recollections in memory's store-house not scattered but remarkably ordered, crisp, and enforcing of personal identity.

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The reflections which follow were much shaped by early daily and inevitable tales, by my family's folk memory which was strengthened by a largely unlettered and vibrant story-telling tradition. For no one of the preceding generations had gone beyond elementary school, and while

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<sup>1</sup> For several papers on like topics, see *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, ed. by Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1994).

books fascinated and were eagerly devoured, talk—good talk of the past and of far away that 'could tire the sun. . . and drive him from the sky'—was much the better activity.

As a child I was gifted with curiosity, with the time generously given of my seniors, and with their sharing of experiences, such as those of my grandmother, herself a child witness of a hanging on the Sussex Downs in 1872, of the ill-treatment of negroes in Durban in 1887, or with her early recollections, as of her grandfather, a guardsman at Waterloo. But most of her tales exemplified her distressed conscience as to human greed and socially condoned cruelty.

Then, too, I had the peculiar good fortune to be a child in one of New Zealand's quieter regions, a very distinctive province which had long passed its roaring days in the third quarter of the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup>, and its later amazing nexus with and dominance of so much of Australia's mercantile, shipping and insurance industries. For the Scottish south of New Zealand had - at least until the 1920s - the most considerable marine commerce with Australia, particularly through the ports of Melbourne and Hobart.

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I was born in Depression times to modest parents of mixed Anglo-Celtic stock in a New Zealand city, set on seven hills, a community of perhaps 80,000 souls. This 1848 foundation settlement and soon to be southern capital of the Free Church of Scotland's selective entry colony was known from the outset as Dunedin, in a deliberate restoration of the proud original name, long lost, of Scotland's own first city. Yet, despite its pedigree and colonial glories, in my childhood Dunedin was the smallest of the metropolitan centres and the one growing least rapidly. However, it had—and still has—a character all its own.

Due to a quirk of fate my birth took place within the church-founded University of Otago, an institution commenced in the 1860s and the nation's senior tertiary institution—a place where I would later study for five years, every day crossing its bubbling stream known from its Edinburgh precursor as the Waters of Leith. Approaching primary school, much earlier I had walked beside the foundation time spring of Kaituna, Dunedin's 'Tank Stream'. Later I would support myself as a student by working alongside humble men in a malodorous foundry at

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1940s I met many aged former alluvial or reef miners, born on the goldfields in the 1870s and 1880s, who had never gone beyond their colonial birthplaces, and yet for whom Walter Scott's Scotland or Synge's Aran Islands were as spiritually sustaining as the Bible or the Missal.

Burnside, a place to be subsequently famed for the spectacular Abbotsford subsidences. As my Scottish style grammar school studies occurred by Littlebourne's creek, 'Craigielea', it is possible to argue that much of my psyche was formed and nurtured beside these streamlets so symbolic of the Presbyterian 'religion', of Celtic and of Maori culture.



*Statue of Robbie Burns, in the Octagon, central Dunedin, NZ.*

For they represent, very neatly: the indigenous Maori heritage that is also part of the culture of the pakeha; the Scottish theological and educational tradition; and its largely classless and fiercely democratic working and social ethos.

In short, I was born in and a later product of the remarkable experiment in generous education and democratic living called Otago. And I was, too, a child of a fascinating once volcanic sea-coast already nurturing well my seniors, the to-be-famed writers, Olaf Ruhen, who deemed himself Tangaroa's god-child, and Janet Frame, who would find for herself further north on that same coast 'a kingdom by the sea'. . .

Rev. Thomas Burns, the pastor to the First Fleet and the early settlement—was itself stimulated, or rather, convulsed in 1861 by the remarkable gold-rushes which very significantly followed hard on the like tumultuous Australian outbreaks of the 1850s. These relatively nearby catchment areas soon produced wave after wave of the 'new iniquity',<sup>3</sup> Irish and other wanderers, from Victoria in particular.

