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Hurricane damage to the reference room of the National Archives in New Orleans.

History is being flooded, too

Slave records, jazz archives, Jefferson Davis' mansion: Hurricane Katrina has put them all in peril.

By **Rebecca Traister**

Sept. 10, 2005 | On Thursday Sept. 8, Shelly Henley Kelly, the immediate past president of the Society of Southwest Archivists composed a letter to the editors of major newspapers.

"Imagine that Washington D.C. is struck by a CAT 5 hurricane and the National Archives has been damaged and/or flooded," Kelly, an archivist at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, wrote. "Archivists and conservators are trained to have a disaster response/disaster recovery plan. They will get in and begin the massive effort to reclaim the damaged documents... But what happens when the archivist is prevented from returning to the repository? How long can the many important documents, photographs, sound recordings documenting our nation's history and culture sit alone, un-airconditioned, possibly wet, before they rot beyond any hope for recovery?"

This, Kelly argued in her letter, is precisely what has been happening for nearly two weeks in New Orleans' cultural and historical repositories. "More than ten days after what will probably become the greatest natural disaster in the United States... archivists have NOT BEEN ALLOWED into their collections -- not for a day, an afternoon, even an hour," read the letter. If these collections are ignored, wrote Kelly, "they will soon be unrecoverable... New Orleans, a city so rich in history, may soon become a city with no history."

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It's a terrifying prospect, and one that grows more real every day. As the human costs of Hurricane Katrina mount, so too do the possible historical, cultural, and intellectual losses. Some attention has been paid to the conditions at the New Orleans Art Museum, the region's zoos and aquariums, its hobbled architectural landscape. But what about New Orleans' delicate and vital documentary history, the papers and books that tell us how the country was built, and who its citizens were: who they married, to whom they were born, and in many cases, to whom they were sold.

Papers -- brittle, ancient, susceptible to mold, mildew and complete disintegration -- have been sitting in the toxic fug of flood-ravaged New Orleans for two weeks. For many curators, initial fears that water might enter through blown-out windows gave way to panic about the stew that was surely drowning basement archives, which in turn gave way to anxiety about dangerously muggy conditions. For two weeks archivists and preservationists have batted messages back and forth online -- trading in rumor and satellite photos to try to guess which repositories got flooded and which stayed dry. This week, while good news emerged about imperiled collections that escaped flooding, it also became clear that the risks to the miles of paper that provide a one-of-a-kind story of the United States are far from over.

Their collections abandoned and vulnerable to looting and humidity and fire, preservationists are worried -- and we should be too -- that among the many casualties of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath will be portions of one of the nation's richest histories.

"There's a little bit of desperation coming out," said Brenda Gunn, current president of the Society of Southwest Archivists, which set up a [message board](#) to track information about the condition of the region's archives. "No one's getting in; assessments aren't being made; the clock is ticking for these collections and records." Of course, said Gunn, "the first priority is rescuing people and saving lives. But we also need to address some of the important cultural issues." Gunn wrote a letter to Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco on Thursday Sept 8, "appealing ... for assistance in allowing representatives from New Orleans archival institutions back into the city." Access and assessment, Gunn pleaded with the governor, "is the only way to avoid a cultural catastrophe."

Desperate archivists. Desperate curators and librarians and preservationists, some of whom told me off the record, that they would be willing to arm themselves to get back into the city to try to save their collections. It may sound funny, but it's far from amusing. "Quite honestly I'd probably faint dead away if even a single 'leader' thought for one second that there are archival repositories that need immediate disaster recovery efforts," wrote Shelly Kelly in an e-mail, noting that she wouldn't blame them, given the ongoing search and rescue missions. But she said, if any civilians are being allowed into the city to view their places of business, "then we must start immediately with the ones that house the IRREPLACEABLE historical and cultural heritage."

New Orleans is home to a vast collection of archival material. Major repositories include the Special Collections departments at Tulane University and the University of New Orleans, the Notarial Archives, Jazz archives, The Historic New Orleans Collection, the city records stored in the basement of the New Orleans Public Library, the Archdiocese's comprehensive regional records, and the Amistad Research Center's collection of African American history. Among the documents at stake are hundreds of years worth of mortgages, real-estate records, marriage, birth and death certificates, manumissions, and slave sale records, dating back to New Orleans' time as a French and Spanish colony. There is original documentation of the Louisiana Purchase and the Battle of New Orleans, Confederate veterans' handwritten remembrances, city planning documents, the histories of Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest. And that doesn't even take into account the various collections of non-regional materials -- from rare science fiction and gay and lesbian collections to Amistad's collections from the Harlem Renaissance. Who knows what damage has been done to the letters, diaries, records, and book collections housed in private homes?

