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Northland map, Noel McKenna.



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Written by

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Always Song in the Water

NZ-AOTEAROA FEATURES

THE ROAD CODE *AUCKLAND– WHANGAREI (SH1)*

Non-driving, my passenger assures me, is a far higher calling than being in the driver's seat. Noel McKenna and I are half an hour north of Auckland and not making particularly good time. Non-driving, he tells me, is the state of *attending to everything in the world that is not driving*. Accordingly, non-driving is infinitely larger than driving. And the essence of travel – I am starting to get this – is such a state of *passengerism*. Behind the steering wheel, the experience of going somewhere is a movie continuously playing in front of you. From the seat on the left, however, the passenger savours the ordered and disordered succession of moments and details – the non-driving experience can be alive with digressions, familiar things seen from oblique angles, all kinds of subtexts and marginalia. One thing might follow another, but then again it might not. And the potential for juxtaposition – the constant ebb and flow of this and that – is limitless.

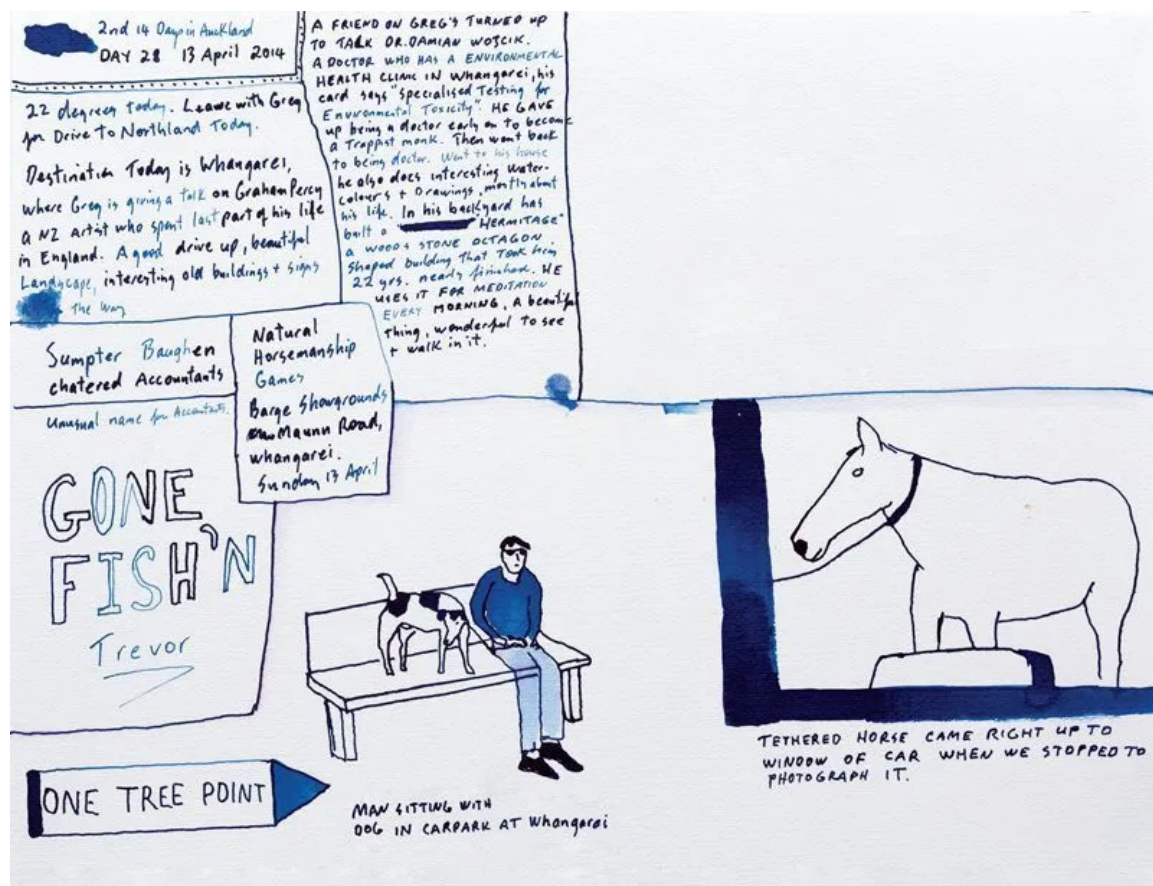
Having shrugged off the city in our borrowed car, the two of us set forth across the plains of lower Northland. Simultaneously we embark onto the flat-lands of the shared pages that follow – this account of a few days in the north.