In one of the last gold-fuelled incursions from across the Tasman there came my paternal grandparents, while my mother's parents had sailed, respectively, one, a distant kinsman of Burns, from Scotland, and the other, an orphaned girl, from southern England. This grandmother

<sup>3</sup> The phrase 'old identity' is deemed by the *Oxford English Dictionary* to have its origins in this Otago influx. The *Supplement II* (1976), p. 237, quotes: '1974: A. Bathgate, *Colonial Experiences* iii. 26. The term 'old identities' took its origin from a speech made by one of the members of the Provincial Council. Mr. E.B. Cargill, who, in speaking of the new arrivals said that the early settlers should endeavour to preserve their old identity.

would live amongst the Maoris at Katigi, south of coastal Oamaru, before marrying. Thus it was that my parents were both born late in the imperial glory of Queen Victoria.

They were also tragically involved in World War I, she losing a very youthful fiance in France, he then spending a long period in solitary confinement for his anti-war stance, a moral conscience issue not untypical of that of many colonial Celts. This last event I was not told of until much later, but I was aware—from the age of five—of my mother's distress on Anzac Days, when I had to put a personal wreath for her at my school's memorial gates. My secondary school also had a like Memorial Entrance commemorating its several hundred former pupils who had made the supreme sacrifice in each of the World Wars. And, like George Johnston, I saw so many of the gassed pensioners coughing out their last days.

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Let me recall the well-remembered Aoteoroa strands in some sort of historical sequence. First the Maori. In pre-war days this was largely one—of legends<sup>4</sup> as in one's primary school readers<sup>5</sup>;—of shore and ocean fishing; of the life of the *kaik* (or village on the sea-shore), or of the grand navigation to Hawaiki; of visits to the wondrously carved meeting house in the Otago Museum, of Maori rugby footballers from the Taiaoroa Heads *hapu* (sub-tribe); or my own school haka. There were, too the contemporary Maoris at war, ever recalled in that spine-tingling song, 'Maori Battalion, March to Victory, Maori Battalion staunch and true'. But there were darker sides to the romantic images—the tales of the northern prisoners of war from the 1860s land conflicts, then forced to build the city's later named 'Maori Road' in the hills, so many dying along it of tuberculosis in the chill winters; or the more recent decimation of the male ranks through heart disease and alcohol.

Then there were more recent and living Maori heroes, All Black footballers, doctors and clerics in training, all determined to provide a new form of non-tribalised leadership—so many of them associated with the redoubtable Varsity A Rugby team.

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps inevitably this was Sir George Grey's *Polynesian Mythology* (1885) in a selections edition.

<sup>5</sup> As produced by Messrs. Whitcombe and Tombs, Ltd.

The sea, too,—its tang ever present in one's nostrils—was an essential dimension with its centuries of legends from the South Pacific; of Captain Cook's complete mapping of the New Zealand coast, as represented on the 1940 national centennial stamp; of the albatross colony at Cape Saunders, near the Harbour mouth, stories of which may well have become English legend through Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'; the 1820s/1830s sealing and whaling in the colder waters; the whole ecology and marine culture of the Ross Sea from which comes the Polar current that chills Otago's coast; the German raiders of both World Wars; the shot-up destroyers from the Solomons campaign coming into dock for repairs; or the near mass-murder of his Kiwi crew by the British captain of H.M.S *Neptune*; the tall training ships in sail, like the 'Amakura'; or the day when Mountbatten and Montgomery stood together in the Octagon after war's end. Then too there was, as there still is, Dunedin's proud involvement with Antarctica, especially from its deep-water Port Chalmers, involving Captain R.F. Scott, Admiral Byrd and so many more.<sup>6</sup>

Olaf Ruhen once called the sea his 'mentor', and there can be few older (Southern) New Zealanders who do not understand what this means as they recall the days before the Common Market when the nation had some thirty deep-sea ports for the export of frozen meat and other commodities for our (then) beloved Mother England.

