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Poetry Notes

Quarterly Newsletter of PANZA

Welcome

Hello and welcome to the second issue of *Poetry Notes*, the newsletter of PANZA, the newly formed Poetry Archive of New Zealand Aotearoa. *Poetry Notes* will be published quarterly and will include information about goings on at the Archive, articles on historical New Zealand poets of interest, occasional poems by invited poets and a record of recently received donations to the Archive.

The newsletter will be available for free download from the Poetry Archive's web site:

<http://poetryarchivenz.wordpress.com>

Niel Wright on John Liddell Kelly's Heine translations

Wellington poet/critic/publisher Niel Wright discusses the 19th century New Zealand translations by John Liddell Kelly of German poet Heinrich Heine.

Literature in English in Aotearoa had already established a literary climate by 1885, one hundred and twenty-five years ago. What I have to say about this literature holds equally true for prose and verse, but I will direct my remarks to the verse.

There are two poles, the popular balladry which the Australians elevate to a national treasure, and an intellectual

humanism, largely purveyed by journalists writing in rhyme. In Australia up to about 1910 both these poles exist in symbiosis in the *Bulletin*. Although the same poles are found in Australia, in Aotearoa they are given a local authenticity through the local colour, particularly the Polynesian background.

At its best in Aotearoa the intellectual humanism takes Heine and Nietzsche as its masters. German literature is much the most influential; it is still strong on Ursula Bethell.

However, although the characteristics of this literature are clear, its success is almost nil. This is because of the endemic banality and facileness which blight its productions almost totally. Only an occasional poem shows the slightest merit. The established culture (jingoistic British Imperialism) and journalism saturated with Sir Walter Scott's verse style are the source of these blights.

There is a considerable survival of 18th century literary mores among the less educated. Scots by origin and education make a major contribution. A number of names can be quoted with large books or bodies of verse to their credit.

Domett is sufficient. Such anthologies as *Canterbury Rhymes* (2nd edition 1883) and *New Zealand Verse* (1906) are not unrepresentative.

What we have to accept is that this is where our English literature begins. It does not matter that by any standard it is appallingly bad: 15th century verse was as totally bad in England, but still gives rise to the Tudor-Elizabethan Renaissance literature.

Although odd poems can be collected, there is only one substantial mass of poems by a poet of this period that is actually good.

This is John Liddell Kelly's *Heine Poems*, published in his 1902 book *Heather and Fern*.

Kelly was a Scots journalist who came to Aotearoa about 1881 and is an elderly man by 1902.

He has all the defects of banal, facile writing in his verse, except for his Heine translations. Here he produces admirable work, the best translations of Heine I know: graceful, simple, genuine renditions. Here alone what Aotearoa literature in English was capable of up to 1914 is seen at its best and as good as needs be asked, as good as anything done since.

If these poems had been taken as a model or benchmark by others it would have had a good effect.

Kelly was aware that he excelled himself in his *Heine Poems*, as he explains in his poem 'Heine', which is representative of his best original work. He acknowledges there the total failure of the rest of his corpus. His self-criticism is sound. No more need be said.

So I was pleased in 1985 to reprint the *Heine Poems* through my imprint Original Books. I took them from the 1902 publication, still to be found without too much search in collections of old Aotearoa books.

I reprinted these poems so that they would not remain buried, but rather would be flagged up by my notice of them. Kelly was confident that his verse would ultimately be recalled. I consider the *Heine Poems* to be our only treasure of verse in English from the 19th century. No other poet of the 19th century can be resurrected in equal quantity with so much satisfaction. This one swallow makes our spring.

Not all are equally successful, but all show the same approach and style; so it seemed best to give them all.

The two best are 'Nacht Lag Auf Meinen Augen' and 'Das Ist Der Alte Maerchenwald'; but others have the same qualities. Here is 'Nacht Lag Auf Meinen Augen' in its entirety:

Night lay upon my eyelids –
Upon my lips lay lead,
With heart and brain all lifeless
I lay among the dead.

How long I cannot tell thee
I slept and never stirred;
But I woke, for a gentle beating
Upon my grave I heard.

"Arise, arise, dear Henry –
The endless day doth break.
Begun are the joys of Heaven,
The dead are all awake!"

I cannot rise, my darling –
I am sightless evermore;
The light hath gone from my eye-lids
Through weeping oft and sore!