Last weekend, archivists attempted to get back into the Notarial Archives, a one-of-a-kind collection

of over 40 million pages of signed acts compiled by New Orleans notaries dating back to 1699. Some of the archives were in the old Amoco building in the French Quarter, while others were in the basement of the civil courts building. The archivists were blocked by Federal Troops. The story was reported by the *Times-Picayune*, perhaps spurring guards to finally allow the curators into the archives on Tuesday September 6, along with representatives from Munters, a Swedish disaster recovery firm.

Reports from Notarial Archives were encouraging. Curator Ann Wakefield posted to the SSA message board that the archive's research center, on the third floor of the Amoco building, had sustained minimal damage, though the civil courts building had taken in some water. On Sept. 8, Wakefield reported that Munters had pumped out the Civil District Courthouse office, and that "The plans are to remove all records from the courthouse location tomorrow." As for the Amoco building, Wakefield wrote, "The most cost-effective thing we can do to stabilize the research center is to block up the broken windows and pump air conditioning in. It is still uncertain whether this can be accomplished."

Other archivists were feeling relatively lucky as well, though anxious about gaining access. Brenda Square heads the Amistad Research Center, which houses the records of the American Missionary Association, the first abolitionist missionary society in the United States, and contains art, photographs, and over 15 million documents charting African American history. Reached by phone, Square said, "Fortunately, the news has been good. We have yet to get in to evaluate our collection. But our building, which is on the Tulane campus, did not get any water." Square noted that she had been as prepared as possible, and had spent recent years "monitoring information which indicated the high probabilities of high water levels [in the case of flooding]. So over the last five years we've moved valuable things up to higher levels." That said, Square continued, "We will feel so much better when we're able to go into buildings and evaluate the situations."

Square added that, "The collections in New Orleans are very important to the nation. This city is older than America itself. If we want to look at multiculturalism, then New Orleans is the starting point."

Things also looked positive for the Tulane Special Collections department, the oldest and largest historical research center in the city, though attempts by Salon to reach the collection's curators were unsuccessful. Susan Tucker, curator of Books and Records at the Newcomb Archives at Tulane, was reached by phone in Alabama. Tucker had posted a message suggesting that busloads of archivists from different institutions go into the city to "begin to consider recovery." As of press time, no such bus had been allowed inside city limits. By phone, Tucker said that she was confident that many of her materials, housed separately from the library's main collection, escaped floodwaters. But she expressed concern over off-site storage shared with Amistad, located in an area that she hadn't even heard reports about yet.

Early Internet rumors suggested that the exhibits at the Historic New Orleans Collection -- including a recent show on the 1815 Battle of New Orleans -- were taken down the weekend before the storm hit and moved to a higher floor. The HNOC's collection includes everything from legal documents to diaries to theater programs and sheet music, pamphlets and books about colonial Louisiana, the Louisiana Purchase, the Civil War, Mississippi River life, and Mardi Gras. On Saturday Sept. 10, a Web post informed archivists that state troopers had allowed HNOC senior staff inside the building, where they were "able to move some priority collections off site as a precaution," but that "generally all is well."

Two collections that had most archivists reached by Salon panicked were the city records housed in the basement of the Public Library, and the Special Collections at the University of New Orleans, located in an area of the city that was completely flooded out. On the message boards, there was little news, and satellite photos seemed to show the main library building completely surrounded by flood

waters. By press time, there was still no news on UNO.

But on Friday came word from Irene Wainwright, Assistant Archivist at the Louisiana Division/City Archives at the New Orleans Public Library (NOPL). Wainwright sent a message to the Miami of Ohio Archives listserv that began, "New Orleans Public Library is delighted to be able to announce that the New Orleans City Archives, which we hold, is relatively safe. Although the majority of our records (as well as the 19th and early 20th century records of the Orleans Parish civil and criminal courts) are housed in the basement of the Main Library, some 18 feet below sea level, the basement remained essentially dry." Wainwright and archivist Wayne Everard gained access to the building on Thursday, along with a Munters representative. "We discovered that the basement sustained NO FLOODING," wrote Wainwright. Wainwright's e-mail summarized other damage to the Main Library (minimal) and the NOPL system. "Probably about half of our 11 branch libraries are under water," she wrote. "But these we can (and will) rebuild. The fact that the archives have survived leaves us almost delirious with relief." Wainwright concluded, "We are unbelievably lucky, and I think I now believe in miracles...."