A nervous traveller, at whose behest virtually our entire tour is conducted at 70 kilometres per hour, and whose most frequent remark is that I am positioning the car 'too far to the left', Noel admits that he feels more at home on a bicycle, or even a train: 'To arrive in one piece, the car driver must always stay focused on what is in front of them. A train is a much safer way to get from A to B. You are nine times more likely to die in a bath than in a train accident.' *The Road Code According to Noel*.

In the graveyard just outside a small Māori church, a Brisbane Broncos flag flies above a mound of freshly dug earth. Noel senses in this marker a trans-Tasman metaphor, as well as a tragic moment in the emotional life of the province. Chief among the reasons why Noel has been a frequent visitor to New Zealand is the fact that it

reminds him of how Australia was a few decades back – his birthplace Brisbane most of all – with its visible bones, recognisable social pattern and sense of incompleteness. Capitalist culture hasn't quite digested the place yet, even if – particularly here on the eastern coast, with its burgeoning developments – it is clearly nibbling at the edges.

We motor onwards through a thinning cloud of information – all manner of road signage, billboards and hoardings which remind us, far too often, that the Royal Baby George is now halfway through his Grand New Zealand Tour, and the missing Malaysian Airlines plane is still missing. We agree that the signage in front of a roadside factory – CONCRETE IDEAS – is good advice for artists and writers alike. Along the way, we pass countless compositions Noel might well have produced himself: arrangements of nonchalant trees, grazed paddocks and verges with troughs, fruit stalls, stray dogs and, visible now in the distance, the oil refinery at Marsden Point.



Noel McKenna, 'The day we drove north', a page from an Auckland diary, April 2014, ink on paper

'JUST BURSTING FOR THE WIDE OPEN SPACES'

Introducing his 1967 radio documentary 'The Idea of North', pianist Glenn Gould, while referring specifically to the Arctic north of Canada, made some salient remarks about outlying, under populated and under explored regions generally. It is into such a bracing and at times perplexing notion of The North that Noel and I are presently heading. 'Something really does happen to most people who go into the north,' Gould observed. 'They become at least aware of the creative opportunity which the physical fact of the country represents and – quite often, I think – come to measure their own work and life against that rather staggering creative possibility: they become, in effect, philosophers.'

In what way have various Northland-based or -formed artists become, by Gould's definition, philosophers? Florian Habicht's *Land of the Long White Cloud* is a good place to start. Publicity for the 2008 feature-length documentary summarised it as 'Fish meet Philosophy on 90 Mile Beach'. Florian's reeling (in at least three senses of the word) and often poetic evocation of the beach's annual surfcasting competition includes a host of self-styled thinkers, a good many of whom would have brought tears of joy to Glenn Gould's eyes. The film reminds us that Northland is, figuratively as well as literally, a promontory or extension, an isolated vantage point from which its citizens see and interpret the world in their own way and with a particular character and intensity.

During the latter period of the painter Colin McCahon's life, when he was living in Auckland, Northland established itself in his mind as the one region in which he felt 'an absence of the colonial hangover', as Gordon H. Brown put it – a region which transcended the notion, still widespread at the time, of England or Europe as home: 'In a special way Northland appeared to him as "uniquely New Zealand".' While McCahon's *Northland Panels* were inspired by Chinese scroll painting and North American abstraction – influences explored exhaustively in most discussions of the work – less is made of the work's deep affinity with the northern province which the title so stridently announces. 'I fled north in memory,' Colin McCahon elaborated – this was in 1958 and he had just returned from travels in the United States. 'I was just bursting for the wide open spaces.' If the work is imbued with an enchantment with The North, it also hints at a commensurate disenchantment with other places. The inscription on the fifth panel of the work – 'A landscape with too few lovers' – might well be a rebuke to the city of Auckland which, in Māori, is Tāmaki-makau-rau or 'Tāmaki of a hundred lovers'. McCahon's inscription is a crestfallen revision of that much older name. The wide open space of The North would be a reprieve for him, a chance to regather energy and focus.



Still from Land of the Long White Cloud, directed by Florian Habicht, 2008

RACING COLOURS

Not far from the northern end of Dargaville, we pull over at the entrance to the town's raceway. I recount how, back in the 1970s, the annual race meeting had all the solemnity of a religious feast day. It shut the town down. The rest of the year, sheep grazed the grounds and members' enclosure, and the track lay like a burst balloon on the land.