"I will kiss the night, dear Henry,
I will kiss it from thine eyes;
Thou shalt see the glorious angels,
And the splendour of the skies!"

I cannot rise, my darling,
For a wound bleeds at my heart,
Where a scornful word thou spakest
Once stung me like a dart.

"Upon thy heart, dear Henry,
My hand I will lightly lay;
The wound will bleed no longer
And the pain will die away!"

I cannot rise, my darling,
From my head the blood flows free,
Where I shot me, in my anguish,
When I was robbed of thee.

"My silken hair, dear Henry,
Upon it I will spread;
I will make the blood cease flowing
And heal thy wounded head!"

She begged so soft, so sweetly,
I could not say her nay:
I tried from the grave to raise me
And go with my love away.

At this, in head and bosom,
My wounds fresh open broke;
The blood flowed fast and faster –
I cried – and lo! I woke!

Kelly's title for all except the two ballads at the end was *Love Lyrics* (from the German of Heine), showing the basis of his selection. He dates his translations of the *Love Lyrics* 1876-86. Kelly manages his translations with a touch of genius. He lacks the music and phraseology which arrest and startle in a true poet. But Kelly is remarkably consistent in finding language, however pedestrian, cliché-ridden or formal it may be, that fits Heine's poem. Kelly makes it look easy - that is a supreme merit; but reference to other translators in verse (from Bowring to Wolfe and Lazarus) will show that it is a rare accomplishment. Translation is not just a matter of language, it is a matter of culture; the culture of the original poems must be understood, appreciated, not just the words before the translator can reflect the spirit and quality of the text.

Kelly catches the rapport between Germans and English just at the right time to capture and transmit the mood of Heine. Kelly allows himself the occasional Germanism, by no means a blemish.

Kelly was a contemporary of Hardy, Stevenson, Wilde, Shaw, Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle. Against that sort of literary performance, is Kelly to be seen as a trifler, an amateur, an archaist? I don't think so. His concept of poetry is within the code of the period and his execution is simpler, therefore better than most. Kelly almost reaches the mode that A E Housman made his own a few years later.

Niel Wright's The Pop Artist's Garland: Selected Poems 1952-2009 was recently published by HeadworX.

He is co-founder and administrator for the Poetry Archive of New Zealand Aotearoa. His poetry will appear in Issue 14 of the online journal International Literary Quarterly (UK).

Poetry Archive opening and book launch



In July, we officially opened the Poetry Archive in Wellington. Thanks to all who helped with the launch that day, and particularly to Helen Rickerby for setting up the PANZA website and to Mark Pirie for maintaining the PANZA online catalogue.

The following speech was read by Nelson Wattie at the opening and book launch held in St Anne's School Room, Northland, next door to the Poetry Archive:

I have been asked to launch two books of poetry into the world, and I am delighted to do that because of the deep belief I have in the importance of poetry. For the same reason I want to congratulate the founders of the Poetry Archive of New Zealand Aotearoa and to say a few words about that before addressing the two books.

I believe that poetry, far from being a marginal decoration to other things, is at the very heart of human life itself. It helps us define and understand what it means to be human. It can help us define and understand what it means to be a particular kind of human as well –

such as a New Zealander, or Aotearoan. Not everyone agrees with that. Recently on a TVNZ programme, a panel was asked to discuss the poetry of James K. Baxter. One of the panel opened the discussion by saying that in the hierarchy of the arts, poetry is somewhere below macramé, and this position was not challenged by anyone else on the panel. As long as literary opinion is led on our national media by fools of that kind, we will have to look elsewhere for any real insights into our culture.

The place to look is not in our big decorative institutions like the media, universities, major art galleries and the like but at a much more basic level, the grassroots level, where our culture has its foundations.

About twenty years ago I became aware of the existence of the Poetry Library in London. I visited it then and I have visited it several times since, and I was convinced from the beginning that New Zealand needs an institution of that kind. I approached a number of individuals and existing institutions with this idea and met brick walls on all fronts. For example, when I was President of the New Zealand Poetry Society in the late nineties I put the idea forward to the committee of that time, and I suggested that they might like to view certain premises in the CBD which could be a promising site. I thought that if we begin with a central site we can then approach the funding question from a firmer point of view. Not one member of the Poetry Society committee viewed the site or took up the idea in any other way. It is pleasing to see that as time passes attitudes change, and the current president and committee of the New Zealand Poetry Society have given the Archive a generous donation and a lot of moral support. But back then one of the committee members pointed out that the Wellington Public Library already collects poetry – isn't that enough? Well, no it is not enough. An important reason for a separate institution, such as the London Poetry Library, is to demonstrate physically and visibly that poetry has a unique and significant place in the culture of the nation and is not to be subsumed as a minor art

pushed into the corner of some other broader structure. The fact is that no human society lives without poetry. I would even say that no individual lives without poetry, and the media types referred to a moment ago are fools not because they have no poetry in their souls but because they don't know that it is there; they live in a semi-conscious state.

