

**The Kendrick Smithyman-Graham Perkins Archive 1942- 45: An Introduction**

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When Kendrick Smithyman was called up for military service with the New Zealand Army (1<sup>st</sup> Field regiment) in December 1941 he was 19 years old (born 9 October 1922), and had just completed two years' teacher training at the Auckland Teachers College. Among his closest friends was Graham Perkins (born 1921), a fellow pupil at Point Chevalier Primary School (1931-34) and, later, at Seddon Memorial Technical College (1935-37); Smithyman had stayed on at high school for two more years (1938-39), before attending Teachers College in 1940-41.

As school-boys, Smithyman and Perkins often went bike riding together, especially into the Waitakere Ranges a few kilometres further west from Point Chevalier, the suburb in West Auckland where they both lived. These bike rides are referred to in the well-known poem "Walk past those houses on a Sunday morning" (1943, Poem 2) one of Smithyman's first-published and most often reprinted poems. He nostalgically recalls these innocent pre-war activities in some of his war-time letters to Perkins, as in that written from Levin in August 1943:

Do you remember the holly trees & the paddock we used to play in behind your place? And walking to Avondale & through Mt Albert one Sunday night a few years back? The Sunday at Waiheke, and God knows how many Sundays in the ranges, lying in the grass beside that stump where you tried a stunt photograph? The line of the Manukau heads, and the run down from Titirangi to New Lynn? Some day we'll have that sort of thing again. (Letter 8)

There is a similar comment in Letter 9 (September 1943).

As it turned out, the two friends had very different war experiences. Smithyman was never involved in active combat, spending most of his war-service in New Zealand in various camps—Papakura, Paihia, Whenuapai, Levin, Nelson, Woodbourne (near Blenheim) and others—before finally being sent to Norfolk Island (not a combat zone) from January to September 1945. Perkins, on the other hand, saw active service in both the Pacific and European theatres, being in the Solomon Islands (Guadalcanal) in 1943-44 and in the Italian campaign in 1945. Throughout the war they kept up fairly regular contact by letter. Perkins' letters to Smithyman do not survive, but through all the confusion and constant movement of military life Perkins somehow managed to retain 21 of Smithyman's letters (and the 38 poems or poem-fragments that were enclosed with them); there are five letters from 1942, seven from 1943, two from 1944, and seven from 1945. Few of the poems are dated, but so far as one can tell from the letters and Perkins' notes, one poem dates from 1942, 13 from 1943, three from 1944, and 21 from 1945. Perkins eventually passed on this important archive to Smithyman's widow Margaret Edgcumbe in 2006 and they have kindly agreed to its publication here.

The letters and poems are worth publishing for several reasons. First, Smithyman is by general consent one of New Zealand's most important poets and the letters and poems provide fascinating and invaluable insights into a key period of his life and writing career. In 1942, when the letters and poems begin, Smithyman was as yet unpublished (apart from high school and Training College publications), though already fully committed to becoming a poet. The letters record first publications in *New Zealand New Writing*, *Angry Penguins* and *Korero*, the Armed Forces magazine. The letters also make frequent reference to his writing. As he commented in Letter 9 (September 1943):

Every time I write a letter my writing comes into it. Pardon the intrusion, but it's the constant factor, the thing that keeps me myself and not just another bloody erk, one of the bloodless wonders who'll never see any action.

Of the 38 poems (plus one verse letter included in Letter 16), only eight were published in his lifetime or in his posthumous *Collected Poems*, most in considerably

revised form. These manuscripts therefore allow a rare glimpse into a major poet's workshop, so to speak. Smithyman's letters are also informative about his reading of and dealings with other New Zealand poets, including A.R.D. Fairburn, R.A.K. Mason and Keith Sinclair, and poets elsewhere including W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, Ezra Pound, E.E. Cummings, T.S. Eliot, Herbert Read, A.E. Housman and others. There is also evidence of what else he was reading; plays—Shakespeare, Wycherley, Chekhov, O'Neill; and fiction—Tolstoy, Proust, Flaubert, Saroyan, Charles Morgan. He comments, too, on the literary scene in New Zealand and Australia, on journals such as *New Zealand New Writing*, *Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand* and *Angry Penguins*, and on literary and artistic figures such as Frank Sargeson, Jane Mander, E.H. McCormick, Ian Gordon, Max Harris, Arthur Sewell, John Weeks and May Smith. The letters in particular are full of lively commentary on the various parts of New Zealand where Smithyman was stationed or visited, especially Waikato, Northland, Horowhenua, Nelson, Marlborough, Canterbury and Auckland. His posting to Norfolk Island (his first travel outside New Zealand) produced lively descriptions of the geography of the island and its convict history. The letters and poems also provide continuous insights into the war as seen from the perspective of a youthful but unusually thoughtful non-combatant soldier. And there are frequent passages of reflection on the past, present and future, as the young poet strives to come to terms with his circumstances and to work out a philosophy of life and art in the context of a world at war.

