



JOHN COLLIE LIFE BLOOD



ALL PEOPLE EXIST within a network of assumptions and beliefs. A central question in understanding common identity is the relationship between people and the land they occupy.

In the 21st century, New Zealand is awakening from a period dominated by European agriculturalists. The vision of a nation focused on fattening lambs and producing crops for the Old World shaped a cultural identity and social purpose advanced by many New Zealanders.

However, the patterns and meanings of Empire no longer hold the same force, and today many favour a national vision built around the idea of a clean, forested paradise, an adventurous and unique place remote from the frenzied pace of the modern world. This vision is asked to serve both as a foundation of nationalhood and culture, and as a marketing tool to encourage tourism and foreign investment.

The land and our relationship to it are central to both constructions. In *Life Blood*, Collie questions the motivations behind this relationship from a contemporary environmentalist viewpoint. He asks us to consider our responsibilities to the land and its flora and fauna, and highlights the impact of recent human intervention.

In reading these works, it is important to remember that we are as much caught up in the myths of our time as was any generation past, and this will inevitably influence how we perceive our surroundings and how we react to them.

LAND AND PEOPLE

About 1200 years ago, New Zealand was a densely forested group of islands. However it was also a place of diversity:

In the dry hills of Central Otago, where droughts and lightning fires were relatively frequent and winters harsh, the tallest vegetation was open woodland interspersed with scrub and grassland.

Scrub and tussock are as important to understanding southern New Zealand's landscape heritage as are forests, rivers and lakes.

Humans arrived here from Polynesia around 1200 AD. In the South Island in particular, this predicated another major event – the hunting of moa, which became extinct in its 19th as 200 years. Thousands of acres of the South Island's remaining forests were cleared during this period, and scrub and tussock took a firmer hold.

European settlers arrived in large numbers from about 1840, into a landscape already modified by several hundred years of human habitation. They expected a way of life at least comparable to their former homes, and most sought considerably greater affluence. To sustain themselves and their vision, they brought European plants and animals, and these cosseted interlopers often preyed openly on native species or competed with them for space and food.

In the mid-19th century, the plains of Canterbury and Otago were the world's last unused temperate grasslands, covered with dense growth supporting numerous bird, insect and plant species. However, in the 1850s and 60s, the perceived need was for pasture, and tussock was burned off with an almost evangelical fervour. Lady Mary Anne Barker recalls 'the exceeding joy of burning' on her Canterbury station in the 1860s:

We each provide ourselves with a good supply of matches ... As soon as we come to the proper spot, and F., has ascertained that no sheep are in danger of being made into roast mutton before their time, we begin to light our line of fire, setting one large tussock blazing, lighting our impromptu torches at it, and then starting from this 'head-centre', one to the right and the other to the left, dragging the blazing sticks along the grass. It is a very exciting amusement, I assure you, and the effect is beautiful, especially as it grows dark and the fires are racing up the hills all around us.

Alongside gold mining, logging, town building, and road and rail construction, this clearance transformed southern New Zealand of a site never before seen. But this transformation was not easily won and climate and terrain were formidable foes.



Farming has been a boom and bust undertaking in New Zealand, with at least as many human and environmental tragedies as stories of great wealth and viable management of the land.

Voices soon emerged warning that wholesale clearance was a short-sighted vision. Thomas Henry Potts, for example, wrote in 1882:

[L]et a few words be recorded for the preservation of our native fauna. It is a work of difficulty... to get folks interested in this subject, amidst the busy scenes of men pressing onward in the struggle for wealth or position... [T]he conservation of forests is either much disregarded or entirely ignored.... When at length we can find leisure to raise our thoughts from to-day to care and act for to-morrow, this state of things will no longer be endured, the commercial element will step in and record its veto against destruction, not from a feeling of sentiment – for commerce, whose only real foe is pain, would chaffer away every tree in the country if a margin of profit attended the transaction – but because it will find out that the preservation of forests can be made to pay.

