

**NOEL HILLIARD:  
THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE SELF**

**Interview by Peter Beatson. March 1988.**

Throughout your novels and short stories, there are many closely-observed descriptions of people performing manual labour. You show women working in textile factories, waitressing and doing domestic labour, and men working in paper mills, on the wharves and on railway construction jobs. You appear to have a great respect for people who perform these necessary, routine physical tasks. Do you come from a working class background yourself?

Yes, my father worked on the railways and I grew up when he was unemployed. I was born in 1929, the railways stopped construction around 1932, and between 1932 and 1935 I had the sight of my Dad working in the garden, walking twenty or thirty miles to timber mills to try to get work, and living on the dole. The dole car used to come round at night: you held out your hand and they counted coins into it in the car lights. My father felt a deep sense of humiliation in having to hold out his hand like that for a few coins.

We were living in the railway construction camp at Kotemaori, but there was no more railway work. They put the men on relief work instead, which entailed shifting heaps of rubbish from one place to another using wheelbarrows and shovels and then shifting it back again. Rational people rebel against that kind of thing. They asked: 'Why are we doing this? Why can't we be digging cuttings, making fillings and putting through tunnels?' They were told: 'Because the railway's closed, that's why.' Can you see the total bloody irrationality of it?

Were your family highly politicized at that stage?

Not really. They and the other workers were all Labour, as in fact were the farmers in the district. They were great admirers of people like Mick Savage and Jack Lee who were household names, but they weren't politicized in any theoretical, socialist sense. All they wanted was to get the old crowd out and 'our crowd' in and everything would be all right.

You have yourself become much more theoretically politicized since then?

Oh yes, very much so. In fact, it may have started when I was quite young. When I was about six or seven, we had a picnic at the beach and I won a race for which I was given a little book called *Comrades for the Charter* by Geoffrey Trease. It was about the Chartist movement in England in the nineteenth century. It was a wonderful book, telling about how the Chartists rebelled against the establishment and fought for

workers' rights. It must have made a big impression on me because I read it dozens of times.

Another important thing that affected my early political consciousness happened when work had started again in the late thirties and we moved to a railway camp called Kopuawhara near the Mahia Peninsula. There was a big flood there in 1938 in which nineteen male workers and a woman cookhouse worker were drowned. There had been a cloudburst and the single men's camp was swept away. I had gone out in the morning to see how high the river was and I saw a party of men in oilskins pulling a body from the river. Later on we went down to the YMCA where they were using the supper room to put the bodies. They were brought in on stretchers, all covered in clay. Those were the first dead men I had seen in my life. It didn't make much impression on the New Zealand psyche because all sorts of dreadful things were happening in Europe at the time, but for twenty workers to get drowned in one hit was quite a considerable disaster. Bob Semple came to the camp and spoke in the YMCA hall.

There is another little incident I remember from that time. The big social event in the camp was the weekly film which they screened in that same YMCA hall and which everybody went to see. In those days they used to play 'God Save the King' and everybody stood up. There was one man, though, who always stayed seated during the playing of the National Anthem. There were murmurings of discontent from my old man, who had been to the First World War and was a great King and Country man.

I used to hear him lambasting that man and I asked my mother what he did that was wrong. She said that he sat down during 'God Save the King'. I asked why, and she said it was because he was a communist. I asked: 'What's that?' She replied: 'They think that everybody should be equal.' I asked what was wrong with that and she went wild at the very notion that royalty should be regarded as equal to us. In her way of looking at things, it was a quite unthinkable notion that people should be equal. I developed an immense respect for that man (Roy Gilbert was his name) who sat down during the National Anthem. I realize now that it is an extreme kind of sectarian gesture which alienates people, gets their backs up, and is of no help at all in political work. You've alienated people before you've even started saying anything, but it made a big impression on me at the time.

Did you ever refuse to stand for 'God Save the King' yourself?

No. I suppose I would have liked to, just to show my independence, but as I said I don't think there is any point in alienating yourself from your community just for the sake of making a gesture. For the same reason, although I have been an atheist most of my life I go along to Church of England services with my family. Church is a meaningful social ritual even if you don't believe in God. As a kid, I went off to Sunday School, and later when I was a boarder at secondary school I actually used to sing in the choir, even though I had decided long ago that prayer was a waste of time. You prayed for all sorts of wonderful things and never got them. I didn't believe a word of it, yet I still did it.