The last time I stood here was during my tenure as roving reporter for the Dargaville daily, the *Northland Times*. I had just turned eighteen and was living at the gravel end of Awakino Road. This side of town. It was in the newspaper office that I met a famous female jockey in the company of a racing journalist whom I remember as being three times her height, at least twice her age, and with whom I suspected she was having an affair. The two had driven up from Auckland together and came to the *Northland Times* office on race morning so we could photograph the jockey and I could scrawl something for that afternoon's paper.

The journalist wore a full-length trench-coat and nifty hat, a pair of binoculars dangled from his neck, the morning's *Herald* lodged in his armpit. Some years later, when I met the Australian author and horse-racing enthusiast Gerald Murnane, I was struck by his striking resemblance to this visiting journalist, or at least to my memory of him. I was introduced to Gerald Murnane at a literary party in the home of *Meanjin* chief editor Jenny Lee in Melbourne, August 1990, at which time he was fiction editor

of *Meanjin*. This was a role to which he was not, by temperament, well suited. Rejecting just about everything that came across his desk, he would publish maybe two or three pieces per quarterly issue. This fact made him a great friend of all the poets in the room, myself included, as the paucity of published fiction meant more pages of each issue went to poetry (edited gingerly by Philip Mead, also in the kitchen). After a year or two in the editorial role, Gerald Murnane scampered back into the relative obscurity he has cherished and assiduously mined, from a literary perspective, since the very beginning of his writing life. More recently, he took himself yet a further remove from the literary world, transplanting both life and work to the rural settlement of Goroke in Victoria, which, by every description I've ever heard of it, could be a sister town of Dargaville, with 15 degrees mean temperature added, and minus the river.

Square-shouldered in his all-weather greatcoat, Gerald Murnane had the demeanour of someone attending a racing fixture rather than a crowded party. He existed in a state which I can only describe as self-imposed, self-regulated exile – with a firm gaze into the middle distance. He was standing beside Peter Craven, editor of another notable Melbourne journal of the day, *Scripta*: Two men-of-letters spouting quality prose, as I recall them, hovering proprietorially over a kitchen table upon which were arrayed a few glasses and the non-refrigerated drinks. The hard stuff, mostly. As I came by, heading for the refrigerator, Peter Craven offered a brisk introduction to his companion. I can't recall whether Gerald Murnane simply said hello or if he said hello and that he knew someone, a member of the family perhaps, who lived near Wellington. I remember and misremember it both ways. And that was as far as it went.



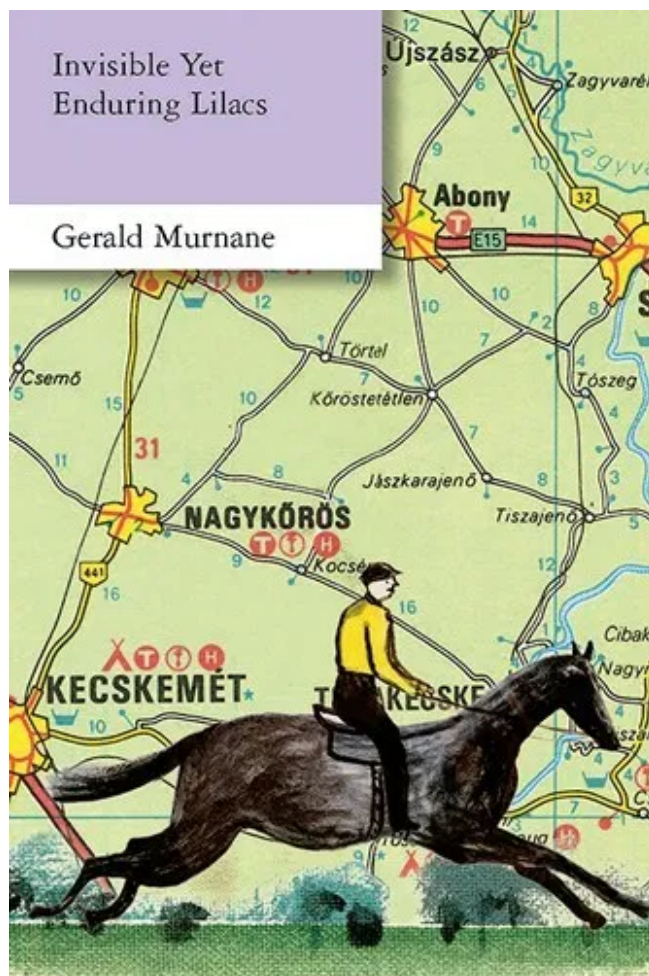
Two men-of-letters spouting quality prose . . .’
Noel McKenna, 2018

I pressed on towards the refrigerator, which I remember as occupying a similar space in the room as the adjacent novelist, and also having something of the same sculptural form and presence. Both had numerous pockets or compartments. I extracted two cans of beer from the fridge door, which I then ferried back to the living room.