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The gold discoveries of 1861 I have mentioned, but not the consequent industrial expansion in the seaboard towns. In the hinterland miners had found their way into the hidden valleys and remote basins of Central Otago, where the rocks and alluvial waste were found to contain so much gold.

With a father—the last of a Victoria-nurtured family—himself born on such a field, it was inevitable that I spent many holidays amongst the ghostly and romantically dreamy remnants of those hectic decades. Each small centre had become by then a cluster of dilapidated and largely unoccupied buildings, abandoned gardens and tall imported Northern Hemisphere pines towering over heaps of tailings—as at Naseby, Ophir, St Bathans and Kyeburn Diggings. Little of a once vast industry was explained to me, but the blood still tingles whenever I hear the incantatory golden language—the pick and shovel; wash-dirt; a gulch

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<sup>6</sup> This still continues with the magnificent videos made of the Ross Sea, McMurdo Sound, etc., by Southern Television of Dunedin, and sent world-wide.

(that infallible indicator of American mind, or Californian memories); fossicking; or 'prospecting on the alluvial'.

As a reflective only child, I explored the old shacks, the rain-filled 'mining-holes', viaduct 'races' and still straggling Mechanics' Institutes, some yet holding their worn original copies of popular novels by Dickens, Trollope, or Boldrewood.

But the almost completely empty country was alive for me as I clutched a copy of Thatcher's *Colonial Reciter*, or was regaled with tales of the presence on the fields of Bully Hayes, Lola Montez, or Mother Mary McKillop, or of the violent lawlessness that necessitated the importing from Victoria of St. John Brannigan, Police Commissioner extraordinary, at whose funeral in 1876 thousands had marched through Dunedin's muddy thoroughfares.

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Being myself a product of an early-established primary and the first, 1863-founded, secondary schools, I was well aware of the central place of education in the world order and of Presbyterianism as both a 'religion' and a way for life. Yet the selfless of the dominie, usually manse-born, was an illustration of everyday godliness, as were reflective long graces and regular family prayers. Such nurture was a sound preparation for the robust 'Varsity, whose doors were open to all classes and ages, even from 1945 and its rationed austerities. I had been ear-marked as its own from the crash course in Esperanto thrust upon me at twelve years.

When there I did classics mixed with engineering mathematics, as well as literature in the vernacular—always taught by the professor himself, in vast lecture-halls, with members of several faculties and of all ages. Student rags pricked pomposity, as did autumn 'capping' festivals—all a part of the life of the town where students and university teachers still constitute a greater proportion of the population than in any other centre. And as there is no division between departments and commercial/residential areas, the town has always deemed the 'Varsity 'ours'.

Because of the enormous pride in its distinctive and clear-cut antecedents, the Otago (Early) Settlers' Association and its Museum have long been the most vital secular heart of the city and this vast complex or 'Folk Museum' is perhaps more community visually-dominant than any other in the former British Empire. Its arresting collections of whaling, mining and domestic artifacts, as well as all heavy transport from the 1860s fascinated me, as did the tales related of the common trials of all the European settlers.

Yet other aspects of the city identified for me its self-image:

- the splendid mock-Tudor Railway Station, with a 900 yards main platform;
- the site of the magnificent Dunedin and South Seas Exhibition of 1925-1926;
- the impressive churches and cathedrals; and
- the dignified public statues, the finest of which was the magnificently sited one of Robert Burns, uncle to the pastor, and, in 1868, foundation Chancellor of the University of Otago.

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Even more so than any other provincial capital, Dunedin was the home of bookshops both new and second-hand, peculiarly English in range and quality, and epitomised by Newboulds, with a regular stock of two million volumes. Similarly from the early 1920s it had been a city pioneering radio and with a remarkable number of community-run stations. Like New Zealand's southern politics, they were then predominantly left-wing as were most electorates in the moral-conscienced south. The Scottishness was ubiquitous—street-names lovingly copied from Edinburgh; the provincial games celebrated every foundation games at the Caledonian Ground; the innumerable pipe-bands, more, the Queen said in 1954, than she had ever seen in one place; Burns' night; the haggis, the kilts, and the Low Scots accents persisting still.