Despite such outward conformity, were the various events and impressions you have mentioned pushing you in the direction of socialism, even as a child?

Yes, there were things like that notion of 'equality', and also my feeling that workers were the salt of the earth: they were the people who actually did things, but were the worst treated and the worst off. The thing about that flood I mentioned was not that I was seeing dead bodies for the first time, but that they were the bodies of workers. Then there were the Chartists and their fight for workers' rights which many had been killed for. I also looked, if in an uncoordinated kind of way, at what passed for 'history' as it was taught at that time. They taught the Russian Revolution, for instance, as a monumental revolt against human reason. We were taught that the whole thing had been a bloodthirsty carnival, but it was on the point of collapse and they were going to revert to capitalism any day now. This is what we were told, but I didn't believe any of it. Actually this was during the war years and the Russians were supposed to be our noble allies, but that was still what they were telling us.

How did your experiences in boarding school generally affect your feeling about equality, your dislike of social hierarchy and so on?

In some ways I quite enjoyed school. I was at Gisborne High School and went back in 1984 for the 75th Jubilee. It was good seeing my old mates and tramping around the places where we used to cavort. While I was actually at school, however, I experienced a very deep alienation of spirit.

In your novel *Power of Joy*, school was shown as a pretty brutal kind of place. In fact, throughout your novels there is a strong sense of revulsion towards male brutality. Did that have its origins in your experience of boarding school?

The school was actually much more brutal than the way I described it in the book. There was, for instance, the forced homosexuality. I was never the victim of it myself, but I was terribly sorry for the jokers who were. They were always young new boys who had no friends and couldn't defend themselves. And there were other humiliations that they used to inflict upon people. There was the 'Alleyway' where you were forced to crawl between the legs of about fifty guys who belted you on the backside. None of the masters cared, even if they knew. I do have a real horror of cruelty.

There were other alienating things about the school as well. Kids there were overwhelmingly the sons of well-off farmers. When they discovered that my father worked on the railways, they started referring to 'your Red Fed old man'. It is interesting that this phrase was still being used up the East Coast in the 1940s when it had been out of fashion for donkey's years in the rest of New Zealand. The idea survived in the minds of well-off East Coast farmers that anyone who was a worker was a Red Fed. Alternatively, the kids would talk about 'your doley old man'. Anyone who had had the misfortune of being unemployed was despised as a 'doley'. That was how I experienced the class system in my early teens.

Although you were looked down on because of your working class origins, your own family could be pretty snobbish in its way?

Oh yes, they certainly were. My mother looked down on Maori people, for instance, even though she had no close dealings with them. I had Maori friends myself. In fact, my closest friend was a boy called Mohi Rarere who was the one who showed me where all the good eeling places were. We used to walk seven miles over to the beach where he showed me how to get paua and gather the edible seaweed called karengo. I also had good Maori pals at high school - Len Ngata in particular. It was only when I left school and went to Wellington that I realized that prejudice towards Maori was more than just a personal quirk of my mother's. Racism was much more widespread in Wellington than it was back home. There was a total disregard for Maori people among the white folks I met in Wellington. They despised the Maori. I could never understand it.

What about your 'King and Country' father? Did he share your mother's attitude towards Maori?

No. In fact, I discovered quite recently something about my father that I had never known. In 1976, I went up to the Golden Jubilee at the little Kotemaori School I had been to as a child. My old teacher Jack Cook asked me if I knew why my father stopped working for the Post Office and got into the railways. I said I didn't, so Jack told me the story.

My father used to play senior rugby in Napier. Even when we were in Kotemaori he used to hitch in to Napier to play rugby. As in all rugby clubs, Maori and Pakeha played together. There was no discrimination. Then the Springboks came to New Zealand. This was right back in the 1920s. My father was working for the Post and Telegraph and he was required to send a cablegram from the manager of the South African team back to South Africa before the first game. The cablegram asked if the white South Africans had to play against 'Kaffirs' in New Zealand. They were talking about my old man's mates, the guys he played rugby with. So he took it to the Telegraph newspaper and they wired it all around New Zealand. In fact, the story got all around the world. The tour was nearly cancelled and it was my old man who blew the whistle on them! Of course he was immediately dismissed.

