

Last Words to Hone Tuwhare, First Church, Dunedin 19 January 2008

Hone,

I'll speak to you for a moment, seeing it'll be the last time I have you in front of my eyes.

"Sleep there in your lonely canoe. The paddles are broken."

Do you remember this, from 1988?

Jazz channel,
Blossom Dearie, someone keeps
sending her flowers.
Hone rang me up the other morning
and sang me that song over the phone.

Hone lives in a very small house.
I have come to say goodbye.

When he stands at the door,
the house fits him like a frame.
He is wearing his glasses. Solemnly
he holds out closed fists.
"Choose," he says.
I tap his left hand.
On his open palm
lies a greenstone adze.
"Bring it back," he says.

Dark greenstone, a river."

(from "Berlin Diary")

In Te Ao Maori, that world which is almost invisible to the generality of New Zealand society, you were a deeply respected elder. Your mana was felt throughout the country.

You were a teacher. You demonstrated a keen insight into human relationships and the European psyche. Likewise you gave your readers a glimpse into the wisdom and the courage of Maoritanga. Into the relationship of tangata whenua with the land.

I know you had to put up patiently with the patronising few, but you had the respect and love of so many that you were sustained and encouraged to continue your mahi without fail. Rich and joyous was your use of the English language. The poetry you wrote will endure. Personal memories will burn like stars in the hearts that hold them.

And this poem, from 1996?

Silver shoals flip
and shirr the calm
A small ship on the horizon
The hills bend to the water

I trust you least in conversation
When you round your eyes
and make your mouth an O
pretending ignorance – not likely –

O you got wicked eyes
that needle me and piss me off, my friend
although I know you're kind to me
and you see deep

Plain and true
the hills and the horizon

Your eyes were bright as coal last night
with grief, when you were speaking of Yvonne.

("Your Eyes")

We'll never forget your aroha, but many won't know the degree of sadness that also went into the work of a man who had the courage to bridge Maori and European worlds. That big heart of yours was often heavy because, although a Maori kaumatua, you were exposed to the hypocrisy and cant which are the weeds of fame. You understood first-hand the evils of racism and classism. Yet you treated all people with respect.

I salute you as a poet. Moreover, I salute you as an elder to whom I owe respect; as tangata whenua. For the insights and understanding you have brought to me personally, I thank you, Hone. You have been a tide in my life that has guided my small craft. You have helped me to know who I am, where I have come from and where I am going.

I know that I have your blessing. Please accept mine.

Cilla McQueen