

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Ecopoetry and the Imaginative Impulse

A critical and creative thesis presented for
paper 139.861 to fulfill the requirements
of the Master of Creative Writing

Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Janet Newman

2015

Abstract

This thesis uses two methods of investigation – a critical essay on the poetry of Dinah Hawken and a collection of poetry – to explore the relationship between contemporary poetry and the natural world.

The critical essay examines Hawken's nature poetry published in eight collections in New Zealand between 1987 and 2015. In order to better understand her intentions and techniques, it explores her work alongside an investigation of ecopoetry, a genre that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century. It begins with a brief summary of the rise and various definitions of ecopoetry, and explains how Hawken's work aligns with the genre's basic terms of reference. However, it sets Hawken apart from much ecopoetry, arguing that though at times her work explicitly references human environmental degradation, it more often portrays nature as resilient, not vulnerable as nature is typically depicted in ecopoetry.

Specifically, this thesis argues that Hawken's nature frequently models ways for people to better cope in a technological age. Many of her poems draw a link between inner and outer worlds, that is, between nature and consciousness. In these ways, her work is distinct from much ecopoetry which is polemic. Polemic ecopoetry tends to rely on literal descriptions and rhetorical assertion because its primary aim is to raise awareness of environmental concerns. Instead, Hawken's work often aligns with a critical school of thought that suggests there is a larger catchment of ecopoetry that includes those poems more akin to a Romantic engagement with nature, specifically the notion that nature has a positive effect on consciousness. Such poetry uses the language of figure and imagination. The essay explores the ways in which Hawken has negotiated the tension between the polemic most often associated with ecopoetry and a poetry of perception that is more Romantic in its aesthetics, during

the thirty-five years she has been writing about relationships between people and the natural world.

The creative component of the thesis is a collection of my poetry that has been shaped and informed by the investigation of the critical essay. My poetry, too, struggles with the tension between poetry of polemic and of perception as it explores relationships between people and nature with an awareness of environmental concerns. In some cases, it adapts strategies and techniques observed in Hawken's work. For example, some of the poems project nature as modeling composure and resilience. By suggesting that nature is important to us, these poems are implicitly ecopoetic. Other poems are more in line with mainstream ecopoetry. For example, some draw explicit attention to environmental degradation, particularly settler deforestation for farming in New Zealand resulting in the loss of indigenous trees and birds and their replacement by destructive exotics. Other poems contemplate the constructedness of landscapes so familiar they seem natural. Throughout the writing of these poems, I have become aware of the need to temper polemic and to aim for perception in order to gain the emotional resonance important in lyric poetry.

Acknowledgments

Foremost, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my Massey University supervisors Dr Bryan Walpert and Dr Ingrid Horrocks – inspiring teachers and writers. It has been a privilege to have their attention for this thesis. I thank them for their guidance, enthusiasm, wisdom and unending patience.

I would like to acknowledge New Zealand Poetry Society for providing me with crucial encouragement over the past eight years and membership of a vibrant poetry community. My poem “Biking to the Manawatu River” – included in this thesis – is the winner of the society’s 2015 International Poetry Competition and will be published in the society’s anthology *scattered feathers*. A version of my poem “Bumblebees” from this thesis will also be published in the anthology.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Part One. Critical Essay:	
The Ecopoetry of Dinah Hawken.....	4
Ecopoetry – its rise and definitions.....	5
Ecopoetry’s broader terms of reference.....	21
Hawken’s nature models composure and resilience.....	25
Hawken and Romanticism.....	34
Tension between polemic and perception.....	41
Works Cited.....	55
Part Two. Creative Work:	
Beach River Always.....	58
Preface.....	59
Beach.....	62
At the Flood Plain Farm.....	64
Lichen.....	66
Biking to the Manawatu River.....	67
lichen.....	69
For the Forgotten.....	70
moss.....	71
Kauri.....	72
Nest.....	73
Flood.....	74
Bumblebees.....	75
The Totara Calls Absence.....	76
Koputaroa, near the Manawatu River.....	77
Turangawaewae.....	79
Weeds.....	80
The Shearer.....	81
Bush Reserve.....	82
The Huntaway.....	83
Suddenly Rabbit.....	84
The Carrier.....	85
Wildebeest.....	86
River.....	88
Kereru Primary.....	89
Sparrows.....	90
And Forth.....	91
Always.....	92
Ducks.....	94