In his book *How Art Made the World*, Nigel Spivey* has described how the universal need to make art has in fact constructed our very perceptions of what the world is. In another relevant book, *The Language Instinct*, Stephen Pinker** has argued that language distinguishes humanity from other creatures in the way that web-making distinguishes spiders from all others. In poetry these two instincts coincide – the art instinct and the language instinct – and it is in poetry that we become most fully human and most fully aware of our humanity. It is not by chance that people in times of crisis and exaltation turn to poetry – in cases of birth, marriage and death or in the most vital turning points in a society's history. The reason that I failed miserably in my efforts to found a poetry library is that I approached people whose instincts for art and poetry have been distorted and stunted by bureaucracy, intellectualism and similar diseases. Mark, Michael and Niel have started somewhere else, at grassroots, in the human heart, and they are making the gesture that says, "Yes, we need this institution – and here it is, in this suburban garage." I am reminded that my Uncle Jim (my brother and I called him Uncle Jam, but he is known outside the family as Sir James Wattie), started bottling fruit in my grandmother's garage during the depression and ended his life as the head of one of New Zealand's largest and most successful corporate enterprises. From humble beginnings in Niel's suburban garage, I expect great things to develop.

But it is high time that I turned to my actual purpose, which is to launch two books of poetry. The first of these is closely connected to the Archive itself, a kind of dinghy acting as flagship. It is captained by the redoubtable Mark Pirie, who seems to go from strength to

strength in his efforts on behalf of our poetic imagination. Throughout the world, thematic anthologies have come into fashion in the last ten years, and, in addition to other achievements, Mark is our leading exponent of this kind of book. *Rail Poems of New Zealand Aotearoa* is appropriate to the occasion because the railways have always been a vital part of the New Zealand imagination. They retain their imaginative significance even if they decline in commercial value. With his customary hard work and ingenuity Mark has brought a fascinating collection together. It contains classics of our tradition – even though they might seem forgotten – such as ballads by Will Lawson. In his own day, Lawson was recognised as a bard of the railways, and one essayist even claimed that you could identify the different locomotives Lawson was writing about by the way the rhythms of his verse matched the rhythms of their engines. Another classic of popular New Zealand culture is also here, Peter Cape’s “Taumarunui”. Any book which represents both sisters Marilyn Duckworth and Fleur Adcock is sure to meet my approval. There are other well-known poets here, such as Jan Kemp, Fiona Kidman, M.K. Joseph, Louis Johnson and Peter Olds, along with names that are less familiar to us. The themes covered are also wide-ranging. Political calls for building and protecting railways, the railway as a link between communities, departures and arrivals, farewells and welcomes, the food supplied at the stations and much more. I am also intrigued to see that Marilyn Duckworth and Michael O’Leary find the motion of trains sexually arousing. In short, considering the small size of this book it is astonishing how it overflows with themes and ideas of many kinds. I am happy to launch it and wave to it as it goes on its way. The other book I am launching today is *The Pop Artist’s Garland* by F.W.N. Wright, better known to his friends as Niel. Niel has been a striking and yet mysterious figure in Wellington’s literary community for many years. Nobody who has held conversation with him will fail to be impressed by the