By the early 20th century, the serious problems caused by consequent soil erosion were topical:

The most urgent problem in New Zealand is the control of floods and the prevention of excessive washing of soil down short river courses to the sea, a process which threatens to leave the country like an 'emasculated skeleton'. Deforestation or overgrazing of the undergrowth... has greatly accelerated run off and soil wash... [T]he conservation of soil, water and vegetation is a pressing problem in New Zealand.

Today we aim to do just as Potts predicted, to make the remaining native forests pay through tourism and foreign investment, but this must be achieved within a land undetermined in places by intensive farming practices.

The same forests will also pay dividends in national identity and cultural pride, but this vision should not create a further layer of illusion. Pre-human and pre-European New Zealand was a place of environmental diversity, and the reshaping of the land since the middle of the 19th century is an equally meaningful part of this legacy.

THE COLONIAL VISION OF THE LAND

Maori cave and shelter drawings provide visual hints of pre-European Aotearoa, particularly in southern areas. But it is the artists on Cook's voyages that offer the first concerted efforts to represent the country visually.

They were visitors whose skills, materials, viewpoints and audiences belonged to another place. In the vernacular of the time, they created romantic visions of a land and people poised on the brink of apparently inevitable extinction in the face of European progress.

A personal interest in the land, and an ongoing relationship with it, become clear in the works of the European settlers proper. In Canterbury, for example, the watercolours of Reverend James Preston provide a catalogue of rural colonial progress. They are populated by neatly-fenced sheep-filled fields, and the comfortable homes of prosperous settlers, with chimneys releasing puffs of smoke into clear blue skies.

But there is also an air of uncertainty. Buildings perch timidly against the grandeur of the Southern Alps. They are dwarfed by the sheer vastness of the land they occupy, and jagged rocky outcrops remind us that this is a tenuous lifestyle.

Photography entered the vocabulary of landscape from the mid-1850s. Initially a demanding undertaking, early landscape photography followed the tradition of the traveller and adventurer, providing visual representations as evidence of presence, and of the march of European technology into the wilderness. Amateur photographers also recorded their surroundings, often with intent reminiscent of watercolourists such as Preston.

Senses of place, self and future are important to colonial representations of New Zealand. Within fifty years, the dominant creative voice moved from distanced visitor, fascinated with the sublime and the exotic, to intensely personal representations imbued with the hopes and dreams of people making new homes, often underscored by a sense of the risks inherent in this venture. In *Life Blood* John Collie revisits these issues and voices for a 21st century audience.

LIFE BLOOD

In the struggle to nourish human life, directly through food and indirectly through income, much of New Zealand's natural diversity has been lost to the uniformity of pastures, crops, sheep and cattle.

In the colonial era, this transformation was an emblem of hope, prosperity and comfort. 150 years on, however, it is clear that Collie finds in the farmland of Central Otago. His sheep are desiccated remnants, marooned in a wilderness, and rendered anachronistic by changing markets, priorities, and perceptions of the land.

The scale of the works and the simplicity of the installation heighten the arresting darkness of Collie's imagery, and evoke the scale and silence of southern New Zealand. Broad vistas are counter posed with intimate studies of the fate of creatures bound to this landscape by human intervention. But human presence is not directly visible and Collie's farmland is a barren, depopulated place.

In *Green Desert / Dead Lamb* Collie constructs an image of despair. The lone Scottish thistle stands as a totem against the sparse Otago grassland. It is a stark focal point echoed by the eye of the dead lamb in the second part of the work. The lamb, traditionally a symbol of innocence and Christian values, lies rotting amidst the very pasture that should have given it life.

Since the photograph was taken, this land has been subdivided and built upon. Many well-heeled 'lifestyle' settlers are attracted to the remote beauty of Central Otago. However, does our rural land live up to the clean, serene image promoted by realtors? Collie asks us to consider the great burden that farming has placed on the land and questions whether the scale and intensity of our actions have, in fact, bled it dry.

