

Ka heke a runga: hard rain.ⁱ

He mihi aroha ki a Hone Pene Tuwhare.

Jeffrey Paparoa Holman

My copy of *Come Rain Hail*, a third edition from 1974, published by Trevor Reeves' Caveman Press in association with the University of Otago's Bibliography Room is actually my second.ⁱⁱ I wish I still had the long-gone first. Sure, this looks the same with its bishop's purple cover and that "superb/orange circle" – but it can't ever quite replace my first edition, bought in 1970 from Peter Hooper's tiny Walden Books in Albert Street, Greymouth.

Just back from an eighteen-month stint shearing in Western Australia where I'd written nothing except letters and had drunk my fill, I was at a loose end. Peter, my English teacher in the fifth form at Greymouth High had resigned from his job and opened the shop in the vain hope of being able to spend more time writing. It was probably Greymouth's only serious bookshop at that time (no stationery or cards), selling only good quality books (that is to say, it was not destined to survive for long in that location).

He eventually had to sell up and returned to teaching. The shop was sold to a Coast Road collective of the hip and the hopeful, and moved to more expansive premises down near the railway station. It soldiered on for a few more years as a kind of unofficial library and crash pad for Fox River hippies overnighting after a day in town, and passing poets like Sam Hunt and Keri Hulme. Hone may even have graced its capacious interior with a huge fire burning rata knots, while rasta-tail Whole Earth Catalogue readers browsed everything for nothing. He did pass through once, on a reading tour with Glover and others.

When last observed, Walden Books had transformed itself into a kind of New Age trinket mausoleum, with hardly a book in sight, and sure as eggs, no Hone. Then The Warehouse opened next door. Nevertheless, the shop had done its work, on me at least. A high school dalliance with poetry was fired again by what I found between those twenty-four brief pages (well, that and a copy of Boris Pasternak's *Collected Poems*, also bought from Peter at around the same time).

Basically a pamphlet, *Come Rain Hail*, the product of his Burns Fellowship year in 1969, was the first book of New Zealand poetry I had ever bought, and its slim depths opened me up again to

the possibility of writing. It spoke to me out of a familiar world. I'd got a job working on a Forestry release cutting gang – a Labour Department unemployment scheme – slashing back gorse that was growing up around the pinus plantations colonising the back country areas like Waimea and Goldsborough, where the native bush was long gone and the second growth had been bowled over and burned.

By day I would scabble around hills of gorse getting a fist full of prickles, and by night, with the rain roaring on my mother's roof, read my Tuwhare and Pasternak with the coal fire in the bedroom flickering light on the wallpaper and bedspread. Tuwhare was full of rain – that is the first thing I see on looking back at this book. It is too much to ask of myself now to recall any single impression that one poem made, but the openness of the forms on the page and the vernacular language in poems like “Drunk” made contact:

“Later wearing a stiff mask/of indifference/ he pissed himself in the bus”.

Hone Tuwhare's people were people like me – the stories were my own.

I work as an academic now, but I was not one then: I was a dropout and a drifter who wanted to write but didn't know how. Tuwhare helped to release that energy: I bought an exercise book and started writing. I know that poems like “Flood” were in some way seminal because they spoke of the world I walked in and worked in each day – better still, the poems worked almost physically at times, in the world with me:

“In the back country/hard rain/is bucketing//Here/in the narrowing light/the river bellows/fatly”.
You can *feel* the rain bucketing and the nakedness of the short line chops away any affectation: *here*, not *there*, is where the action is. I had heard rivers bellow in flood many times, and I knew and feared their power.

I was walking home one night in a great wind with the orange glow of the sodium streetlights on the whipping palms alongside the road near the school where Peter had taught me English and showed us how he wrote poems about whitebaiting. I got home and that night wrote this:

“windwhip rawbone breaking chill/booming down the dark gut of night”.

The poem went on – happily now lost – but I credit what was happening for me at that time to Hone Tuwhare's example. He'd got under my skin.

