TRADE AND TRUE: ANTHOLOGIES FIFTY YEARS AFTER DONALD ALLEN’S

THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY

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The flourishing of the anthology as poetry product in New Zealand in the past decade is beyond question as the list below attests:


*The Happy Warrior: An Anthology of Australian and New Zealand Military Poetry*, selected and compiled by Paul Barrett (Warrant officer Class 2) and Kerry B. Collinson (Hartwell, Vic: Sid Harta, 2001)


*Listening to the Rain: An Anthology of Christchurch Haiku and Haibun* (Christchurch: The Small White Teapot Haiku Group, 2002)


121 New Zealand Poems, chosen by Bill Manhire (Auckland: Godwit, 2005)


Life’s a Beach. Comp. Mary de Ruyter (Auckland: New Holland P, 2006)

Dear To Me: 100 New Zealanders Write About Their Favourite Poems (Auckland: Random House, 2007)


The Earth’s Deep Breathing: Garden Poems by New Zealand Poets, ed. Harvey McQueen (Auckland: Godwit, 2007)

A Good Handful: Great New Zealand Poems About Sex, ed. Stu Bagby (Auckland, Auckland UP, 2008)


A Day in History: Poems Celebrating the Election of Barack Hussein Obama to the U.S. Presidency, ed. L.E.Scott (Paekakakriki: Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop, 2009)
Our Own Kind: 100 New Zealand Poems About Animals, ed. Siobhan Harvey (Auckland: Godwit, 2009)

Twenty Contemporary New Zealand Poets, eds. Andrew Johnston and Robyn Marsack (Wellington: Victoria UP, 2009)

Voyagers: Science Fiction Poetry from New Zealand, eds. Mark Pirie and Tim Jones (Brisbane: Interactive P, 2009)


Even though the list contains inexplicably lean years such as 2003, for a small country with a small publishing industry where poetry sales are diminutive, this is something of a flood. And having found so many, I am sure I have not found them all. I have restricted the list to print anthologies and have not included on-line curations such as the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre's Fugacity '05, or Bluff '06, or Love, War and Last Things, or All Together Now; nor such site specific gatherings as Paula Green's Poetry on the Pavement in Auckland or the Wellington Poet's Walk. I remain quizzical in face of this rain of anthologies falling dutifully on all aspects and landmarks of the beloved nation’s culture, geography, history and peoples. There are many kinds of anthology here, but none of them could claim (nor, I suspect, would most want to claim) status as a “national” anthology. The Johnston and Marsack (2009) might surreptitiously assume a little of that guise, but, as Australian poet Laurie Duggan notes in his blog Graveney Marsh, that anthology is “a disappointment overall” which may be because “a perceived British readership has determined selection.” Jump back to the 1980s and it was all about national anthologies: Fleur Adcock’s 1982 Oxford Contemporary New Zealand Poetry, Mark Williams’s 1987 Caxton New Zealand Poetry 1972 – 1986, and most significantly the Wedde, McQueen, Evans 1985 and 1989 Penguin anthologies, which are probably where and when the terms “national” and “definitive” began to leak buckets. Even more specialist anthologies from that time such as The New Poets: Initiatives in New Zealand Poetry (1987), Yellow Pencils: Contemporary Poetry by New Zealand Women (1988), and Kiwi and Emu: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry by Australian and New Zealand Women (1989) retained a national focus as the presence of New Zealand in each of their subtitles testifies.
Could this proliferation of anthologies be proof that during good economic years (the decade 2000 at least until near its end) poetry does well? Or might the list represent the end-product of a cultural nationalism which had its “high and serious” moment in the 1980s and is now in its senility? Must we be careful not to be cynical of this effulgence lest we bite the feeding hand of what Laura Riding and Robert Graves dubbed “the poetry-consuming public” (158) in *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928)? Riding and Graves, with Modernist hauteur, set up an opposition between “trade” anthologies and “true” whereby “true” designates anthologies which carry out some literary task, such as a feat of rescue (lost poets recovered, new poets found), or a work of criticism or history by way of the choice and structure of a selection, or else the unravelling of an act of private taste via reading, the connoisseur’s recipe. For Riding and Graves the trade anthology “treats poetry as a commodity destined for instructional, narcotic, patriotic, religious, humorous and other household uses,” what they call “the modern publisher’s anthology” and which they label “the most offensive” (165). In our more-market, input/output, bean-counting era such idealistic strictures are laughable – or would be if it were not the case that they apply so chillingly to the list of New Zealand anthologies. I have extracted, from Riding and Graves, a list of “trade” anthologies from the 1920s and noted beside a number how well they match the New Zealand list ninety years on: *Flower Poems* [ *Earth's Deep Breathing*], *Animal Poems* [ *Our Own Kind*], *The Kiss in Poetry* [ *A Good Handful*], *Poems of the Sea*, *A Homage to Lindbergh*, *Child Poems* [ *Swings and Roundabouts*], *Songs of the Homeland*, *Book of the Tree*, *Book of the Inn*, *Anthology of Suppressed Poems* (could New Zealand manage one?), *Sonnets*, *Modern Triolets*, *Manchester Poets* [ *Auckland Poets, Dunedin Poets*], *The Chicago Lyre* [ *Wellington Poems*], *100 Best Lyrics* [ *121 New Zealand Poems*], *Best Poems of Our Time*, *The Second 100 Best Poems [Classic, Contemporary and New New Zealand Poets]*, *Vitamin E Poems*, *Poems of Television*, *Death-Ray Poems* (some of these 1920s English and American anthologies sound much more interesting than those in my list of recent New Zealand anthologies), *Ballads of the Brave*, *Bus-top Treasury*, *Poems for Convalescence* [ *Poems on Death and Dying*], *Business Girl's Garland of Verse*, *Sacco-Vanzetti Anthology* (all gleaned from Riding and Graves, 165 – 167).

