

LIVING IN NEW ZEALAND (1987-88)

by Rutherford

We arrived in New Zealand in November 1987, but by the following May, we couldn't get away fast enough.

It is only by spending an extended period of time in a foreign land that one comes hard up against one's own prejudices and preconceptions. Or, put another way, we often don't realise that our peg is round – until we try to fit into a square hole. For example, those of us from Anglo-Saxon societies often do not realise the extent to which we expect a degree of courtesy from strangers – until we live among the French where it is almost wholly absent. It is only when the surrounding culture is different than our own that we become aware of the assumptions and expectations we had previously taken for granted. As a result, one's ability to be happy living in a foreign land depends on how one feels about these differences: some of these will chafe against a value we hold dear – others may give us the room to expand in a direction that our 'home' culture did not. It's a matter of comparing advantages to disadvantages, and deciding for ourselves which are more significant.

For many immigrants to NZ, one strong attraction is the opportunity to start a new career in a sector that may be highly regulated in their countries of origin. For example, if you have always wanted to be a photographer, but the government in your home country requires photographers to be graduates of a recognised trade school, you can come to NZ and hang out a shingle without any such fuss. But what applies to photographers also applies to electricians and, during our time there, NZ had more than its share of fatal house fires.

NZ was also by far the most expensive place we have ever lived. With the exception of kiwifruit and some dairy products, fresh produce of all kinds was horrifically expensive. It was explained that, knowing that they can sell their produce at \$X.xx per pound in Japan, NZ farmers demand the same price to sell domestically. One can get sick of kiwifruit pretty quickly. Forget NZ lamb (it's all for export); what you get instead are the tired, old mothers and fathers. To one who has not grown up with it, mutton is definitely an acquired taste.

In our dealings with professionals of all kinds, one area in which Kiwi society chafed us most abrasively was in the apparent lack of interest – bordering on contempt – for professional competence of any kind. Another was the strange mix of national inferiority and jingoism. Perhaps things have changed since but, during our time there, we found that the opinions of North Americans and Europeans were widely esteemed more highly than the native variety, and so we were regularly asked what we thought of ... Our television programmes? Our school system? This here lampshade I made? But heaven help those who dared to criticise ANYTHING, regardless of how gently or constructively, or who ventured to suggest that whatever it is might be improved by ... because the response we met was invariably: "***What the hell do YOU know? You're not a Kiwi.***"

One of the things that had originally attracted us to NZ was its anti-nuclear policy (neither weapons nor power) – as admirably demonstrated in 1987 by the refusal of the Lange government to allow US warships entry to its ports and by its public opposition to French nuclear testing in the Pacific (which led to the bombing of the Greenpeace flagship Rainbow Warrior in Auckland harbour by the French secret service, resulting in the murder of the Portuguese photographer Fernando Pereira). But given the Kiwi attitude to professional competence, had they not taken this position, it is possible that the entire country might now be just a memory. ("*Oy! Whaddya think this red button does?*" "*Dunno mate. Let's find out. Give 'er a push.*")

A few facts about driving in New Zealand:

- New Zealand does not require trailers pulled by private motor vehicles to have rear lights;
- Many New Zealanders pull trailers so overloaded that, at night, the car (and its brake lights) cannot be seen beyond the tarpaulin-covered mound behind it;
- New Zealand drivers have the habit of stopping suddenly in the middle of the highway; and,
- New Zealand does not require motor vehicles to carry insurance.

Do the math.

Following several tragedies, the government deemed it necessary to remind residents (in a flyer distributed to all households in Auckland) not to permit their children to play on the road and not to leave children unattended near swimming pools.

There was a popular game show on NZTV called *It's In The Bag*. Taped on the campus of a different university town each week, the moderator would ask three "skill-testing questions" to a series of contestants – all of whom were students at the host university. On average, just over half of the questions were answered correctly. In the years since, we have regretted not having had a VCR at the time to be able to record an episode of this show because, when we have cited examples of the questions put (almost half of which remember, were answered incorrectly) no-one has believed that we aren't exaggerating just a little.

A few of these have remained seared into my memory. I am NOT making these up:

- The Olive is the fruit of what tree?
- Wood comes from what?
- Big Ben in London overlooks what river? (The answer given was "The Mississippi?")
- 'Supersonic' means faster than the speed of what? (After two wrong answers "An aeroplane?" "No?" "The speed of light?" the moderator was finally able to elicit the correct response by slowly repeating "Super SONIC... SONIC... S O N I C...")