It was only later that I discovered Noel had been corresponding with Gerald Murnane for some considerable time and in 2005 provided a drawing of a racehorse for the cover of his collection of essays, *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs*. Their association was grounded, I suspect, upon a knowledge of ‘the horses’, a propensity for various kinds of mapping and list-making, and a shared cast of mind.

It was my reading of Gerald Murnane’s books, rather than the nondescript encounter just related, which formed the impression of the man I find myself returning to during our Northland excursion. When I first read Murnane’s *The Plains*, the novel impressed me as being, at various points, very suggestive of the province we are currently driving through – with its isolated figures, spartan rhythm and stretched-out sense of time. Its *elastic metaphysics*, as I noted on the flyleaf of my copy. As a private form of homage, the only personal email address I have ever had is wellington dot plains –

this despite the fact that, apart from the Tasman Sea/Cook Strait/Pacific Ocean trifecta, there is no significant flat territory anywhere near the city in which I usually live. Murnane's books suggest he probably wouldn't care for the capital: 'And when we happen to see the turbulent air swirling like water above our land at noon, don't we turn away because it recalls the meaningless turmoil of oceans.' So pronounces a righteously landlocked character in *The Plains*: 'In the hottest days of February we pity the poor coast-dwellers staring all day from their cheerless beaches at the worst of all deserts. . . .' As an exclamation of oceanic loathing, the passage is about on par with W. H. Auden's description of the sea as not only being 'deplorably wet, sloppy and formless' but also 'that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilisation has emerged and into which, unless saved by the effort of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse'.

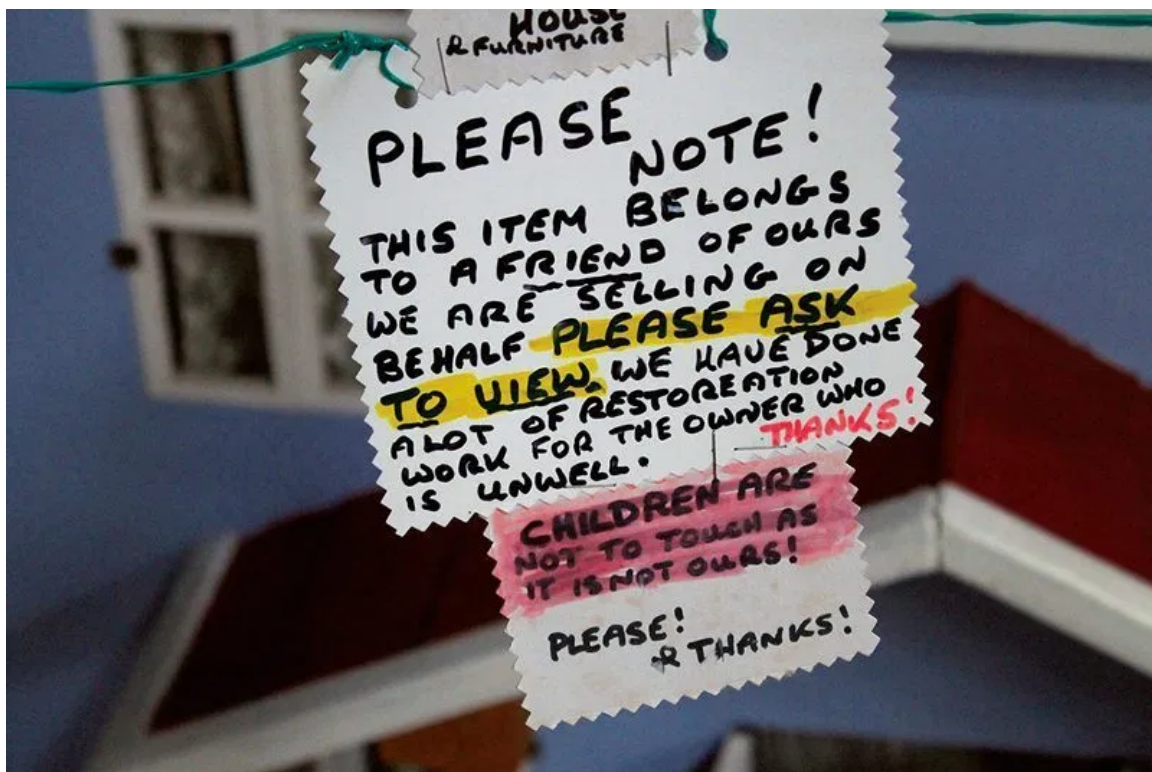


Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs by Gerald Murnane, Sydney: Giramondo Publishing, 2005.