Riding and Graves acknowledge *The Golden Treasury*, selected by Francis Palgrave, is “the Dean of Anthologies,” noting that at the time of writing its “original liberalism [had] ossified beyond recognition” but describing it approvingly as “a usurping private anthology, very
conscientiously compiled” (174). For myself, at the age of 12, I opened my mother’s school copy of Palgrave (St Columba School for Girls in Dunedin) and read with pure pleasure from “There was a time when meadow, grove and stream” right through to “Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (Palgrave, 309 - 314). Wikipedia’s entry for The Golden Treasury highlights its essentially open form: “There is no definitive version of this popular classic.” Like one of the Chinese Classics, with countless commentaries, additions and editions, it continues to mutate.

Riding and Graves published A Pamphlet Against Anthologies 67 years after Palgrave’s first edition. This was the period required for ossification beyond recognition. It is now, in 2010, 50 years since Donald Allen's anthology The New American Poetry first appeared. John Robert Colombo linked Palgrave and Allen in a brief in memoriam note for Allen at the time of his death in 2004: "Palgrave's Golden Treasury created conditions for the acceptance of lyrical poetry in English for about five generations. Allen did it for non-lyrical poetry for his generation and ours." Whether the poetry of Allen's anthology is non-lyrical is doubtful (Frank O'Hara described himself as "lyrical to a fault" (Allen, 270)); one can be on surer ground asserting that Allen's anthology is the book of American poetry to have most deeply influenced New Zealand poetry. Big Smoke: New Zealand Poems 1960 - 1975 is an anthology created from the poetry which was to a large extent inspired by the Allen anthology: an anthology's anthology, a recovery of lost voices and an act of critical definition. The New American Poetry has neither ossified nor assumed a power to continually renew itself; in contrast to Palgrave, the attempt to update Allen (The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised, eds. Donald Allen and George F. Butterick, New York: Grove P, 1982) had what Marjorie Perloff described as "something of a retro air" which meant that "the punch of the original New American Poetry was largely lost." Perloff sums up the difficulty for anthologists now trying to emulate that moment of "punch": "... it is no longer possible, as it was for Donald Allen, to present readers with an anthology of the or even a New American Poetry."