Dad had been dead for twenty odd years and this was the first time I heard about it. He had never said anything to me even when I used to agitate against playing rugby with South Africa. I marched in the first anti-tour demonstration back in 1948. I suppose there were about thirty of us. People picked garbage and tins out of the gutters and threw them at us. We were a small, pathetic bunch marching down to the Cenotaph, but we were led by a distinguished soldier, Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, whose legs were blown off during the war. He addressed our little group at the Cenotaph and asked why it was that the Maori were allowed to fight and die on the battlefields of North Africa but were not allowed to play rugby on the sports fields of South Africa.

During all that time of agitation and debate, and during later protests as well, my father kept quiet and never said anything about the long-ago incident with the cablegram. After he died, I found a collection of photographs he had taken at Gallipoli which included pictures of his Maori mates. From his point of view, if Maoris were good enough to be on Gallipoli with the rest of us, he would stick by them later on.

Given your mother's attitude, however, it must have caused a bit of a stir in the family when you married a Maori?

Yes, when I told my parents in 1953 that I intended to marry Kiriwai, my mother was deeply upset. I showed her a photograph of Kiri, and I waited while there was a long silence. Finally all she could bring herself to say was: 'And she's got flat shoes!' When we got married, I wrote and told them. There was no reply from my mother, but Kiri got a nice letter from Dad which she still has. She treasures it because it was the last letter he wrote. He knew he was dying but never mentioned that. The old man's heart was in the right place. Even if he was a 'King and Country' man, he knew who his mates were.

Your father sounds like the archetypal, old style Kiwi male. RSA, rugby...

And beer and racehorses. Half his income went on the horses.

How was it possible for you, coming from that kind of background, to develop an independent, and for them idiosyncratic, worldview?

I don't really know. It's something I've never really tried to analyze. I've just gone ahead under my own steam. My mother never read my novels. She never wanted to know about them. If they contained 'Marries', that was it! She actually never read anything heavier than *Woman's Weekly* and escapist books by Ethel M Dell, Ruby M Ayres and Frances Parkinson Keyes.

Your own novels are far from being escapist literature. In them there is a harsh awareness of the ugliness and brutality inherent in much social life. In fact, your central male character finds himself constantly faced by a profound existential dilemma. On the one hand, he is a very solitary person, who has learned how to escape from the more squalid side of the human world into an almost mystical contemplation of nature. On the other, he knows he must face up to the hard realities of social life, must achieve a way of reaching out to and making contact with his fellows, no matter how repellent he may find them at times.

Yes, in my novels there are many avenues of escape open to my hero. For instance, the tree into which he climbs is a symbol of one way of releasing himself from all the horrors that take place on the ground. There are many other ways of going off into your own tree and letting all the nastiness happen down below while you're having a good time on high. Ultimately, though, there's no way that you can be a real human being without also being a citizen.

Yet it would be nice if one could spend one's life sunk in contemplation of the beauty of nature. It is obviously something you yourself love. Throughout your work, there are passages of almost hallucinatory power where nature is observed and described in its most minute detail.

Yes, I love the natural world and wanted to communicate that love in my writing. There's nothing that I like better than sitting here and looking out at the ocean and

clouds. Kiri and I are great connoisseurs of sunsets! We sit outside and watch the sun going down with nobody saying anything. That is what we really like doing best. The fact remains, though, that as citizens we have to do a great many things besides contemplating the beauty of nature.

You mean the necessity to force yourself out into the public world and link up with the lives of others - which also means having to cope with all the violence and the sleaziness that world contains?

Exactly. That's what I tried to communicate throughout the whole *Maori Girl* tetralogy. It is the conflict between individual being and social being. I don't know whether I resolved it in my books. I don't even know whether I have resolved it in myself.

But for you, 'social being' is harder to accept than 'individual being'?

Oh yes. It is so easy to make mistakes. If we could only please ourselves in what we do, how much more congenial life would be! But it doesn't work that way.

Does the acceptance of responsibility towards social life mean getting involved in left-wing politics?

Sure. I have always felt that the basic solution has to be a political one. Nothing short of a political solution will prove ultimately satisfactory. A political solution, not a philanthropic one, must be found, for instance, for unemployment and all the misery it brings.

And yet your novels were actually set during the post-war period of prosperity and full employment. Times were good, but even so many of your characters were weak, vicious and petty. Doesn't that suggest a basic flaw in human nature which no political solution can cure?