almost incredible scope of his knowledge of New Zealand poetry. So many people have published poems and even books of poetry in this country that it is almost impossible to get an overview. As co-editor of *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* I suppose it is my responsibility to strive for such an overview, but I confess that I have been floored again and again by Niel’s information on poets long forgotten by most of us but not by him. He knows their names, what they wrote, when they wrote, the contexts in which they wrote and, what’s most important, he has actually read their work attentively. We also know that he has been writing his own poems for many a year. He began, he tells me, in 1947, which means that he has been writing poems for more than sixty years. He has published them too. In fact no other New Zealand writer has published so many books. If we include his novels, stories, essays and other writings in addition to the poetry, he has produced about a thousand separate publications. According to his own count he has written more than 40,000 lines of verse. The statistics surrounding Niel are quite extraordinary. But the fact remains that he and his work are very little known. Most of his books have been produced in tiny editions and their publisher – Niel himself – has made almost no effort to distribute them beyond the legal deposit in the National Library. Frankly, the physical appearance of the books makes them uninviting, and if you think the one you are looking at is only one of a thousand and may not be representative, you despair of getting any real impression of his work. This makes the new book, meticulously edited and lovingly presented by Mark Pirie, the first real opportunity to get a genuine feel for Wright’s poetry. We find a wide range of themes and forms. The poems are always rhymed but the rhyme schemes are multifarious. Wright’s poems range in length from epigrams and aphorisms of two lines to narrative poems of several pages. On the evidence of this book I find that Niel has a special strength for narrative poetry. He re-tells classical stories such

as that of Hero and Leander or Jason and Medea, And he also tells stories, sometimes romantic sometimes comic, of life in modern Wellington. But narrative is not everything. I have mentioned the aphorisms and there is also a wide range of lyric forms and themes to be discovered in these 100 pages. My partner tells me that I always talk too long on these occasions, and I can see that some of you are already growing weary. But I don’t want to finish without giving you an actual example of what I’ve been talking about. More important than talk about poetry is poetry itself. I will conclude by reading what I consider to be one of Niel’s most successful poems. It is called “Wahine” and Wellingtonians will have immediate associations with that name. In fact storms are a recurring motif in Niel Wright’s poetry – storms in the Mediterranean or in suburban gardens. In addition to recalling the disaster in a terrible Wellington storm, the word *wahine* is also, of course, the Maori term for “woman”, and women are another recurring motif in these poems. In this particular poem the breakup of the ship in the harbour happens at the same time as a breakup between lovers on shore, and the interweaving of these two events and the two associations of the title word give special poignancy to the poem. (As for the other poems – buy the book and read them!)

WAHINE

By F W N Wright

We did think twice whether to face
Such rain and gale force
Winds as inch deep drenched
The pavement and threatened to wrench
The massive steel and concrete building
loose
From its base. This was as close
As the car would take us. We plunged into
the rain
And staggering in the wind, stumbled, rather
than ran
To reach shelter. As we and our colleagues
sip
Our morning tea or coffee over desultory
gossip
About this atrocious weather that still
continues

Classic New Zealand poetry

This issue starts a new *Poetry Notes* feature: ‘Classic New Zealand poetry’. A classic poem will be printed every issue. This issue’s classic New Zealand poem is by the late Wellington poet Ronald Castle (1907-1984), a local chemist, writer and musician, who created a pharmacy museum in the 1970s:

SONNET ON THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

By Ronald Castle

This tiny realm amid the waste of sea,
Haunt of the seal and wide-winged albatross,
With little herbage save Antarctic moss,
And rocks defiant of the South’s decree.
But endless solitude could never be:
Near tiny islands tinier galleons toss,
And captains ponder whether gain or loss
To raise a flag and claim the sovereignty.
Shall England, France or don of courtly
Spain
Shelter these isles beneath imperial wing?
Whose cannon’s thud shall human settlers
bring
From Cromwell’s England or the Spanish
Main?
Shall Argentine pluck here her sad guitars
While mighty ships steal on beneath the
stars?

(From *The Select Poetry of Ronald Castle*, Wellington, 1983).

Publications by Ronald Castle:

- Fleeting Music*, Wright & Carman, 1937
- Arcadian Grove*, Wright & Carman, 1939
- Psaltery and Trumpet*, Chapbook Publications, 1948
- Old Instruments in New Zealand: a short survey of the Zillah and Ronald Castle collection of early and unusual musical instruments*, Z & R Castle, 1969
- Verses for Music*, R B Castle, 1981
- The Select Poetry of Ronald Castle*, Castle Publications, 1983

Further reading: *A Reading of the Poetry of Ronald Brian Castle* by F W Nielsen Wright, Cultural and Political Booklets, 2001