Allen's anthology seems to be stuck in the shape it was born in and to belong forever in the moment of its birth. That was, from the start, a powerful form, as Richard Kostelanetz summed up: "One of the few anthologies that collected disparate materials into a persuasively coherent presentation, making visible what was previously invisible, creating taste instead of sweeping up enthusiasms" (Memoirs). Truly, in Riding and Graves's terms, a true anthology.
Its impact is noted by Virginia Gow in her essay on Robert Creeley in this issue of Ka Mate Ka Ora when she quotes from Bill Manhire: “In New Zealand and Australia poets seem to compete as to who was first to read it [the Allen anthology]” (Gow, 27). Peter Coyote evokes the American counterpart of this enthusiastic up-take: "We tore that book apart, reading everything, dog-ear the pages, sharing quotes, and inhaling the words . . . " (Memoirs). To fulfill Manhire’s claim I should stake my own encounter: for my 17th birthday, in 1966, I was given a copy purchased at Paul's Book Arcade by my best friend, Scott Thornbury - he wrote on the card, "mon semblable, mon frère," nurturing our Baudelairean fantasy - and I was able to experience a second Palgrave moment and an exciting shift in how the world might be perceived over the summer of 1966 - 67 as I read the poetry of the Black Mountaineers, the Beats, The New Yorkians, the San Franciscans and the others: "the light seems to be eternal/ and joy seems to be inexorable" (Frank O'Hara, "Poem," 268 in Allen).

Allen's brief "Preface" to the anthology is a masterpiece of definition. Perloff is both impressed with and complains about this "Preface": "Allen felt little compunction (or inclination) to theorize as to the nature of the New American Poetry" and she adds, "Note the paucity of explanation" (Perloff). But I would argue that Allen is both bold and succinct and he does have a theory, namely, that for once in its life American exceptionalism is true:

As it [the New American Poetry] has emerged in Berkeley and San Francisco, Boston, Black Mountain, and New York City, it has shown one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse. Following the practice and precepts of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, it has built on their achievements, and gone on to evolve new conceptions of the poem. These poets have already created their own tradition, their own press, and their public. They are our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry. Through their work many are closely allied to modern jazz and abstract expressionist painting, today recognized throughout the world to be America's greatest achievements in contemporary culture. This anthology makes the same claim for the new American poetry, now becoming the dominant movement in the second phase of our twentieth-century literature and already exerting strong influence abroad.

American poetry, of the kind contained in the anthology, is seen to be assuming a mantle of leadership on a more than national scale. This poetry shares common cause and practice with other aspects of American cultural leadership, modern jazz and abstract expressionist painting, twin pillars upholding the banner of an indigenous American avant-garde after the Second World War. Scott and I, in 1966, in Hamilton, New Zealand, used to pore over a book by Michel Seuphor called Abstract Painting: from Kandinsky to the Present and try to paint
our own Pollocks and de Koonings; while engaged in looking at the book we played Ahmad Jamahl at The Persching playing his composition "Poinsietta." We did not need to stitch up the joins between our reading and our looking and our listening because Donald Allen had already done it. In their turn these cultural successes can be seen to rest on the European triumph of the Marshall Plan and the internal gift of the GI Bill. Frank O'Hara's faux-Noh play "Try! Try!" can be read as a footnote on the GI Bill. O'Hara served in the Pacific as a sonar-man and his subsequent tertiary education at Harvard and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor (there was nothing naïve in O'Hara’s learning despite poses the poems sometimes strike) was made possible from the assistance offered veterans through the GI Bill.

In the play (there are two radically different versions, the 1951 Cambridge, Massachusetts version and the 1953 New York version) GI Jack returns from the Pacific war where he has been killed, so effectively he returns as a ghost in the best Noh tradition, to find his pre-war Violet shacked up with John: "I've come a long way for your sake,/ my back all decorated like this/ and my feet covered with mold" (O'Hara, 41). John confronts him with the new, post-war world: "Do you think everything can stay the same./ like a photograph? What for?" (O'Hara, 48). But John also proposes, with some sneering irony, a date between the men in a world where men of their kind, of no consequence, will stock the bookshops' shelves in the new world: "Let's have lunch together after you've found/ yourself a job. I'm writing a novel your firm/ may find itself interested in" (O'Hara, 47). Donald Allen, at Grove Press, was definitely interested.