No - I don't agree with the Christian idea of original sin. I don't agree that human beings are basically flawed. It is society which has shaped them the way that they are, so it is a social solution that you must seek.

It's not just Christianity that got it wrong. Freudian psychoanalysis also made a basic mistake. It looked into the individual and said: 'You are screwed up. Let's see how we can unscrew you. Let's go deep down into your psyche and see how we can cure you and make you fit into society.' It doesn't look at the shaping influence of society, and say that maybe it's society that is screwed up. Maybe if we altered society, we would cure the social problems which individuals reflect.

If you found somebody suffering from typhoid, you would have a look at the drains, at the food they'd been eating and so on. Similarly, if you are looking at individual neurosis you should look for the external pressures which have caused it. Considering that we are all alienated in the present state of society, people are forced sometimes into bizarre forms of anti-social activity.

Picking up on that theme, the male protagonist of your novels on several occasions finds himself confronted with people and situations from which his instinct is to shrink in revulsion. There are, for instance, several scenes set in rather grotty pubs around the Wellington wharves, where the hero sits and looks at his fellow human beings with a certain amount of initial disgust. However, each time that he catches himself passing such moral judgements on others, he makes the conscious choice not to turn away but to keep looking, keep thinking, and try to understand the social pressures which have made these people what they are.

The point I'm making is that he does not act from a warm, spontaneous love of humanity, but rather he wills himself intellectually to adopt a more sympathetic stance. For some of your characters, a love of their neighbour seems to come naturally, while for others it has to be worked at. Your heroine Netta is of the first type, your hero Paul is the second. Is that how you saw him?

That's a fair statement. To the extent that his acceptance of others was a conscious act, it was willed and deliberate. The alternative was to revert into self, and he didn't wish to do that.

Having yourself made that conscious decision to accept the responsibility and challenges of being a citizen as opposed to an isolated self, the obvious step was to get involved in political action. Could you tell me a bit about the political world of the forties and fifties as you found them as a young man?

The Labour Party was the great party of the working class when I grew up. For good or ill, Mickey Savage had an almost messianic influence. People used to think of politics in very personalized terms. Leaders like Savage or John A Lee were going to bring the millennium. To my mind, that is the wrong way of thinking. Ultimately it is the people themselves who bring about the great changes. Don't trust any specific group or individual. It has to be a collective, social movement. People as a whole have to want to finish with the old way of life and start a new one.

But back in 1935, the Labour Party was the great charismatic party. On election night, we went to listen to the one and only radio in the district. When the Labour victory was assured, how people sang and danced and kissed one another! I asked my mother what it was all about. She just said: 'Everything is going to be all right now!'

In 1946, I started work on the Labour Party newspaper *The Southern Cross*. Its first issue was March 4 1946. It was a great excitement to bring out a new daily newspaper from the ground floor up. Then I became aware of the political side of things and watched the manoeuvring between political Labour and industrial Labour, the parliamentary Party, the grass root branches and the trade unions, the militants and the reactionaries.

For instance, we would get a union's statement on why it had gone on strike, then F P Walsh would ring up and say: 'Get rid of that, we don't want it in!'. He didn't have any shares in the paper, but he was head of the Federation of Labour and a big heavy. He was also chairman of the Economic Stabilization Commission which more or less

dictated Government economic policy. He was a very big wheel and people like Fraser and Nash were scared of him. But those politicians also wanted their say in the running of the paper. The result was that grass roots dissent coming up through the Labour Party got suppressed in *The Southern Cross* by the head office hierarchy, even though it was the grass roots and the unions who had put in the money to start up the paper in the first place. The wharfies had put in the most, but it was the wharfies who got the worst deal.

I was secretary of the Wellington Central branch of the Labour Party, but I left the Party over the conscription issue in 1949. I put out a magazine called *Civil Liberty* opposing peace time conscription. The Labour Party was saying that there were submarines in Vladivostok, we had to prepare, and all the eighteen-year-olds had to go off and do drill. I thought that in the atomic age this was bloody silly. A few years later when conscription was abolished, they gave all the reasons which we had given for not introducing it in the first place!

Well, I watched all that happening and used to compare how milk-and-water our paper was beside the Australian communist paper *The Tribune*. I also used to go to communist meetings at the Unity Centre, got interested, contributed to Communist Party funds and read *The People's Voice*.