### **The drivelling futility of this bloody life**

Smithyman's letters provide little explanation of why, with the exception of the months in Norfolk Island—also a non-combat experience—his war-service was all spent in New Zealand. He occasionally refers to the matter. In Letter 8 (August 1943) he says: "now I'm safely removed from the firing line I'm getting quite bellicose. I expect to be in the islands soon, so will get my guts full no doubt." Within a month this possibility had disappeared. He wrote from Nelson (Letter 10):

The routine of this station gives me nothing to write about except the drivelling futility of this bloody life. Am now in charge of nuts, bolts, washers

etc. a most interesting job. I sit and stare out the window waiting to be certified. I had a crack at getting overseas as a replacement but missed.

The reference to being “in charge of nuts, bolts, washers etc.” alludes to his role as a stores clerk, or as he describes it in one letter: “I’m officially storeman of this Troop, in reality quartermaster-rousteabout [sic]” (Letter 1). He seems to have retained this role when he transferred from the Army to the Air Force after about a year (in December 1942). In some ways the stores job suited Smithyman quite well as it enabled him to get on with his writing. In Letter 2, written from Waipu in July 1942, he says:

My job though I get intensely annoyed at times is eminently suitable for my purposes. Whenever I wish to write I retire to my P W D shack which serves as store and spread out the petrol accounts. Then I set to work to write. This afternoon being wet and the boss being absent I set to work and wrote a whole string of poems...

The change from Army to Air Force did not bring about any improvement in his mood, especially the infantry training and pre-entry Air Force work with which he began. Indeed, he regretted the shift. In Letter 6 he wrote from Whenuapai (January 1943):

I never liked the military way much and I don’t now. The delights of bayonet drill are wholly illusory. I take no pleasure from poking steel into ti-tree and kidding myself that by so doing I contribute to the betterment of humanity. It may be but I cannot convince myself of it...I tolerated the pettiness of artillery: infantry I can stand not at all. To go crawling across paddocks with a rifle is not my idea of seeing the country—but you will get the general drift of what I feel.

Not surprisingly, his tedium and frustration increased as the war ground on. In December 1943 he wrote from Woodbourne (Letter 12):

Nothing, nothing and nothing. The southwest blows through the willows, the sun wanders over, and we sleep at night. A little beer and letter writing. Not much work and bugger-all inducement... Mainly, this is functionless stupidity. I'm so much a cog, I can't see anything of the machine's working because I'm still bound to the routine that signifies its action...

In 1944 his mood got worse, which may explain why his letters to Perkins decreased in frequency in that year. In July 1944 (Letter 14) at home on leave he wrote:

Pardon this silence. I'm no good for writing these days, too bloody stale and flat, and all run-out. The family are poorly, mother progressively worse, and the old man intermittently sick. Myself, going steadily crazier and duller in the service monotony.

Service life often seemed monotonous or pointless but he also felt an increasing alienation from civilian life, as he wrote in January 1945 while waiting to be sent to Norfolk Island:

I feel as if I have been here too long. I've not been good at waiting at any time as you know and I would rather have gone sooner than hang around in the fashion of the last few weeks than have had this dragging that saps one so desperately, this awkwardness of waiting and being unable to do anything or make any start since everything is qualified by the nameless place and the dates of our future...I realised once more today that I am now more at ease back in camp than I am at home. One can largely put aside responsibilities in the anonymity...It is something civilians cannot understand. There is a definite gap between us who have seen service, even in degrees, and the total civilian. They, outside us, may have sympathy but they can't understand.  
(Letter 15)

He was relieved when finally the opportunity came to go abroad, even if only as far as Norfolk Island:

Not that I regret this going away. I want to go. I feel that otherwise I would be cut off from experience that is so big a part of the life of the people of this country, of friends like yourself whom I have grown with and if there is anything in me as a writer, I must know what that experience is. It is now necessary. (Letter 15)

His mood picked up with the stimulus of being in a new environment in Norfolk Island, with its stone buildings redolent of its brutal past as a convict settlement and its sub-tropical climate and vegetation (this is especially apparent in his first letter from there at the end of January 1945):

I have been here little more than a week. The months will temper my feeling for the place. It is after all exile from home but it is a place of strange beauty. I like the place and will carry on liking it...Last Sunday I sat on the cliff edge above the sheer fall to the sea and the bosun birds whistled past and the grass was warm and the war and all its bastardry was a long way off. (Letter 16)

However, before long the old sense of tedium set in, though his spirits lifted again as the end of the war approached and the long ordeal of service came to an end, his impatience exacerbated by the death of his mother and his frustration at not being at home to help his father:

