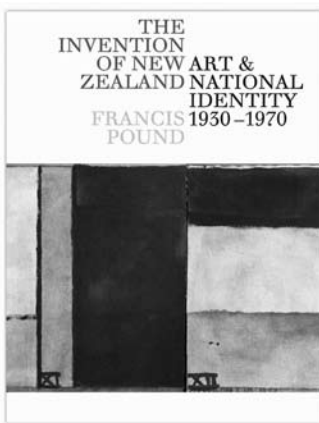


# The Invention of New Zealand

Art & National Identity 1930-1970  
by Francis Pound

Review by Pip Cheshire



Pound, F. (2009). *The Invention of New Zealand: Art & National Identity 1930-1970*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.

Poet Allen Curnow's comment in the *First Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand* lays out the general argument for the necessity of invention: "... strictly speaking New Zealand doesn't exist yet, though some possible New Zealands glimmer in some poems and in some canvases. It remains to be created – should I say invented – by writers, musicians, artists, architects, publishers." Curnow writes in 1945, the Second World War has ended, the country has roads, railways and hydro schemes; the land is cleared, irrigated and farmed. His comment is, like Cook's comments some 180 years earlier, a conceit, an hyperbole; where Cook saw a land without habitation Curnow sees a land physically occupied, yet here in body only – tied still to the culture of England.

In his preface Pound couples Curnow's text with a McCahon *Landfall* essay of 1966 entitled "Beginnings", in which McCahon refers to "... something... belonging to the land and not yet to the people. Not yet understood or communicated or even really yet invented." The two texts point to a way of understanding creative endeavour, primarily that of painting and writing, that became so pervasive as to be a canon, a Nationalist canon – an unquestioned tenet by which all creative work was measured. The extent to which the necessity of inventing a nation dominated the critical frameworks of writers, reviewers and curators is measured yet in the unbalanced collections of the nation's museums, the hearts and minds of some more public commentators and the marginalising of some of our more interesting artists.

Pound examines a number of themes central to the establishment of a Nationalist sensitivity: the necessity for particularising and naming (Rita Angus's *Cass*, Robin White's *Mana Railway Station*), the ubiquitous strong clear light (Don Binney's bird, Brent Wong's clouds), the engendered land – the nurturing earth mother ravished by the invariably male artist, and so on. For each such tenet there is a carefully articulated and illustrated argument, and an ever so gentle demolition of that argument as each is subject to his erudite examination. So gentle are his refutations of the arguments that it is, as Pound himself says in the preface, as if he has become enamoured of the canon, wistfully nostalgic for the certainty and singularity of vision implicit in such a dominant idea. There is too an heroic task at hand – the making of a country. Is one therefore unmaking the country to some degree by questioning its clarion call and yardstick?

Pound's use of McCahon's *The Listener (Head)*, as the first plate of the 190 that are grouped throughout the book, becomes a reference, an introduction to those

aspects of the country that need inventing: the cleared and empty land, and the rear view of the listener's observing head gazing out. By the end of the thesis the land may not be so empty: Theo Schoon has recorded cave dwellings, connections to a wider world have been discovered and the necessity of a New Zealand way of painting looks increasingly like a convenient shibboleth of the handful of curators, writers and publishers who held sway over what was seen in the country's museums and its few galleries in the early part of last century.

In a small society the power of a prevailing canon of thought is significant: too few critics have too few opportunities for publication and thus those that are published have undue influence. Where those commentaries are within the mass media those few key figures have the power to skew the public's understanding of art to fit that canon. Throughout this extraordinarily written and crafted work Pound runs parallel arguments; a coherent argument in favour of a Nationalist reading is made, then work is discussed that either doesn't fit, and was thus ignored by the canon, or is of such profundity as to make the Nationalist reading somewhat trivial. McCahon's work for example is dominant throughout, yet, in Pound's words "its shifting meanings" invariably suggest themes larger than those dealt with by the tropes of Nationalism. His *A piece of Muriwai canvas* can certainly be employed to illustrate the searing white light between dark sea and the underside of the long white cloud, yet that is to barely engage in the more complex ideas and emotions provoked by the work.

*A piece of Muriwai canvas* illustrates too the uncertainties and failures of the Nationalist canon to engage in abstract, non-figurative work. Milan Mrkusich's abstract work of the 1940s sits like an elephant in the Nationalist room, his work, as Pound notes, never having been figurative. It is consigned, by analogy with the influx of European modern artists and architects to pre-war America, to a kind of immigrant holding station. Where we see John Weeks' undated Cézanne-influenced abstraction of the land (*Landscape Sketch, Abstract, Green and Orange*) and Gordon Walters' transition to non-figurative work (*Painting no. 2, 1952*), Mrkusich's 1946 *Constellation with red* is shocking in this context for both its clear engagement in an international discourse unconcerned with the occupation of a new land and for the self-referential nature of the work itself.

Just as the Nationalist trope fends off the outer world, and in particular the distractions of modernism, in favour of inventing the new land so the prior existence of a vibrant visual culture before the colonial mapping of new-found exotica is something of an embarrassment. Pound tracks Theo Schoon and Gordon Walters' discoveries of South Canterbury cave drawings and the incorporation of Maori pattern and motif within their work. This synthesis is placed within the context of paintings depicting dejected 'natives' and presented as evidence of a declining Maori population and the loss of pre-colonial innocence.

These are crude abbreviations of a superb book which raises academic writing in this country to an extraordinary new standard. Though its focus is on a relatively short but critical period of New Zealand art, its text is an endlessly effervescent provocation that has one wishing for a wider education and more time to read the very many referenced texts. The book is thoughtfully organised, with usefully explanatory footnotes immediately at hand at the page's bottom, an extensive bibliography and index, and well-selected and referenced full colour plates.

If there is critique then Pound shows himself all too aware of it; in his preface he refers to the length of time taken for the book to come to print. This has clearly given time for polishing the manuscript but perhaps some of the arguments may have benefitted from an updating. Though the period of study is well past and our art now reflects the currents, complexities and contradictions of the wider world, the shadow of a singular paternalistic and constraining reading of art lingers in the country's asymmetric public art collections.

We might also point to a collective inability to engage in coherent discussion about abstraction of any kind as a legacy of Nationalism's bias to the figurative, witness the public gnashing of teeth over the artist et al's Venice Biennale work of 2004, or almost any other publicly funded abstract art for that matter. Architecture is similarly tongue-tied in discussion of the abstract and retains a strong emphasis on the relationship with the land, though invariably the focus is on the search for a rapprochement with nature rather than a transformational occupation. This has conferred a moral certitude on the farm shed which is consistently referenced by architects today, though their projects invariably owe more to those of immigrant Europeans in post-war America than the hayricks of the Waikato or Southland.

Pound's thesis ends with the outside world no longer able to be held at bay by the constructs of a Nationalist ideology; by the early 1970s the Vuletic gallery in Auckland is showing New Zealand art, made here, engaged in current contemporary discourse current in the rest of the world and without a figurative stroke in sight! The large public response to the recent Rita Angus show in Wellington and Auckland city galleries is testimony to the current popularity of a nostalgic look back to an austere and circumscribed time of our history. *The Invention of New Zealand Art & National Identity 1930-1970* is a superb work that offers rich insights into the time when artists, writers and those of our own trade were exhorted to create an intellectual infrastructure to complement the labours of the black-singletoned and pinnied colonial forebears.

## References

- Curnow, A. (1945). Dialogue by Way of an Introduction. *First Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand*, no.1, 1-8.
- McCahon, C. (1966). Beginnings. *Landfall*. vol 20, no. 4, 360-64.