Comment by Ivan Bootham

FUSED MUSING ON TWO POETS’ TWO BOOKS

By Ivan Bootham

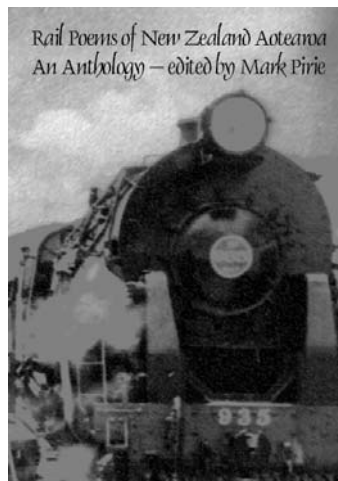
The two poets are Michele Leggott and Michael O’Leary. The two books are Leggott’s *Mirabile Dictu* (AUP, 2009) and O’Leary’s *Toku Tinihanga* (HeadworX, 2003). Firstly Leggott’s poetry in the above book. In it her concerns tend to be localised and feminine, her vocabulary correspondingly in keeping with that. She sequences words with thoughtful care, with restrained finesse. She does not go for the obviously big statement — political or social (if they are not one and the same, essentially). She, not surprisingly given her failing eyesight, treasures what is seen, what is before the eyes. Recording that immediacy of context before the mind reflects on it, toys with it to make references to, and analogies with, a wider, enriched context. And intermingling with that are the memories the seen and literal information bring to mind. Her poems, though they may tell a tale, are not structured as straightforward narratives, but of linked elliptical statements. They can be read as summations, highlights of a life, of a situation that define it more tellingly for the poet (and reader) than a straightforward narrative might. Even a poem less successful as poetry, “winter 1928”, in its assemblage of words written to a child (words made more understandable and colourful by the would-be child-like drawings placed above them), is a somewhat elliptical construct. Apart from that poem, and the also illustrated “gulielmus igitur” poem, a surface impression of all the other poems in the collection is that their writer, the poet, favours constructs made of close weave word texture. A

more attentive reading, however, reveals that the words individually and in their small clusters are readily comprehensible, even to the extent of being *everyday* in what they are saying and in their intended meaning. Though, as stated above, Leggott’s concerns do tend to be localised, that locality can oft times be the mind of a person who is steeped in literature, the humanities. In short, a poet who assumes her readers to be similarly educated and so not fazed when she takes them on a cultural tour. Some of the names she drops will eventually require a gloss (the downside of doing that sort of thing). It is probably too much to hope that a poem loses little if a name unknown to the reader is thought to be an imaginary being who encapsulates a particular type of humanity.

For many of the statements above on Leggott’s *Mirabile Dictu* the opposite could be made on O’Leary’s *Toku Tinihanga*. But apart from them, noticeable and defining differences between the two collections are tone, manner, structure, subject matter. In all those respects O’Leary comes over as a more traditional poet, irrespective of the contemporaneity of his subject matter. His stance is that often thought archetypical of poets: rhetorical, expressive, audience involving. There is immediacy in his poetry. There is passion in his poetry. Though, in conveying that, the pen nib he uses is sometimes a little too broad. Consequently, what he is attempting to express is not in such instances as finely worded as it might be. Whether or not O’Leary’s poetry is easier to relate to than that of Leggott’s will depend on the reader’s interests and literary background. It may be correct to say O’Leary’s poetry is seemingly more readily comprehensible on a first reading than is Leggott’s. But there are discernible ramifications in the subject matter of a number of his poems that potentially are of wide-ranging complexity.

Ivan Bootham is a Wellington writer. A number of his poetry collections are collected in the Poetry Archive and are well worth seeking out.

New publication by PANZA



Rail Poems of NZ Aotearoa

Editor: Mark Pirie

ISBN: 978-1-86942-119-9

Price: \$15.00

Extent: 32 pages

Format: 149x210mm

Publication: July 2010

Publisher: PANZA/ESAW

The railway has been a dominant presence in New Zealand life for a century, connecting freight and people. In this new collection of rail poems, editor Mark Pirie presents a fresh and vibrant journey through many facets of the railway and explores its significance in our daily lives.

Contributors: Fleur Adcock, Marilyn Duckworth, Michael O'Leary, F W N Wright, Simon Williamson, Kim Eggleston, Louis Johnson, Jan Kemp, Fiona Kidman, Ron Riddell, Will Lawson, Jean Hamilton Lennox, Roger Wrighton, Hugh Isdale, Stephen Oliver, Peter Olds, M K Joseph, Rhys Pasley, Mark Pirie, Alistair Paterson and Peter Cape.