They say the war is over. No hysterics, no excitement now. Not much at any time. We have been waiting too long. Now we start to wait for the last moves. The long road goes home and back to the mediocrity of the suburbs...We are not disillusioned for I doubt that we had illusions to lose. We are not desperate. We are only tired and strange to ourselves, to the past before we were in service and to the present since its purpose has been negated and definitely to our future where we must learn to move again and be. (Letter 21, August 1945)

## The truest vehicle

Smithyman was already by the age of 20 fully committed to being a poet, feeling, indeed, a sense of inescapable vocation, a fact that becomes evident from repeated references to his writing in his letters, not to mention the poems that he enclosed with them. A comment from Letter 10 (September 1943) illustrates the level of commitment to writing and poetry in particular:

You asked in the last letter I had, for something I've written and you shall have it willingly, not that I seek an audience—my public as you know is bloody small—or that it may have value in it—it may have, I can't judge—but it is sent as reminder that out of this nettle patch there is still at least an effort being made to pluck some flower, not safety of the original phrase, but security. The poetry, after all, is security to me. It's so much part of me, good or ill in its content, that it grows more and more. It's not always a comfortable or easy thing to carry, this desire to create.

In Letter 6 (January 1943) he mentions that he has been writing stories, though poetry remains his first priority, despite the lack of opportunities for publication: “Poetry is still my truest vehicle, but its field is so limited in publication.”

Smithyman sent a group of poems to the critic E.H. McCormick, author of *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (1940), the first substantial critical account of the country's literature and art, and was delighted with his response (Letter 7, April 1943):

He was most encouraging, saying of the poetry that it was “good, fresh, and passionate” the last not necessarily in the conventional sense! Extravagance of phrases and ideas leads to obscurity, as I will readily admit. He says in conclusion, that it is usual to end a critique with “shows marked promise,” but he would scorn such condescension...All of which pleased me greatly, as encouragement goes a long way in view of present difficulties. It is easier to keep quiet, but God knows why, this is the only thing I keep hammering at. For what? Not profit most assuredly. Fame? I doubt it. It seems only to satisfy the urge in me, to write without question.

A friend and contemporary whose progress as a poet he monitored closely was Keith Sinclair, later well-known as an historian as well as a poet, whom he had known since primary school and who also lived in Point Chevalier. In August 1943 (Letter 8) he wrote:

I was home on a weekend recently, & saw some of Keith Sinclair's stuff. He's made a deal of progress in the last year, but his chief fault is still his lack of discipline in writing. Not the discipline of "patterned" verse, mathematical verse...but the discipline of ideas with the exact words. For my own part I'm writing largely in formal measures mainly a mixture of Auden & Yeats, & perhaps for that reason Keith's work affects me so. He has a very real talent & when he matures his verse will be worth reading. It is now, but he is still his chief enemy in that his personality is a mixture of adolescent and adult, & that leaves his pen. Once he overcomes that he'll be right.

Occasionally Smithyman commented on specific poems that he had included in his letters. For example, "Prothlamion," one of several poems written to Phillida Mays, a WAAF with whom he was in love:

The "Prothlamion" means much to me. I think that as a sample of my poetry, it's good. I like the images, and the rhythms in it. But its chief value is an association which I can tell you and hesitate to tell others. Apart from Phil Mays for whom it was written as so much of this year's work has been, you'll be the only one to have seen it so far. (Letter 10, September 1943)

The poem did not succeed in winning the lady's hand, however; she turned him down. "Prothalamion" was never published, though "Lady as Swan," also written to Phillida Mays (though not sent to Perkins), was. Other specific poems on which he made comment were "Lazarus" (Poem 7, see Letter 11) and "Put down your christ somewhere" (Poem 10). Of the latter he wrote: (Letter 10, September 1943):

The "put down..." piece is the development of the short lyrical form at which I've worked on and [off] since last year. It has, I hope, something of the tone



of Yeats' "Woman young and old" series, but with it my own tricks that make it mine and not just imitation.

Significantly, it is the sinewy and dramatic later Yeats, represented by poems such as "A Woman Young and Old," rather than the earlier Yeats of the "Celtic twilight" period that appealed to Smithyman; he was a Modernist right from the start. Such comments also indicate the degree of self-awareness and technical know-how involved in his poetry and his determination to model himself on the best modern practitioners such as Yeats and Auden, or (to take a New Zealand example), Mason. The second poem of this group (Poem 10), "bring laurel here or bay," owes something to such anti-romantic poems of Mason's as "The Lesser Stars." The model of Auden is most obvious perhaps in poems such as "[Comrades we cannot speak]" (Poem 16) and "[Now the crisp earth redresses]" (Poem 18), or in the imperative voice of "Walk past those houses..." (Poem 2).