It's great news. But it's also early news. And the hot, wet conditions in New Orleans, combined with the lack of access mean that there are more risks -- and more careful evaluations -- ahead. In several cases, there were conflicting reports. Beauvoir, the Mississippi home and presidential library of Confederate President Jefferson Davis at first appeared to have fared badly. Significant damage was done to the main residence, and early reports indicated that two outbuildings -- including a free-standing library containing Davis's papers -- were obliterated. With experts scattered, and eyewitness accounts hard to come by, questions remained as to whether those papers had been removed from the vulnerable library before the storm.

And while word from the Museum of Art, where employees had weathered the storm, and in doing so helped to save the art collection before being told to leave by armed National Guards on Friday Sept 2, was great, there were big question marks about other cultural institutions like the D-Day Museum, the Confederate Museum and the Walter Anderson Museum in Ocean Springs. The Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane appeared to be safe. But a casino riverboat had crushed the Frank Gehry-designed Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, destroying an African-American arts collection. The Old Capitol Museum in Mississippi, it was reported in the Clarion Ledger, had its roof "peeled back like a banana," allowing water to stream in on its collection of clothing, paintings, swords and furniture.

And even those collections of paper that escaped the disintegrating effects of flood waters now sit, without temperature control, in humid conditions that create a scary breeding ground for mold -- preservationists' arch enemy.

"The big issue at this point is being able to get in and do an assessment and freeze materials," said Gregor Trinkaus-Randall, a preservation specialist at the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, and chair of the preservation section of the Society of American Archivists who noted that he and his fellow archivists had been in New Orleans a week prior to the hurricane for the annual SAA meeting. "I can tell you what the temperature and humidity is like down there right now and with the incredible amount of water that's there, you have a 48-hour window before mold begins to grow."

Bruce Turner, head of Special Collections at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, was also concerned about the possible mold damage. He explained that mold "actually eats into the papers." He said that the speed of destruction depended on the type of mold and the type of paper, but that "ultimately this is botanical growth and if it's not treated it can eventually simply eat the paper away." In addition, there's the fact that for some people, the mold can be toxic, making preservation attempts increasingly costly and dangerous the longer they go untended to.

That's where Munters, and other salvage companies, come in.

Lauren Reid, the vice president and general manager for Munters, the Stockholm-based restoration company, said, "Everything from records for records managers to one-of-a-kind types of things have been impacted" by Katrina and its aftermath. "The key is to get archival records or books stabilized and into a neutral environment." A neutral environment means a freezer. "That's the first thing you've got to do," said Reid. "It stops any deterioration of the documents and puts them into a state where no mold will develop. This is first and foremost. Once you get the documents frozen it gives you some time." Reid said for smaller collections, a small chest freezer could be brought in, but for the larger archives, freezer trailers on the back of semis will have to be brought into the city, and of course, there will need to be power to run them.

Reid was comparatively upbeat about the possibilities for document recovery, pointing out that post 9/11, "people are much more in tune to disaster planning. They are much better prepared. They don't put documents and books in bottom shelves. They look at their facilities with far more of a smart approach."

But that doesn't put all the fears about the documentary treasures of New Orleans to rest. More than one archivist spoke to Salon about fears for their collections and later called back to plead that we not publish the remarks, lest it become clear that a group of important and valuable items were sitting unguarded, uncared for, waiting for anyone to come along and steal them.

But will the government -- on federal, state, or local levels -- allow experts to get in to protect and care for the historical record? How can we not consider that much of what makes New Orleans' history unique is that it is a city where European, African, and Caribbean cultures have cohabited like no place else in the U.S.? And then there is its pivotal role in the slave trade, a part of history that some Americans are all too eager to forget. It's hard to imagine, were there to be a natural disaster in Boston or Philadelphia, officials failing to prioritize the preservation of our Puritan and Quaker histories. But records of the Africans who were imported through the port of New Orleans and sold up the Mississippi River? Perhaps it's too easy to conceive of an unconscious desire to let that history -- so fundamental to the country, but so ugly that we've always tried to keep it hidden -- literally rot.