In a poem like “Tangi-hanga”, he also opened up another side of a Māori world I had touched on in the shearing gangs of the Wairarapa and southern Hawke's Bay. Not that I went anywhere near a marae – I was a South Islander and Coaster, after all – but I worked with a high proportion of Māori shearers and shedhands, went looking for pūhā on days with wet sheep, and in my second year up there, I was taught to shear by a man named Leckie George. He used to sing while he

shore, sweat beading on the tip of his nose, a version of a song by Los Bravos: “Black is black, I want my Māori back,/grey is grey, since she went away...”.

Black humour. I didn’t know then what I know now, but in 1966, it wouldn’t have helped me, I suspect. Leckie kidded me I had to learn to make moccasins before he would teach me to shear – homemade sacking shearers’ boots – for him first. I’d get into his catching pen at lunchtime and practise shearing off the belly wool. Half a dozen bare bellies and he’d ring the board for the first half an hour while the Pākehā shearers swore at me. “Too good, the Māori!”, Leckie would leer at them, winking at me.

This was Hone’s world too – the workingclass world of a rural Māori proletariat – but he knew of others elsewhere. “Tangi-hanga” came out of his Ngāpuhi culture: formal and angry, rude and tender, mixing the loftiness of oratory with scatological obscenities. I’d never struck anything like it. For Tuwhare in such a mood, there was only one Anglo-Saxon route for Maui to enter the death goddess Hine-nui-o-te-po: in a word, through her cunt.

Nobody I had read before ever wrote like that, not in New Zealand anyway – nor got past the censors to be published. This man pushed the boundaries and some of the risks he took rubbed off. His tribute to Ralph Hotere, down there in Dunedin at the same time on a Francis Hodgkins fellowship – both nourished on great steaming pots of toheroa soup – is sly mix of the mock-cerebral with the demotic:

“...when I reach the beginning/of your eternity I say instead: hell/let’s have another feed of mussels”.

What a memorial to the meeting of these two great Māori minds, two characters, ngā taniwha e rua! Hotere repaid the compliment with his paintings of Tuwhare poems, like the elemental “Rain” – which when it towers above you literally rains down the words. Ka heke a runga – what is above is falling. Between them both, they reinscribed their world, rewriting Māori on the face of the culture, confident moko on the skin of a long and bitter erasure. It has slowly sunk in, rewriting, reinventing us all.

In *Come Rain Hail* Hone Tuwhare was leaving behind the hieratic world of the literary culture that Mason had steered him through, forging a newer looser poetic with American rather than British influences, preparing himself for the more overtly political voice that would follow on from the Māori Writers and Artists Conference at Te Kaha in 1973, where he was something of a father figure. A transitional work perhaps, in relation to his developing range – but a taonga on my personal list of life-changing books.

And now he is gone: gone with “the snivelling creek bed, the steady drum-roll sound, the rain stabbing the streets, rain holding off at the tangi, *tall rain-shafts/driftng*, rain on my rain-coat/tapping, silent, insidious/ It falls: there is no comment”.

The Bible in Māori
for Hone Tuwhare

I te tūmatanga te Kupu

He kupu hou my words to you

you who if you knew what I knew
would love my battered old Bible in Māori
Paipera tapu tapu tapu
Ei! how tapu the tapu is
Ei! can you feel it the Bible in Māori
dancing a haka right onto your skin as
moko moko pure tā moko
carving your senses outside in
and inside out the whare nui
opens its ribs and draws you in

draws you in to the Bible in Māori
with Tarapipipi the finest of men
seen with a rifle and seen with a book
stares from a picture like Job with that look
of *what have I done now to be what I am*
the Bible in Māori that sings of my sin
ehara ehara ehara e au called by the powers
no man can contain the Bible in Māori
is speaking again of Rua, Te Kooti
millennial men Te Paipera Tapu

he tapu *he tapu*
Te Paipera Tapu
amine amine
amen and amine
Ei! many such men

such men from its belly
are rising again.

ⁱ Nō Ngāti Porou: “Ka heke a runga: It’s pissing down/the sky is falling.” Nā Uncle Barney (the Reverend Barney Moeke) tēnei whakaaro.

ⁱⁱ All poems quoted are from this edition.