The enthusiasm of McCormick and others to whom he showed his verse, such as Arthur Sewell, Professor of English at Auckland University, and Fairburn, encouraged Smithyman to submit a collection to the short-lived Progressive Publishing Society in Wellington. His optimism proved to be unfounded—the Society crashed through financial mismanagement—though he did have some poems in two of the four issues of the Society's *New Zealand New Writing*, edited by Ian Gordon. He later became furious at the failure of "that bunch of Wellington bastards" to respond to his letters or return his MSS (see especially Letter 17, April 1945). Plans for Bob Lowry to publish collections of his stories and poems (mentioned in the same letter) also came to nothing. However, he did succeed in getting some poems accepted by the cutting-edge Australian journal *Angry Penguins* as he excitedly told Perkins (Letter 15, January 1945):

Two days back I had a letter from Max Harris of the Angry Penguins in Australia—you'll remember the Ern Malley business—and I'll be printed in the next issue. I've seen the advance copy of the current issue. The magazine is without doubt the finest that has been printed in this part of the world. It is really good. And I've broken in there. So bloody what?

Increasingly, as the war went on, Smithyman devoted less time to writing poems than stories (one of which, “The Raft,” about an air-crew who crashed in the sea and could not be rescued because of adverse weather) appeared in *Korero*, v.2 no.5, 1944, pp. 22-25). He commented, “Lately I’ve done too much prose to bother much with verse” (Letter 17, April 1945). Although Smithyman mentions several other stories he had written, this was the only one to achieve publication. However, the stimulus of a new environment in Norfolk Island seems to have got the poetry-writing juices flowing again, beginning with the verse letter included in Letter 16 (January 1945).

The last of the letters, written after the end of the war had been announced, includes an important statement about the future of poetry as part of his “practical testament of faith” (Letter 21, August 1945):

My faith and my planning is in concrete things, in places we have known and actions we have known. I am trying to be integrated and not distracting myself with esoteric things. Since I have written differently earlier, you may ask What about the writing. But that is as much a way of living as the pickling in the kitchen. It is a part of the plan. It is not an exotic. It is very important, maybe more than anything else. But it is in focus. I am not designating it with high flown bullshit, calling it my ART because it doesn’t deserve that. It is a way of living I project in concrete terms and you must agree that art in any form is a way of living. It has been put on a pedestal in a latter day Olympus. But its place is in the armchair by the fire or on the beach when you are lazy with summer or in a tram and under the trees of autumn. I know that now. I didn’t at one time. But I have written poems in latrines and on ration trucks going into town and on top of a pile of flour sacks and any God knows where. It is part of the day. Most of my free thought goes to it I suppose. It isn’t far away for long. And if I learn to pickle onions well—I’m very fond of them—it may be just as important as making a poem. They both have their place in the landscape.

The “pickled onions” view of poetry, as a normal and continuous activity and part of everyday living, remained with Smithyman throughout his life.

## **The north is in me**

One of the interesting revelations of the letters is how early in Smithyman's career the theme of the North, so important to his writing in the latter part of his career, emerged as central to his poetic outlook. It should be remembered that Smithyman was born in Te Kopuru, a small saw-milling town on the Wairoa River, near Dargaville in Northland, and lived there until he moved to Auckland with his family in 1931. So his attachment to the North is partly to the region of his childhood, but not to that alone. He refers to it again and again. In Letter 3 (July 1942) he writes from Waipu: "This country [i.e. the North] constantly arouses me as I have written so often. It must [be] in the blood. It is most definitely an integral feature of my mental structure."

In August 1942, returning to Paihia from leave in Auckland he wrote of the long return trip back to camp:

In parts it was wearisome. But there were stretches of real delight that filled me with my old passion for this land. Harshness in scrub, for today was a grey day and all in tune with the bitter melody of the North, and sensuous colour...For miles I was filled with the imperative desire to write. I had phrases, sentences and thunder in my mind. But my hand is tired, and this is as far as I get.

Note that, for Smithyman "this land" is almost always "Northland" rather than "New Zealand"—an early manifestation of the regionalism which would distinguish his (and Sinclair's) attitude to place from the more generalised nationalism of his elders such as Fairburn, Allen Curnow, Denis Glover and Charles Brasch, though, significantly, the perspective widens in his letters from Norfolk Island, where distance from New Zealand temporarily encouraged a more "national" perspective (see especially Letter 18). Later Smithyman would find theoretical justification for his attachment to a specific region in the critical writings of the Southern American poet, Allen Tate, such as his essay "The New Provincialism" (1945) where he draws a distinction between "regionalism" and the spurious internationalism that he designates "Provincialism." Smithyman would eventually discuss these concepts at length twenty years later in his critical book, *A Way of Saying* (1965).