When Barack Obama was asked if he believed in American exceptionalism, he replied that he did - and added that the Brits believed in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believed in Greek exceptionalism. That's pretty much how it stands now with exceptionalism - it's not very exceptional. But that post-war period from 1945 - 1960, the new poetry from which Allen's anthology gathers together, was an exceptional moment. Stalin could never have agreed to accept help under the Marshall plan, simply because of the undermining effect that would have had on his status in the world; but the "if" of "if he had" is one of the significant "ifs" of the twentieth century. As it was, the Cold War came about instead, and the question of Russian exceptionalism versus American exceptionalism ("We will bury you," Khrushchev promised) sustained a state of suspended indecision until 1989. What seemed to be decided then, 20 years ago, as the Berlin Wall fell, is now, as the economy of the Marshall plan struggles for air, a seeming illusion of that time. Frank O'Hara, a Russophile, deep admirer of Rachmaninov and Mayakovsky, celebrated, in a poem which Allen anthologised,
Khrushchev's arrival in New York in 1959 to speak at the UN, where he would remove his shoe and smash his watch with it while pounding the podium and promising our imminent burial, one of the Cold War's classic moments. In "Poem" O'Hara describes Khrushchev as the perfect addition to the world of New York which already has "everything" ("except politesse"): 

Khrushchev is coming on the right day! 
the cool graced light 
is pushed off the enormous glass piers by hard wind 
and everything is tossing, hurrying on up 
this country 
has everything but politesse, a Puerto Rican cab driver says 

(O'Hara, "Poem" in Allen, 267.)
Works Cited:


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"Memoirs of Donald Mirriam Allen"
http://www.emptymirrorsbooks.com/thirdpage/allentribute.html


http://epc.buffalo.edu.authors/anth.html


Donald Allen’s prophetic anthology had an electrifying effect on two generations, at least, of American poets and readers. More than the repetition of familiar names and ideas that most anthologies seem to be about, here was the declaration of a collective, intelligent, and thoroughly visionary work-in-progress: the primary example for its time of the anthology-as-manifesto. The New American Poetry is a crucial cultural document, central to defining the poetics and the broader cultural dynamics of a particular historical moment.—Alan Golding, author of From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry. From the Back Cover. Donald Allen’s prophetic anthology had an electrifying effect on two generations, at least, of American poets and readers. Allen, Donald M., ed. The New American Poetry. New York: Grove Press, 1960. Asher, Levi, ed. Kerouac: The Definitive Biography. New York: Taylor Trade, 2004. Marler, Regina. Queer Beats: How the Beats Turned America On to Sex. The New American Poetry Fifty Years Later. Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2015. Metrics. If Expressionism straddles media, the experimental poetics of The New American Poetry, Donald Allen’s seminal anthology of 1960, modelled itself on adjacent art-forms, especially the bebop jazz and Abstract Expressionist painting of the postwar era, but also dance and performance. According to Ben Lee, in his chapter on post-war avant-garde poetry in the U.S., poets adopted the new music and painting as their models as a strategy for distancing themselves from a modernist literary tradition that they regarded as over-civilized and exhausted. Allen’s anthology has reached its fiftieth anniversary, providing a unique time for reflection and reevaluation of this preeminent collection. As we know, Allen’s anthology was groundbreaking—it was the first to distribute widely the poetry and theoretical positions of poets such as Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg and the Beats, and it was the first to categorize these poets by the schools (Black Mountain, New York School, San Francisco Renaissance, and the Beats) by which they are known today. To this point critics mostly have examined The New American Poetry as an anthology; former treatments of The New American Poetry look at it intently as a whole.