SMALL TOWN, SMALL WORLD

Dargaville might be fewer than 200 kilometres from Auckland but these are tough, unyielding kilometres; and the muddy Northern Wairoa River to the east is the town's moat, drawing a line between it and the outside world. If you're driving northwards to the town, you sense a shift in the collective unconscious as soon as you have crossed the river. In the late 1970s, a crime wave swept the Northern Wairoa district. As the *Northland Times* court reporter, this was good news for me. No shortage of stories. I remember overhearing a policeman saying that the bed of the impenetrably muddy Northern Wairoa River had become so laden with stolen merchandise – presumably jettisoned or discarded as useless – that it was a miracle the river (which was really an estuary) was still able to move at all.

To this day, just beyond the river's stopbank, a scattering of second-hand shops are still ticking over with their lawful and unlawful stock. One junk store, aggressively named 'Lock, Stock and Barrel', has many of the characteristics of a well-organised totalitarian state. Under the watchful eye of its proprietor, Noel and I navigate our way through a multitude of DO NOT TOUCH signs. Not only are there instructions and threats aplenty ('Shoplifters Beware' and 'You Break It, You Pay For It'), there are also detailed descriptions of objects, handwritten in the forthright manner of an officially sanctioned Thought Police. Ultimately the experience of being in the shop is akin to a classic-period Eastern European movie with subtitles.



Photograph by Noel McKenna

The hands-off directive isn't a problem for Noel, whose approach to most things has always been a very acquisitive kind of looking, but never touching – very much a leaving of things as they are. After a short visit to another second-hand emporium – this one aptly named 'Muddy Waters' – we linger a while beside the Northern Wairoa River. I have just purchased an LP recording of 'Water Music' (Linde Consort) for a dollar for the simple reason that Handel's aquatic suite is perfectly situated here.

I recall various nicknames for the silted-up waterway from my time here in the 1970s: the Gravy River, the Upside Down River . . . The heavy brown mass of water struck a chord in my mind with T. S. Eliot's 'The river is a slow brown god . . .' – which I first read while living here. It was also the Congo in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As a dreamy seventeen-year-old, I would sit in the band rotunda and project not only Eliot but also James K. Baxter's Jerusalem-period poems onto these unresponsive waters: 'The brown river, te taniwha, flows on / between his banks . . .' or 'Grey and muddy the waters of Babylon / Flowing out of the broken hills, / The river serpent swollen with proud silt'.

Some days the river resembled a cup of tea, usually with milk, other times it was filter coffee. During lunch breaks I would prowls the rocky, rubbishy water's edge. There was a shambolic jetty from which, after a brief appearance in the nearby Dargaville courthouse, a young man called Barney Ben Tane threw himself. It was mid-hearing that he made his break for freedom and, with one middle-aged policeman and the *Northland Times* reporter in hot pursuit, ran down the road, past the Post Office, across the parking area and then into the river. Alarmingly, the fugitive seemed not to have taken into account the impossibility of keeping his face above water while handcuffed. Our policeman had to make a hasty dive into the tidal flow and rescue him. I was standing amongst the townsfolk as the bedraggled, escapee was marched by the similarly bedraggled constable to the nearest police car, both of them enwrapped in the enthusiastic applause of all assembled.

'I have never been in a small town that had not a few distinctive spirits,' wrote Dargaville resident Jane Mander in a newspaper article. I felt sure she would have approved of Barney Ben Tane's freedom dash. She was writing two years after the publication of her novel, *The Story of a New Zealand River*, a book which opens with one of the most striking scenes in the country's literature. Therein, a household's worth of belongings – including, famously, a piano – are taken by barge up a Northland waterway, in the general vicinity of where we are now standing.

Upon taking up employment at the *Northland Times* in 1978, I was informed by the editor, rather portentously, that Jane Mander had once held the job to which I had just been appointed. This I took as an interesting precedent and grounds for mild optimism regarding my own endeavours.



Noel McKenna, *untitled (detail)*, 2014, oil on plywood



‘... in that incongruous setting...’, drawing by Noel McKenna, 2018

This is an extract from *Always Song in the Water: An Oceanic Sketchbook* by Gregory O’Brien, published in September 2019 by Auckland University Press. Details [here](#).

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