To return to the North, in January 1943 (Letter 6), writing from Whenuapai, he comments: “I feel rather restless, looking for the day when I can get back to the North and have a stab at doing what I want, to get it down on paper properly.” A similar note is struck in Letters 7 (also from Whenuapai) in February 1943 and 10 (October 1943):

It’s raining at present and there are gulls calling. The sea is on the far side of the field, and those birds make me feel as they always do, intolerably lonely and hungry for my north. I like it here, but the north is in me and I can’t get away from it.

Interestingly, the North does not figure explicitly in the poetry he was writing at the time, except possibly in a poem like “Record” (Poem 9) which he describes (Letter 11, November 1943) in these terms (the avoidance of slavish topographical fidelity evident here is a point worth noting):

[“Record”] is a mixture of Westland, and Kaipara. Phil [Mays] understood it to be the districts round Ruapehu, and felt a Jane Mander note in it. (She wrote of the Otamatea-Kaiwaka area, beating me to the Wairoa as a theme.) So it seems to have a genuine touch somewhere, though it refers to no actual, identifiable place.

Despite occasional exceptions such as “Bream Bay” (1945), “Te Kopuru” (1946, unpublished prior to the posthumous *Collected Poems*), “Waiwera” (1948), and “Journey Towards Easter” (1951), it is not until the great poems of the 1970s and 1980s—“An Ordinary Day Beyond Kaitaia,” “Tomarata,” “Reading the Maps An Academic Exercise,” and of course the posthumous book-length *Atua Wera*—that Smithyman fulfilled his youthful dream of “get[ting] it [the North] down on paper properly.”

## **The news from home**

Since Perkins was a family friend, Smithyman kept him informed of goings on at home, not excluding the family pets. The most significant event of the war years from a personal perspective was the illness and death of his mother (later memorialised in “Elegy Against a Latter Day: A.L.S. 1879-1945,” 1951). He first referred to her illness in Letter 3 (August 1942), while later letters charted her steady decline. Typical is this passage from Letter 17:

The news from home as you would expect is not good. My father has done magnificently (for him) in writing to me but my mother writes seldom and then very little. Dad apparently hopes to get her into hospital again for the nursing that she needs so much and has not been able to get. It is a hellish drag on him...For my mother there has not been any let up at all. There is always the pain and the cumulating weakness. You saw that for yourself a while back, and I sit here wasting my time.

His frustration at being at a distance while his mother’s health declined is palpable. Letter 19 announcing his mother’s death (May 1945) is very moving in its understatement.

The letters (and some of the poems) also document his dalliances with the opposite sex. Brief relationships with at least three different girls are referred to in the letters (see Letters 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 11), the last four referring to the progress of his friendship with Phillida Mays (“the light of my life,” Letter 11), the sister of Fairburn’s wife Jocelyn, who turned down his offer of marriage though encouraging his writing. Smithyman did not meet his first wife Mary Stanley, a poet and war-widow, until 1946.

## **Our Auckland**

“Auckland is a superb place,” Smithyman wrote in November 1943 (Letter 11) after being home on leave, and, despite his devotion to the North, his affection for his home town is also often evident in his letters. In two letters in particular (Letters 13 and 14,

from May and July 1944) he wrote at length about aspects of Auckland, partly to give him something to write about—not always easy given the repetitive tedium of military life—and partly to sustain and entertain his friend overseas with images of home. These letters, especially the earlier, read somewhat like set pieces, almost in the spirit of a familiar essay by Charles Lamb or Charles Dickens writing about the sights and sounds of London. The letters need to be read in full to get the total effect of his mental tiki-tour of familiar landmarks, commenting on shops, buildings, the harbour, the wharves, the weather and the people, but a passage from the latter will suggest his attachment to the city and something of the character of his descriptive prose. The displacements of army life brought about a defamiliarising freshness to his perception of familiar landmarks, almost like a demonstration of the critical principle of *ostranenie* as defined by the Russian critics such as Victor Schlovsky:

Coming along Surrey Crescent I had one of those flashes that give you the spirit of the town, so that suddenly you see familiarity as something strange and excitingly new—houses at Owairaka or Sandringham getting a blaze of sun, weak but emphatic while all the suburbs round were brooding and shivering under the grey. And then the Point laid out like an architect's model—miniature and distant and as if I had been away and was now returning to something remembered out of exile. The ranges were under the clouds, the shape of Te Atatu calm, everything waiting.

### **The slow drag of exile**

Relief at finally being sent abroad, after months of uncertainty and waiting, and enthusiasm for the excitingly novel landscape and history of Norfolk Island, with its “strange beauty” and compelling convict history considerably older than any European settlement in New Zealand (see especially Letter 16), soon gave way to the familiar tedium of service life, exacerbated by guilt and impatience at being away from his family when they needed him most, as is expressed in this passage from Letter 17 (April 1945):

I have also been bored and frustrated and generally tired of the way of living, though as active service it has a great deal to commend it. But over everything

hangs the stultifying effect of boredom, the monotony of service life and the slow drag of exile from New Zealand at a time when I would most want to be there.

