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**From Aspiring to ‘Paradise’:**  
*the South Island myth and its enemies*

A critical and creative investigation into  
the (de)construction of Aotearoa’s Lakes District  
presented in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Masters in Creative Writing  
at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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## **Abstract**

Poetry and film are artistic modes for representing, interpreting and evaluating our environment. Aotearoa's poets have distilled the meanings we place on 'places of the heart' since the first oral histories and lyrics were composed. Kiwi filmmakers have also fixed their gaze on places layered with cultural significance, selecting Edens at various stages of the Fall as settings for their protagonists to mess about in. With New Zealand's unique position as the last place on earth to be populated, the human response to this landscape is a significant aspect of the nation's psyche, and the relationship between people and place remains an enduring motif in local writing and cinema. My research stems from an exploration of the poetic and on-screen representations of the Central Otago region as a cultural landscape generated by a variety of spectators.

This paper takes an excursion into the high country of Te Wai Pounamu to see how two key places have been sighted in terms of the South Island myth. The first place to be framed is deep in the Matukituki valley. Here, the gaze of the nationalist era is epitomised by the ill-fated *Aspiring* film project masterminded by Brian Brake and scripted by James K. Baxter. The antithesis of their gaze can be seen in the 'Paradise' of Jane Campion's post-feminist television mini-series *Top of the Lake* (2013). My interest is in the swing from Brake and Baxter's romanticizing of Aotearoa's 'Lakes District' to Campion's brutalizing of it. How has the mythical South Island landscape been established and then fractured by these artists?

These issues are also explored in my creative component, which draws upon my critical report in order to devise my own response to the South Island myth through a fictionalized journal / scrapbook entitled 'Aspiring Daybook'.

## Preface

*No country upon earth can appear with a more rugged and barren aspect than this doth from the sea as far as the eye can reach nothing is to be seen but the summits of these Rocky mountains which seem to lay so near to one another so as not to admit any Vallies between them.*

- Captain James Cook's log, 23 March 1770

An early gaze upon Aotearoa as a symbolic place in collective memory is not a gaze on the land, but the gaze upon the kuaka migrating south for summer through Central Polynesia. The flightpath of these godwits gave the first explorers a clue, around 800 years ago, that there was land beyond the horizon. So Aotearoa was in the first instance a place not seen, but imagined. It began as a construction, the dreamed-of region the kuaka flew towards which was waiting to be 'discovered'.

When Captain James Cook trained his telescopic lens on the dinosaur-spine mountains he sighted from the Endeavour, he cast a colonist's gaze onto the Southern Alps and in his journal began to scribe the first of the written mytho-poetics that still surround them.

Many poets and directors have looked upon this landscape and positioned themselves at different angles in relation to it. For some, Central Otago's dramatic vistas cause an annihilation of self. For others, they bring about affirmation of existence. Certain artists oscillate between the boundaries of this binary opposition, sometimes within a single piece of work. At issue is how to authentically represent a land that is so loaded with connotation, prior narratives and inscription. Is the artist always the Other? Or is this Heartland the Other *place*? To what extent have responses to the landscape generated or obliterated the South Island myth?

## Research Objectives

In a place that readily shifts into the symbolic, where is the author (or auteur) situated? Which voices have been suppressed? My Masters project seeks to address the problem of how to ‘authentically’ represent the Aspiring region as a New Zealand writer or director.

My investigation is comprised of both exegesis and eisegesis:

1. The Critical Report

My report tracks the representation of New Zealand’s Southern Lakes from Brake to Campion, and how it has shifted from a pure, lofty manifestation of the divine to a disturbing and disturbed fallen Eden. My tracking looks specifically at the relationship between artists and place; firstly in the poetry written of and within the Matukituki valley and secondly at the filmmaker’s dystopian ‘Paradise’ setting at Moke Lake. Both locations are found within Mt Aspiring National Park, in the heart of the place popularly known as ‘Central’.

2. The Daybook

After (re)visiting the physical places referenced within selected Central Otago poems by James K. Baxter, Basil Dowling, Liz Breslin, David Eggleton, Denis Glover, Bernadette Hall, Emma Neale, Jack Ross and Laura Williamson I have responded to them through my own writing. The resulting text is collated as a fictionalised diary called the ‘Aspiring Daybook’: an eclectic and ephemeral journal of an ex-pat narrator who returns to her rural hometown to take care of her terminally ill father.

Through the experience of ‘coming home’ to live and write in Wanaka, I am interested in finding out how this area has been represented in literature and on screen and what this says about our relationship with ‘Central’ as a cultural landscape, then and now. I see this mythical Heartland as being inscribed with layers of meaning that can be read through a variety of lenses which are always translating *space* into

mediated *place*. Lakes District inhabitants and visitors are constantly framing a projected image; the most accessible of which is the reliably conical Mt Aspiring – an icon of the South Island myth. This paper examines ways in which a sense of place (or placelessness) is established through the representation of and about the Aspiring region. My critical report traverses the arc of the myth, following its trajectory from Heimatic construction towards shattered allegory. Finally, my research informs my own creative response to living in this landscape.

## **Dedication**

This research report is dedicated to my parents Robert and Prue,  
who first took me into the mountains and helped me understand their mana.

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