Social life of the 1940s and 1950s was still more puritanical than liberal, yet one rejecting paternalism and politically leftist if pressured from Wellington, while ever deeply concerned about man's recent past, his present and future; rejecting violence and supportive of world-order – witness its remarkable pride in the then new United Nations Organisation; and concerned with understanding of one's own identity and so of the way to personal happiness.

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In short, my New Zealand nurture had a character all of its own, particularly in its setting- of storied harbour and hills; - of many tales of 'passage out' and of long memories; —of university and industrial activities cheek by jowl; of an ubiquitous and



fierce pride in education - all combining to create a distinctive, if tiny, metropolis, where Scottish traditions were dynamic after a century of transportation to a distant land.

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While all of this must symbolise my essential self, the reasons for giving this perhaps formless 'prequel'—to utilise a word coined by my later teacher and mentor, Tolkien, who led me to pursue depth study of all formative and significant cultural tradition—must indeed be obvious.

The purpose of such a 'preface' is to assist one to follow the steps from which I have been able to define honestly the essential seed-bed for the 'legends' which I see now even more clearly to have made my young adult and essential self. Much of the process is also true of others, intensively nurtured in a particular and, surely atypical fashion, and then long sundered from those vital sources. It is perhaps symbolic of the necessary acts of memory for all of us as reflective beings, if we are to stand firm as individuals in the face of (global) technology's mindless destruction of all personal/folk narrative in these post-millennium days.

The process of discovery is, further, nearly one of a life perspective, in that, like many of my studious peers, I had left New Zealand for further study at 'Home', since then spending most of my life out of my native country. This long period—in England, Australia and Scotland, in particular,—may now be seen to have been a partly unconscious desire to understand more clearly what made the memories of those who begat me. My various later short return visits home have enabled me to identify the better the very bulky if invisible baggage that I have carried with me.

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Beyond the sectors of my investigation that are identifiable with Otago's history, culture and atypical personalities, there were many chambers in that palace of my memory<sup>7</sup> that are still to be located; many like places and concepts available to you all: axes that pivot; levels/platforms that separate and so challenge to effort; borders which control and define your own various 'others'; shadows that haunt; forgotten rooms that define/terrify/fulfil; types that recur; gardens that civilise; water that both pools and connects; images that motivate.

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<sup>7</sup> Several of these ideas are borrowed from *Chambers for a Memory Palace* (1994), by Donlyn Lyndon and Charles W. Moore.

That earlier personal time and place can and do give each one of us many images from the most intimate and personal to the most public and the most sublime. They are also linked to the elements and to the cycles of nature, capable of mediating between it and humankind. Layers of the earlier culture can identify the conditions of your making.

Certain shapes from that time of personal growth are embedded in our own perceptions of culture and they carry with them humbling recollections that individualise us; a complex and supportive interactive system that lives within our essential selves. It is also one which we may and should activate to ensure self-knowledge of the most rewarding kind. As William Faulkner said long ago, 'memory believes before knowledge remembers.'<sup>8</sup>

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For me, mid-century Dunedin and Otago—perhaps for you, an earlier time and lifestyle—these give the bright light which defines our first formative and later spaces and which is continually filtered through human memory. That light may be playful or mystic, exciting or ghostly, but it is above all fascinating, able to enliven the dull shades of the now that may well depress or lull mind and spirit.

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We can, and should, unpackage our personal heritage as far as possible in its original time and place, because we will soon discover ideas and happenings—our very own folk narratives that have patterned so much of our earlier lives,<sup>9</sup> the rooted advantages and inescapable painful realities of that time, the conditions of the spirit which as John Clare once said of his own East Anglian place, 'made my being'.

Fracture from our home scene is something we all have to endure, yet we are all able to return to it, with some initial effort, perhaps, but later with both ease and insights.