Sarah Canby Jackson, an archivist for the Harris County Archives in Houston, Texas, who has offered space to collections that need it, said by phone, "My concern as an archivist is that cultural materials have such a low priority. No one's arguing about saving lives, no one's saying let's go in and save our manuscripts before we pull people out of the water," she clarified. "But people do not understand the value of these records. They provide the entire basis of this country and New Orleans... People think 'Oh, so you lose the papers of some writer or something. But that's not what this means. This is your heritage. It's everything that makes you who you are.'"

"New Orleans has perhaps the richest documentary history of anywhere in the U.S.," said Robert de Berardinis, a genealogist. He argued that this was in part because French and Spanish record-keeping systems "bordered on the compulsive," and in part because freed slaves were allowed to live alongside white Louisianans before the Civil War. "As a result you have a situation there where the records of people of color prior to the Civil War were kept by the churches and in the property records," he said, adding, "This is a crying shame." He predicted that the genealogical projects of people who trace their roots back through New Orleans "will be hurt by this."

But the paper situation is not simply about history. Some of the concerns of archivists and record-keepers are very much about the present and future. A Times-Picayune story last week revealed the possible loss of thousands of real estate records -- including titles, mortgages, and liens dating back to 1827 stored in the New Orleans City Hall basement. If those records are stewing, that means not only a loss of historical documentation; but that people will have trouble deciding who owns what --

right now.

The Picayune also quoted a New Orleans law professor who claimed that thousands of lawyers may have lost parts of their filings, including documents crucial to criminal cases. And on Friday Sept 2 Clive Stafford Smith, a co-founder of the Louisiana Crisis Assistance Center, wrote in the Guardian about how damage to records could hobble the fight to represent those facing the death penalty. "The ground floor of [LCAC] was the storage area: boxes and boxes of papers... most a potential life raft for the living," wrote Smith. "In 2003, it took one single document identifying the true killer to rescue Dan Bright after nine years' wrongful conviction. The DNA test results that freed Ryan Matthews from death row are probably disintegrating into mulch, along with his chances of receiving compensation."

It's also not lost on those who pay attention to preservation that they are living through world-changing history right now. Brent Hightower, the only archivist at the Times-Picayune after the hurricane, posted a notice on message boards looking for preservation materials. "The first priority," said Hightower by phone, "is my friends and coworkers who are taking pictures and writing stories, making sure their stuff is backed up and not lost." Hightower said he is making every effort to "preserve a historical record" of the current events, as well as preserving paper copies of current newspapers. He said he's also trying to keep contiguous microfilm records and hard copy records. "I've looked at those records from Betsy in 1965 so many times," said Hightower. "It would destroy me if I couldn't figure out a way to provide that for future generations."

About the writer

Rebecca Traister is a staff writer for Salon Life.

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Waitakere City Council

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September 5 2005

Dear Mayor

I am writing to express my support in what is an absolutely tragic time for the citizens of New Orleans.

Obviously we are receiving an enormous amount of coverage about Hurricane Katrina and her devastating aftermath and I can only begin to imagine the extent of the horror.

However it does seem, despite the Bush administration's much reported "slow reaction" to the disaster, you are handling the situation and we can only hope the overwhelming state of affairs improves as quickly as possible.

On behalf of my Council and the City of Waitakere, you have our deepest sympathies. Our thoughts are with you.

Kind regards



ROBERT A. HARVEY QSO JP
MAYOR
WAITAKERE CITY

By Nigel Cox

Hello, it's great to be here – though, my mother did tell me, "Never follow Bill Manhire."

The other thing is, it's strange to be giving this address now, with the election only a week away. "New Zealand as I find it": somehow we've all had rather too much of that in recent weeks. I can't help being afraid that at any moment Sean Plunkett will burst in with, "Answer the question, Mr Cox: Yes or No?" When I started thinking about what I was going to say tonight, all of that was many months away.

Anyway, over the top – here we go:

Before I Went Blind.

So where do you start: Winston Peters? I don't think so – but, coming back, your eyes fall on such things and you think: You, still alive! I want him gone by lunchtime. The inner groan when you see that Judy Bailey is still reading the news. And such news! That's the news? Surely New Zealand is at its worst in the run up to an election.