At four years of age, our daughter was able to answer more questions correctly than the university contestants.

Another thing we found very odd was the (apparently ubiquitous) national antipathy towards wearing shoes. Whenever we were in downtown Auckland on a weekday, we noticed that when Kiwis left the office for lunch, they left their shoes behind. It was strange sight: middle-aged professionals in expensive suits and ties, walking around barefoot. The long-term physiological affect of this behaviour can be likened to the effect of repeatedly dropping a ball of putty on a hard floor. Do you remember the size of Fred Flintstone's feet?

To give the place its due, it must be said that New Zealand is one of the most spectacularly beautiful places we have ever seen (the landscapes are magnificent: all over the country, the lush vegetation reminded us of the décor painted on the walls of dinosaur exhibits in natural history museums); but in the end, it was the culture (don't think 'art' – think 'yoghurt') that we couldn't tolerate for another minute. We found NZ to be the most racist, sexist and homophobic society we have ever visited (Men are like *this*; Women are like *that*), and we refused to allow our daughter to grow up there.

If you do visit New Zealand, you MUST visit the Waitomo Caves, near Rotorua, south of Auckland.

The caves consist of a series of underground 'cathedrals' complete with spectacular stalactites and stalagmites. At the end of the section open to the public, we found ourselves at the edge of an underground stream where we were helped into a small boat that a boatman pulled along the stream by use of a rope suspended from the ceiling. The stalactites in this section of the grotto are covered by the phosphorescent larvae of a native insect, resulting in millions of tiny, faint points of light. As the boat glided soundlessly along the stream in pitch-blackness, we looked up at the ceiling and saw what appeared to be millions of stars against a three-dimensional 'sky'.



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It is truly the most amazing thing I have ever seen. We emerged into the world changed for the experience.

There is (or was) a phenomenon in NZ called the 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' in which anyone who is different is made to feel worth less and isolated. Heaven help those young men who have no interest in sport, or worse, those struggling with a growing awareness of homosexuality, for they are (or were) made to feel like freaks. The country's geographical isolation is a significant factor and only adds to the impression. We were reliably informed that, at some point in the 1980s, New Zealand took the title from Japan as the country with the highest rate of teenage suicide in the world.

In a book detailing the phenomenon (*Big Boys Don't Cry*: Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press 1978), Felix Donnelly, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Donnelly an inspector of schools in NZ, quotes a poem written by a fourteen year old boy:

He always wanted to explain things, but no-one cared.
So he drew.

Sometimes he would just draw and it wasn't anything.
He wanted to carve it in stone or write it in the sky.
He would lie out on the grass and look up in the sky and it would only be the sky and the things
inside him that needed saying.

And it was after that that he drew the picture.
It was a beautiful picture. He kept it under his pillow and would let no one see it.
And he would look at it every night and think about it.
And when it was dark and his eyes were closed
he could see it still and it was all of him and he loved it.

When he started school he brought it with him.
Not to show anyone, but just to have it with him like a friend.
It was funny about school.

He sat in a square brown desk like all the other square brown desks and he thought it would be red.
And his room was a square brown room like all the other rooms.
And it was tight and close. And stiff.

He hated to hold the pencil and the chalk, with his arm stiff and his feet flat on the floor, stiff,
with the teacher watching and watching.

The teacher came and spoke to him.
She told him to wear a tie like all the other boys.

He said he didn't like them and she said it didn't matter.
After that they drew. And he drew all yellow and it was the way he felt about morning. And it was
beautiful.

The teacher came and smiled at him. What's this? she said.
Why don't you draw something like Ken's drawing?
Isn't it beautiful?
After that his mother bought him a tie and he always drew aeroplanes and rockets like everyone else.

And he threw the old picture away.

And when he lay alone looking at the sky,
it was big and blue; all of everything,
but he wasn't anymore.

He was square and brown inside and his hands were still.
And he was like everyone else. All the things inside him that needed saying, didn't need it any more.

It had stopped pushing. It was crushed.
Stiff.
Like everything else.

Donnelly notes that, after he wrote it, he killed himself. His teacher published it anonymously after his death.