Silent Forest / Sheep Head manipulates scale and introduces an element of the grotesque, as a decaying sheep's head appears to protrude from the edge of a beech forest. The forest recalls today's vision of a lush, forested New Zealand, but it is a silent fragment struggling amidst quite a different landscape. The

sheep's head is part of this other reality. Its final resting place is a bed of pine needles, contrasting with the ferns and moss on the floor of the remnant forest. Forest and pasture exist uneasily beside one another and neither reaches its full potential as human intervention imposes artificial demands and restrictions.

New Zealand Desert hangs opposite this work and introduces the diversity of the indigenous landscape. Collie considers this scene a 'natural desert', an evocation of the austere beauty of the grassland of Central Otago, complementing the New Zealand forest vision.

Ranging Sheep is an explicitly questioning work. In an obvious distortion of nature, the dead lamb has been suspended in a pine tree, recalling the imagery of animal sacrifice, while beneath it a crop of turnips lies unused. Human beings have stocked the land for economic gain, but both the food crop and the animal it was intended to nourish have been abandoned. Respect is a concept central to this work, and to the whole exhibition. Collie questions the tendency to reduce land and animals to units of economic production, a mind set which can also extinguish any need to offer them respect as living parts of the world we occupy.

Collie feels a connection to this land but he is an occasional urban visitor without a direct personal stake in its future. His black and white work, and its remote subject matter intended primarily for a city audience, recall 19th century landscape photography. But Collie is more than a dispassionate traveler. He believes the future of the land is an issue for urban and rural constituents alike.

As with many artists of the 19th century, there is a sub-text to Collie's work that questions the success of the colonial vision. Was the struggle to impose a European agricultural ideal successful in Central Otago, or has it proven to be ultimately unsustainable, so that now we seek to build a different property on the scarred terrain.

The landscape of the future will be constructed quite liberally on the bones of the past, and *Life Blood* asks us to consider our responsibilities in this process. If we are to continue to align our national identity closely with a vision of the land, how should this

be constructed? Is there such a thing as the true essence of the New Zealand landscape and, if so, how should it be expressed, and for whom? To be meaningful, such a vision must take account of all of the major periods in the evolution of the landscape, and all of its diverse manifestations. It should not be based on selective reworking of a palatable but essentially romantic myth.

Farming remains a vital part of New Zealand's economy and character, but today it sits alongside a range of values, including the desire to define and preserve a unique natural identity. The will to realise this vision is no less intense than it was 150 years ago, but is the model we are working towards any more robust or meaningful? As the colonial experience has demonstrated, be careful what you ask for. You just might get it.

Gary McCarthy

Curator of Pictorial Collections
Canterbury Museum

1. King, Carolyn *Immigrant Artists: Introduced predators and the conservation of birds in New Zealand*, Delford University Press, Auckland, 1984, p. 13.
2. Worthy, Trevor H and Richard R Holdaway *The Last World of the Moa*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2002, p. 540.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 546.
4. However, huge areas of forested land did survive this period, particularly in the North Island, see King, Carolyn, *op cit.*, pp 42-53.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
6. Barber, *Lady Station Life in New Zealand*, MacMillan & Co, London, 1870, pp. 195-6.
7. Potts, T H *Out in the Open*, Lyttelton Times Co, Christchurch, 1882, pp. 233-4.
8. Worthy, R D *The Alps of the Earth* (1926), quoted in L W McCaskill *Hold this Land: A History of soil conservation in New Zealand*, A H & A W Reed, Wellington, 1973, p. 17.





709.93
C69

9 - 29 OCTOBER 2003

13 Beever Road, PO Box 91 210 Patunanga, Manukau City, Auckland New Zealand. Phone (09) 577 8134
Fax (09) 577 0039. www.tebahi-themark.org.nz. Galleries open 12pm - 4pm 7 days. Closed public holidays

John Collie acknowledges the generous support of Manukau Institute of Technology Research and Ethics Committee
Images: Green Desert / Dead Lamb, Silent Field / Sheep Head, New Zealand Desert, Hanging Sheep
© Kerry McCarthy & John Collie 2003. Design: Janelle Tomancek Verso. Printed by Printco Graphics, Auckland
ISBN 0 908995 30 2



arts - culture - community