But you're pleased to be back. That's what you keep telling yourself – you've thrown the dice, there's no turning back, so, of course you're pleased to be back. But in fact you are. For the first couple of weeks I walked around with a big dopey grin on my face, loving everything. Fish 'n chips in the rain under a Norfolk Pine at Mission Bay: magic. The wine! The food! For five years we had the pick of European food and wine, and what we have here, I'll take it any time. And so cheap! And so good! Of course, for the first few weeks back after five years, wine with fancy food in the company of old friends is what takes up most of your day. Not too much wrong with that. [**Pats fat stomach**] And all the no-brainer stuff: the All Blacks with a decent scrum. Everyone speaking English! It's like a return to real life.

And that's the problem. You can feel real life settling in, real thoughts, and, although you don't want to, you can't help noticing a few things. Where to start?

In Germany, maybe. As Murray said, I was there for five years, with my wife and our two kids – in fact we came home with three – working on the Jewish Museum Berlin. Now that museum is a whole other topic and I don't propose to go there tonight, but what it meant was that, unlike other countries I have spent time in – drinking their wine, eating their food; it's amazing how those two items loom so large – that job meant I really did go in to German society; or at least some way in. I look at myself now with a Kiwi eye and I think, So are you more serious? Are you less flexible? – or is that just age? Are you taking yourself more seriously? Or is that just hubris? The casualness of New Zealand, this is not a big feature of everyday life in Germany.

It's one of the big things which strike you here, this casualness. I want to start now on a long slow circle into the middle of what I have to say tonight and out at the edge as I start what I get is the greeting from the heavyweight Māori guy who inspects my passport at Immigration: "Great to have you back, fella. Welcome home." After cops with machine guns, you've gotta love that. The bloke getting you into lines for Customs clearance: "Look everybody, we're a bit overloaded here, everyone just go over into those two outbound lanes, would you – just ignore the markings on the floor." Ignoring markings! – never in Germany, Bruce.

Then you step outside, and everything is so open – the skies, for one. In Berlin there's always a building rising right in front of your face, there's no horizon, no distance. I can't tell you how lucky we are to be able to escape, so quickly, from the enclosingness of cities. And the freshness of the air! After a year in Berlin my nose was like a chimney that needed a sweep, and it stayed like that for the next four years. I'd been back a week when I noticed that it was getting better. It's all the exhaust emissions etc in the air, and in fact there's no wind in Berlin to blow it away – well, nothing that we'd call a wind. It did blow a bit one day and all the dead branches came down off the trees, killing seven people and closing the roads for days.

Okay, quickly now on the weather: it's too soon for me to be missing the way the seasons are articulated in Europe but I know I will. It's not so much the snow – though I did love the way that white blanket smoothed everything back to elemental shapes. It's the changes – the way you can so strongly sense the world turning, and your life going through its seasons. Makes you more reflective. Somehow instead of seasons, what we have here is weather.

And what's that weather like? Well, we don't really notice. In New Zealand we are increasingly of the idea that the weather should be constantly warm and permissive of outdoor leisure activities, and any weather that's not is somehow an aberration, an insult to our idea of our lives. Accordingly we wear warm weather gear no matter what. To see people in Courtenay Place Wellington during a southerly in a T-shirt or shorts is to remember what Joc Phillips said, in this case about New Zealand men: that the culture of not giving expression to pain has become a culture of not giving expression full stop.

Just to do a little truck-stop here on clothes, the unbelievable casualness of the clothes New Zealanders wear is one of those things that poke your eye out, right up there with the popcorn quality of the TV news – TV in general, actually – and the obsession with violence (more on this later). Peter Jackson on set reminds me of Les Murray's poem, *The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever*. Guys wearing to work the jersey they used to wipe the dipstick. Jandals at the dinner party, the lawn-mowing trousers... At the same time, New Zealanders have become a lot more conscious of style. Travel back with me if you will to my boyhood in the Masterton of the 1950s (please, let's don't stay there too long): what I can see walking down Queen Street is the daggy, the saggy, the raggy and the self-rolled tobaccky. Not too much of that about these days, outside of Speights' commercials. Lots of people seem to have one eye out for that TV camera that might just suddenly put a frame around them and make their day. So the style is, be casual, but with streets of cool.