As a scholar and human being, I find myself constantly hankering after 'primordial' insights/artifacts/statements which still float about in my memory—a Maori *punga*, a miner's washing dish for 'dirt' or gravel, a young and awkward frigate bird wheeling and screaming over my

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Chambers of Memory', p. 144 in *Words from the Land*, ed. by Stephen Trimble (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> See the 'Introduction' to Ronald Blyth's *Characters and their Landscapes* (London and New York: A Harvest/ HBJ Book, 1983).

head—which all seem to say to me something much more relevant about my life than any learned book or travel-given insight of my later years.

Just when that early knowledge became the insights of a deeper wisdom I do not know, but I return with joy in both dreams and waking reverie to those locations and positions in space that are my Wordsworthian interior landscape, and still in need of vigorous questioning and subtle interpretation. As Ronald Blythe has said so insightfully of these recalled times of nurture:

For some it is a fatal air, for others a kind of inescapable nourishment which expands the soul. . . a form of permanent geography. . . [such as] an annexed scene, as a house which does not belong to its residents, but to my most personal countryside. . . a literate landscape where I remain a native.<sup>10</sup>

Memory with its innumerable stories and insights has many powers to enrich—restoring the absent to the present, the dead to the living; the child you were forty and more years ago to your present self;—all of which vistas signal us as pilgrims as to how to go, in order to be sure of our own survival. We must all seek *our* childhoods—I need mine as a point of refuge, a time when all seemed simple and ordered, and we did not despair of humanity or of God.

Challenged by memory we can move forward. To recall our communities of nurture means that we are able to live in more than one world, and can transform present tensions—much as I have done—into a positive culture, spiritual inquiry and a quest for universal justice.<sup>11</sup> Memory can bridge the great gulf between skepticism and belief, can position us at the threshold of revelation, give us the strength to resist the present and the trumpery, and to distinguish between the deeply spiritual and the merely apparent.

But, above all, it can restore calm to confused humanity, and act so as to enable us to enter into and accept the experiences, the tales told by many another. These other inner worlds we must grasp with imagination and not with the intellect alone. Terence said so well: ‘Nothing which concerns mankind I deem to be foreign to me.’

Properly understood another's story—or, for that matter, those from our earlier selves—are an echo of the theme of Christian love as expressed in St. Paul's *Epistle to the Corinthians* (I.13):

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<sup>10.</sup> *Op.cit.*, pp. 7,ff.

<sup>11.</sup> Such sentiments are common in the reflective and healing writings of the 1986 Nobel Prize winner, Elie Wiesel, as in his *From the Kingdom of Memory* (1990), or *The Forgotten* (1992).

(Charity) beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things . . . For now we see as through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known. (vv. 7,12)

He who remembers with compassion has achieved calmness and self-discipline, a greater wisdom; he or she has entered into a world of revealed story that, for all its seeming complexity of motivation and characterization, is consistently archetypal and personally mythical.

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These skeletally presented researches into a earlier self, and the implications they contain, may easily be dismissed as obvious, but they are certainly not a desertion of distanced and painstaking recreation of the recalled significant anecdote, vision or experience.<sup>12</sup> That vernacular landscape, that weaving of story and memories are, in the words of John Brinckerhoff,

the image of our common humanity—hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love. (*Discovering The Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1984), p. xii.)

Apart from personal recollections of the behaviour or dress of relatives, it is contended that these personal folk narratives, recalled, contain abundant authentic evidence of those persons' preferences and responses to culture then, which has, I trust, in some part, flowed into my own essential self.

And so I return to my title—and to the burn or burns meandering down to Otago Harbour and the enveloping Pacific Ocean—and, in human terms, to those who tended me there. Their past, given so generously and full-bloodedly—to make me so rich in memory,—is not dead, is not gone, cannot ever be completely escaped,—or erased.

Memory's reconstruction is selective, potent and inspirational, as is my like gift to my sons.

That past for me, or their past for them, quite simply *is*.

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<sup>12</sup> They are layered with the traces of previous generations' struggles to earn a living somewhere, to raise their children, and to participate in community life.