This is the first publication by PANZA's publishing arm in association with the Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop.

About the Editor

Mark Pirie is a Wellington writer, publisher, anthologist and critic. Recently he edited *The Pop Artist's Garland: Selected Poems 1952-2009* by Niel Wright and *The Earl is in...: 25 Years of the Earl of Seacliff* (ESAW, 2009), to mark the 25th anniversary of the publishing company ESAW. Among his many poetry collections are the verse novel *Tom* (Poets Group, Christchurch, 2009) and *Gallery: A Selection* (Salt Publishing, UK, 2003). His most recent project is the major cricket poetry anthology 'A Tingling Catch': *A Century of New Zealand Cricket Poems 1864-2009* (HeadworX, forthcoming 2010).

Recently received donations

L E Scott, Wellington – 9 titles

Cornelius & Co: Collected Working Class Verses by John O'Connor (from John O'Connor)

Puriri Press, Auckland – 9 titles (from John Denny)

A Morning Walk in the Later Days by Leonard Lambert (from Leonard Lambert)

Flying Against the Arrow and *On a Day Like This* by Jan FitzGerald (from Jan FitzGerald)

Rona Driscoll – Thomas Bracken's *Not Understood*, 1944 edition

Barry Southam, Christchurch – *Presto* magazine, 2 back issues

Ron Riddell, Wanganui – *G ville* magazine, 1 issue, plus two books by Ron Riddell: *Selected Haiku* and *The Oracle of Alexandria*

Grant and Cathie Lawrey – *Zephyr* by Gary McCormick

Ivan Bootham – *Argot* issues 26, 28 plus *Argot* broadsheets and *Participants and Others* by Brent Southgate

Rush Hour Press, Wellington – *25 Cars* by Simon Williamson

Peg Tocker, Christchurch – *Songs of a Cricketer* by Jim Tocker

John Denny, Auckland – *Poetry NZ* back issues 3, 5, 6, 8, 10

Lopdell House Gallery, Auckland – Two poetry reading anthologies: *Red Tendrils* (2010) & *elusive, but daring and strong* (2009)

Janet Charman, Auckland – 7 titles

Barry Southam, Christchurch – 9 titles

Laurice Gilbert, Wellington – 13 titles

Little Rock & over lunch by Rosetta Allan (from Rosetta Allan)

Mary Cresswell, Paraparaumu – 4 titles

Stephen Nutter – *Saint Kilda meets Hugo Ball* by Eric Beach

PANZA kindly thanks these donors to the archive.

About the Poetry Archive

Poetry Archive of New Zealand Aotearoa (PANZA)

PANZA contains

A unique Archive of NZ published poetry, with over three thousand titles from the 19th century to the present day.

The Archive also contains photos and paintings of NZ poets, publisher's catalogues, poetry ephemera, posters, reproductions of book covers and other memorabilia related to NZ poetry and poetry performance.

Winter 2010

Wanted

NZ poetry books (old & new)
Other NZ poetry items i.e. critical books on NZ poetry, anthologies of NZ poetry, poetry periodicals and broadsheets, poetry event programmes, posters and/or prints of NZ poets or their poetry books.

DONT THROW OUT OLD NZ
POETRY! SEND IT TO PANZA

PANZA will offer:

- Copies of NZ poetry books for private research and reading purposes.
- Historical information for poets, writers, journalists, academics, researchers and independent scholars of NZ poetry.
- Photocopying for private research purposes.
- Books on NZ poetry and literary history, and CD-ROMs of NZ poetry and literature
- CDs of NZ poets reading their work
- Inspirational talks on NZ poets
- Video/DVD/film screenings of documentaries on NZ poets
- Readings/book launches by NZ poets
- Educational visits for primary schools, intermediates, colleges, universities and creative writing schools/classes.
- The Northland Writers' Walk (in planning)

You can assist the preservation of NZ poetry by becoming one of the Friends of the Poetry Archive of New Zealand Aotearoa (PANZA)
If you'd like to become a friend or business sponsor of PANZA, please contact us.

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Visits by appointment only

Current PANZA Members:

Mark Pirie (HeadworX), Roger Steele (Steele Roberts Ltd), Michael O'Leary (Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop) and Niel Wright (Original Books).

Current Friends of PANZA: Paul Thompson and the New Zealand Poetry Society.

PANZA is a registered charitable trust