The familiar traveller's registering of similarity and difference runs through his early letters from Norfolk Island. For example (Letter 16, January 1945):

I walked down to Kingston last night, going on roads that were damnably dusty and like the back roads of the North. The island is much like North Auckland. You have the same valley slopes and chiefly to remind me, many of the grasses are those that grow at home. There are paspalum, rats tail, cocksfoot and prairie. The cows on the hills could very well be grazing at Katui, even to those meandering at the roadside. But Katui doesn't grow bananas over the fences nor have taro in the soggy patches near streams.

The novelty of being stuck on a tiny island even more isolated from the rest of the world than New Zealand soon palled, and we witness in both letters and poems Smithyman vicariously feasting on Perkins' more exotic and danger-filled experience in Italy (Letter 17, April 1945): "Keep your eyes open for me. I may want all your description of the local scene someday. It's a pity Hemingway beat me to the Italian scene." Poem 21, "092822," is typical of such appropriated material.

Boredom, access to a typewriter, absence from New Zealand and a growing maturity of outlook combined to bring a more reflective and philosophical tone to Smithyman's letters from Norfolk Island some of which expand to considerable length, over 3000 words. Some of this material reads now as excessively earnest, even pompous, lacking in the irony and humour which animates most of his correspondence. One soon tires of page after page of this sort of thing (Letter 18, April 1945):

The troubles of our community are in the individual. To heal all we must heal each one and the process of that healing is always blocked since any action presupposes a good condition, a pendulum swing between acting and suffering, with the action no action and the suffering the total agent, since the

good condition in the community must be there to give a mechanism for the individual to be bettered and the individual must be sound before such a condition can be attained in the community...

Smithyman is on surer ground when he turns from abstract reflection to concrete reminiscences, such as the lengthy passage in which he recalls, vividly if somewhat portentously, the various parts of the country he has come to know during his war service, from Nelson to the Far North, attempting to sum up what New Zealand means to him and to “assess ourselves as we stand in relation to that country.” The passage, which needs to be read in its entirety, concludes:

We are compound from such things. To us now in exile, there must always be pleasure and sadness in the naming of names. They are our music. We in part have made those places as we have made places we have never been. We are involved. Peace means those places and their fertility, not that fertility of producing alone but the fertility of being able to give us what we would ask and give always in good measure. They are our testament. (Letter 18, April 1945)

In the last two (Letters 20 and 21), written as the end of the war becomes certain, Smithyman turns from the past to the future, worrying away at questions of identity in terms not wholly dissimilar (though with a somewhat different emphasis) to those of his nationalist elders that he would later repudiate. The following passage might be fruitfully compared and contrasted with the attitudes in Allen Curnow’s “House and Land” with its “...land of settlers/With never a soul at home”:

Between the reality of our community and the fact that in that is our home and the unavoidable nostalgia for a place where we can be at home as I have never been at home in New Zealand. We are colonial. We are both of us, Gray, first generation colonials and we have repudiated the temper of England and are unable to take our natal soil on its own good terms. But we must go home and we must be at home there. If we desire happiness (whatever we understand below any level of language in that term) we must be reconciled to our country



and out of that reconciling we must build and be fulfilled. (Letter 20, April 1945)

The change from the gloomy assertion that no-one is “at home” to the determination to “be at home there” represents a subtle shift in cultural attitude which would distinguish much post-war New Zealand poetry from its pre-war antecedents.

In the last letter written in August 1945, in terms strikingly reminiscent of the sentiments in Fairburn’s long poem “To a Friend in the Wilderness” (not yet written, it dates from 1949), Smithyman constructs a kind of testament of faith. Part of this as it relates to poetry has already been quoted above. Here is a bit more of it (Letter 21):

I have a great plan for the future, Gray. I am going to listen to music and write a little and paint a little and earn enough to live and enjoy a bit here and there, and make love a little, pleasantly I hope, and settle in a winter night by the fire. I have my father and the cat. The house—not much admitted but there is a garden and there are trees. The harbour is not far away. We are not too far from the city. There are things to be done and thought...Pop will supervise and I shall garden and from the garden we will take cucumbers and beans and onions and pickle them...To settle and live quietly. Is it a terrific plan?

Above all his “testament” conveys a longing for peace, normality and the enormous appeal of living privately and according to one’s own likes and dislikes, after the enforced collectivism of the military.