Then I got TB in 1950 and had to go off to a sanatorium for a long time. Even so, I kept in touch with what was going on, and during the 1951 waterfront strike I got up a petition which we sent off to Sid Holland. We protested against the suppression of civil liberties, against the Emergency Regulations, against the formation of scab unions and so on. Holland's reply said: 'Your petition received and contents noted. The only protest you appear not to have made is against the bashing of an innocent union official'. I don't know what he was talking about, but the papers of the time were full of stories about wharfies beating up scabs. It was a typical Holland reply and a typical Holland evasion. He was a ratbag.

The upshot of all this was that while I was in the sanatorium, I wrote and asked if I could join the Communist Party. *The Southern Cross* had stopped publication on February 19 1951, mainly because it lacked funds but also because it lacked any clear direction and was badly organized. I came out of the sanatorium minus a lung in 1952 and got jobs with the Tourist and Publicity Office and the Government Printing Office as a proof reader. I got pushed out of both jobs because of the intervention of the security police. They said it was because of my health, but when I challenged the head of the Printery he told me that it was regarded as a security Department and the security people had told them I wasn't to be there. I asked how the hell I could be a security risk when all I was doing was proof reading railway timetables. He agreed with me but said there was nothing he could do.

Did you stay in the Communist Party for long?

No. I prepared a big report around 1954 saying that it was a mistake to find Russian reasons for doing things in New Zealand. There should be New Zealand reasons for doing them. They were always quoting Russian precedents for this or that. In the event, my report was not presented at the meeting it had been written for. They said they didn't think it was suitable. This was the very kind of thing I was fighting

against. The Party was run by a self-perpetuating coterie under what they called 'democratic centralism' which basically meant that there was no democratic control over a group of self-perpetuating leaders. By the time of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, I had already stopped going to meetings, but if I hadn't, the Russian invasion of Hungary would certainly have stopped me. A hell of a lot of members left at that time and only a hard core remained. Looking back, I can now see many justifications for the Russians behaving as they did, but even if I had known them then I think I would still have left the Party. And if not then, I would have left with the Czechoslovakian intervention of 1968. Anyway, after 1956, I had no further connections with the Communist Party.

Did your political beliefs have any further repercussions in your professional life?

In 1954, I put in for a job as foreign editor with *The Evening Post*, but they said they didn't like my political background. They thought I would slant the news 'the wrong way'. They gave the job to someone who was politically 'reliable'.

Returning to your novels, when *Maori Girl* came out in the early sixties, it created quite a lot of controversy and attracted a certain amount of hostile critical attention. Why was that?

It was really the first novel that portrayed Maori people as being members of contemporary society and as fellow citizens. All previous novels had depicted the Maori in their great heyday before the Pakeha arrived. Furthermore, the novel was not written from an anthropological point of view, smearing the Maori on a slide and peering at them through a microscope. Quite a lot of Pakeha did not like this at all. Today things have changed so much it is hard to believe what it used to be like.

Another problem was that the novel treated social issues and was political. As a result, it wasn't considered 'artistic'. Also, back then New Zealanders used to be very self-conscious about seeing themselves portrayed in novels or films. There used to be a nervous titter when the Film Unit's weekly review came on in the cinemas.

Perhaps another reason why your novels upset people was that you were showing a side of life in Wellington which was pretty nasty, and which many either did not know existed or at least tried to pretend was not there?

Oh yes, there was a lot of racial discrimination around. You can go back and read old accommodation notices saying: 'Europeans Only'. Or there was a sign in a bar which appears in one of the novels: 'Native Women Will Not Be Served In This Hotel'. People think I invented that for the book, but it was for real. I still have a photograph of it. Just imagine it - Kiriwai is 'a native!'

Of course, in the non-pejorative sense, this is quite right. The Maori are the native inhabitants here and the whites are just interlopers. Nowadays there are Maori campaigns for land and water rights of a kind you never had when I started writing. How I longed for that to happen back in the forties and fifties!

Do you think the word 'socialism' is wide enough to encompass what Maori are looking for, as well as embodying white, working class political aspirations?

I am sure of it. There's no inconsistency between socialist teachings and Maori communal organization. No private individuals should own the land, the air, the clouds, the trees, the ocean or the sun. They are precious heirlooms that we receive and must pass on in good order to those who are to come. That is the Maori view. Isn't it also the socialist view?