The letter, and the whole rich war-time correspondence ends (Letter 21):

As always I send you my good wishes and fond memories of the casual suburb where we are known and hope that it will not be too long before we can be waiting for the tide and the beach, drinking beer on my back steps and going leisurely to bathe.

Yours, my old and rare,

Ken

### like the piano stumbling: the poems

Apart from the juvenilia of high school and Teachers College publications, the poems sent to Perkins are among Smithyman's earliest. He chose to date his posthumous *Collected Poems* (published online as [www.smithymanonline.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.smithymanonline.auckland.ac.nz)) from the year 1943 which means that the first poem included here, that addressed to Perkins on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, dated September 1942, precedes the poems that he regarded retrospectively as worthy of preservation. His earliest journal publications date from 1944—two poems in *New Zealand New Writing* 3 (“Prelude” and “Walk Past Those Houses on a Sunday Morning”) and “Winter Bird” (later called “Kingfisher Song”) in the *New Zealand Observer*. In 1945 he published further poems in *New Zealand New Writing* 4 (“Danish Interlude”), *The New Zealand Observer* (“Song,” later called “Between Two Seas”), and four poems in *Angry Penguins* (“Poem,” “Sonnet” [“Deep in the unhistoric ice...”], “Sonnet in War Time” [“Not by any special acts of faith...”] and “When August was compelling the broken branch”). Of these only two “Walk Past Those Houses...” and “Poem” [“And the singular gull...”] were among those sent to Perkins [Poems 2 and 35]. These details demonstrate that Smithyman did not send *all* the poems he was writing to Perkins (unless, of course, not all the poems sent were preserved, which is certainly possible given the circumstances of war-time), a situation underlined by the fact that in his posthumous *Collected Poems* Smithyman preserved more than 50 poems from the years 1943-45 (to which need to be added an unknown number of the 28 poems in the Norfolk Island sequence “Considerations” which are not individually dated), only half a dozen of which are included among the group preserved by Perkins. It is impossible, therefore, to make significant generalisations about Smithyman's early poetry on the basis of the Perkins archive. At most these 38 poems represent less than half the poems Smithyman wrote during these years.

From the start Smithyman was a prolific writer, a feature he comments on himself in Letter 10 (September 1943): “My output is as pretty voluble as it ever was. Not even routine now can interfere with it. And any one style is a matter of any one mood.” This comment throws light on the range of poems preserved by Perkins. They are a disparate group, many of them exercises in different moods and modes by a young

poet determinedly practising his craft. What T.S. Eliot said in his introduction to Ezra Pound's *Selected Poems* (1928) is relevant here. He said:

A poet's work may proceed along two lines of an imaginary graph; one of the lines being his conscious and continuous effort in technical excellence, that is, in continually developing his medium for the moment when he really has something to say. The other line is just his normal human course of development, his accumulation and digestion of experience... (T.S. Eliot, "Introduction: 1928," in Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1959, p. 17)

If Smithyman's letters record largely "his accumulation of experience," the poems represent his "conscious and continuous effort in technical excellence...his continually developing his medium..."

Smithyman makes several references to the idea that his poetry is steadily improving. In Letter 6 (January 1943) he writes: "Looking back on last year I am quite satisfied with what I wrote considering the circumstances. Not as much as hitherto but I think it continues to develop and take personal shape. Can I ask more?" In August 1943 he writes: "Last month I managed to produce quite a bit: it's getting better all the time but it'll be a long time before I'm satisfied. Which is a good thing." Writing from Norfolk Island in April 1945 (Letter 17) he says: "The writing has kept on sporadically and even with more result than when at home. The interference of camp life has been circumvented to a degree..." Later in the same letter he comments: "Lately I've done too much prose to bother much with verse. I'm lacking a theme anyway and the chance to work undisturbed." Within a year of this comment his meeting with Mary Stanley would provide him with a theme sufficiently compelling to sustain his first mature collection, *The Blind Mountain* (Caxton, 1950).

Not surprisingly the environment of war and military service recurs repeatedly in the poems from the "training bombers" mentioned in the birthday poem to Perkins (Poem 1) to the "Four years of war" referred to in Poem 39 ("Two Sonnets in Return"), which anticipates the return of his friend from overseas. Among those in which the military setting is most prominent are "Troop Train" (Poem 4), Poems 19 and 20,

occasioned by the casualty which befell an Air Force comrade, “Radio Mast at Evening” (Poem 25), “Time Explodes Into History” (Poem 34), and “[The mind no more delights in simple heroics]” (Poem 37), which records the death of a couple by war and accident. “092822” (Poem 21) draws vicariously on Perkins’ experiences (recorded in letters to Smithyman) of the Italian campaign, as does Poem 32 “[The ultimate armistice rings them down].” Many other poems while not so specific in their imagery are coloured by warfare in their preoccupation with history, danger, waste and a sense of personal futility or fatalism, as, for example in Poem 28, [“Now is the time to appraise”]:

Today Pacific claims  
and no one there can thrive  
under that charter, damned  
by waste of many lives  
stranded on beaches, stirred  
by dangerous foreign winds.

Less specifically concerned with war, but nonetheless affected by it in various ways, are poems of a philosophical temper in which Smithyman reflects on the nature of human life and death. Examples include “[I pack all things away]” (Poem 6) with its reflections on death, or the extracts from longer poems such as Poems 30 and 31, which probably owe something to Auden’s philosophically attuned poems of the war years collected in *Another Time* (1940) and *New Year Letter* (1941).

Next to war, love is probably the most recurrent theme, as in “Prothlamion” (Poem 10), with its epigraph from Donne, its title from Spenser, and its reworking of the Persephone myth (also present in “September Frost,” Poem 8), the Audenesque Poem 18 [“Now the crisp earth redresses”], and “Words for Tristan,” another mythological appropriation. Occasionally, as in Poem 33, [“Castles and ultimata in the air”], the themes of love and war wittily intersect in terms of the motif of the battle of the sexes:

O now by that tell how the arbitrary

flux may confound and be confounded when  
re-entering is music for all who  
sing dance ecstatic lie – for you  
who have no word no armistice of me.

Within the 38 poems of this archive there are an extraordinarily large range of verse forms. More than half the poems are in regular stanzas. There are stanzas of four (Poems 10, 18), five (Poems 5, 19), six (Poems 8, 10, 16, 20, 24, 27, 28, 36), seven (Poems 6, 7) eight (Poems 9, 22, 25, 33, 34, 35), eleven (Poem 3) and fourteen lines (Poem 29). Within these stanza forms there is a considerable range of rhyming patterns, some employing full rhymes, some half rhymes and some a mixture of the two. To take the six line stanzas as an example. Poem 8 rhymes abcbca: drop/bloom/blade/harm/rode/sleep, for example, where all the rhymes are half rhymes, though not in every stanza. In Poem 10(3) the pattern is abbacc, and the rhymes are full: rich/sought/thought/ditch/cried/pride. In Poem 16 the pattern is again abbacc but the rhymes are a mix of full and half (e.g. speak/rewards/words/break/dance/chance). In Poem 20 the pattern is ababcd, but the unrhymed lines (5 & 6) rhyme with the same lines in the second stanza. In Poem 24 the pattern is abbcde, where the cc (prove/reprieve) rhyme repeats in each of three stanzas. In Poem 27 the pattern is ababcc, with a mixture of half and full rhymes (e.g. winter/rose/tender/snows/light/neat). In Poem 28 the pattern is abcbed (e.g. claims/thrive/damned/lives/stirred/winds). In Poem 36 the pattern is abbcde as in Poem 24, but in Poem 36 the line is 10 syllables (five beats) whereas in 24 the line is of six syllables (three beats). In other words, in the eight examples of six line stanzas, the pattern is different in every case; Smithyman never repeats himself once. This is surely deliberate and a sign of how attentive he was to such details. It would be tedious to subject all the poems to this sort of analysis, but in all likelihood a similar pattern (or lack of it) would emerge.

In addition to the regular stanzaic poems there are others where the stanza is irregular (as in for example Poems 1, 2, 11, 21, 23, 31, 37), or where stanzas are not employed (Poems 4, 12, 13, 32). There are also poems in blank verse (Poems 14, 17) and there are several sonnets (Poems 26, 38) in which the rhyme scheme is

different in each case, none conforming to any known convention. Line length and metre also vary considerably, both within and between poems.

Smithyman can also be seen experimenting with different voices, styles and idioms. Sometimes he affects a traditional lyricism, as in Poem 27 where only the half rhyme in the last couplet intimates a twentieth century date:

She has been kin with winter  
for here the guelder rose  
against her pane lay tender  
massed like remembered snows  
that hung across the light  
curious, cold and neat.

Elsewhere the language is more consciously contemporary, underlined by the persistent use of half rhymes:

The red mast stands more tall  
and aircraft nearing home  
along the winds smooth edge  
look down where far and still  
an island or a ridge  
stands stiff, stripped of that charm  
slim words gave or the late  
quicksilver run of light.

No great claims need be made for most of these poems. As Smithyman himself recognised by preserving so few of them, many are little more than “five finger exercises,” experiments in this or that mode, in this or that verse form, on this or that theme. They nevertheless provide an intimate glimpse into the origins of a major talent in the making, manipulating his chosen models, contriving “my own tricks that make it mine and not just imitation.” The last lines of the best known of them, “Walk past those houses on a Sunday morning” (Poem 2), say it well:

Somewhere there is value to them. Like  
the piano stumbling  
something is cast into being that will  
take shape in the end.