When you look pause and look around at the skies here, one of the things you see everywhere is wires. Black lines cutting the open into pieces – telephone wires, power lines, looping, sagging, making cobwebs. Doesn't anyone care what things look like? The Germans have been getting rid of powerlines for years. And signs. Our cities are thickets of signs. The whole country has gone berserk on marketing itself. Every little Lotto outlet and heel bar has a brand and a tagline and they just have to get it poked right into your eye. Doesn't anyone want the cities to breathe a little? Oh, that's right: our cities are for commerce, not for people. And all that marketing competes with another category of signs, you know the ones, which read, "In case your eye catches this sign instead of the thing right in front of you, these are stairs, which means you have to lift up your feet or else you'll have a nasty accident." Doh. If we didn't have so many of these signs maybe we'd see the stairs better?

The wires-in-the-sky thing extends to pylons – so we're really going to have pylons marching across all our paddocks? Is there no money in this country for beauty?

Or do we think we have so much of it down south that up here, where most of us live, we don't have to care? And wind turbines. In fact I think wind turbines are relatively interesting-looking, and I'm all for eco-friendly sources of power. But has anyone looked at what's happening in Germany? There, they've had serious investment in wind power for over twenty years – thanks to significant government subsidies, many farmers erected big propellers on their land and sold the power to the national grid. You see them, stately forests of them, seeming to cartwheel across the horizon, when you take a train journey. They're intrusive, yes, but not ugly. Nevertheless ... Just recently the Germans have concluded that the propellers are not an economic source of power, and are going to abandon them – just as we are about to invest heavily in this area. And Germany is a country with an infinitely greater commitment to ecological sustainability than us – is anyone paying attention?

Of course the eco-commitment of the Germans can get tedious. To get rid of your rubbish you need to sort it into at least five types, each of which must go into precisely the right bin down in the courtyard. These bins are used communally and when you move into a new apartment block you are given comprehensive instruction on how to divide and deposit your stuff – it's detailed in your lease, for godssake – and woe betide if you get it wrong – phalanxes will arrive to set you straight. Colour-code your empties into the correct white, brown or green bin or face a good dressing down. If you buy a take-out bottle of beer, pay a fifty cent surcharge for each bottle, for which you're given a receipt, so that, as long as you've kept it, and the bottle, you can get a refund when you take them back: to that exact store. If you buy it here and drink it there, tough – you lose. When you move out of your apartment, take it back to the bare white walls you started out with – the exact shade of white, naturally, which is also specified in your lease. No question that any improvements you might have made would be worth keeping – everything must go. Is that smart? When we left Berlin I spent four days unbolting a massive mezzanine floor that was so big and solid you could have landed the space shuttle on it – and the next tenants were planning to put it up again. Remove the light fittings, fill the screw-holes, and leave only bare wires. Remove the sink bench, leave only the outflow pipe. Now, what do you do with the sink bench, which was custom-built and won't fit anywhere else. Well, there's no market for it – actually, there's more or less no market for any second-hand stuff. I guess it's because for the last hundred years or so Germany has been so incredibly wealthy. Maybe that's about to change – unemployment is way up and rising steadily; economic growth is non-existent. But, for now, what you do is get your friend with a van to come round and take it to an urban recycling centre. It's what Berlin has instead of a dump. My first visit to one of these amazed me. For a start, it's so clean you could hold a picnic in the middle of it. No smell, none whatsoever. It is simply another urban facility standing cheek-by-jowl with crowded apartment blocks and shops. Men in bright, clean overalls direct you where to put everything (they are all men. It's men in charge in Germany. When Helen Clark visited the Jewish Museum, all my colleagues said, "Your prime minister is a woman?" Angela Merkel, who very likely will be Germany's next PM, faces hatred from the men in her party who resent being told what to do by a woman. Never happen here, would it.) Back to the recycling centre: everything is divided into shipping containers, which, when full, are shipped off for use as raw materials. Neat, clean, self-serviced. But it does feel a bit counter-intuitive. You want to get rid of your perfectly good old desk, so you break it down at the recycling centre, using the crowbars they provide, into splinters, for wood pulp – is that necessarily a good idea? Your old chair, which isn't good for recycling, is dragged away somewhere and crushed. Unless it's an antique, hardly anything is ever used again. All the old fridges, washing machines, dryers, in a container for scrap metal. It does make you wonder.

But there's no question: German ecological practice makes this country look like a cowboy outfit where anything goes. We met a German eco-freak who, during Ronald Regan's "star wars" era and terrified that Europe would get caught up in a nuclear war, emigrated to New Zealand because it was, he figured, the cleanest, greenest, furthest-away place he could think of. And he was shocked by what he found here. He stayed as long as he could bear it, but the state of the rivers, the way we think about land use, the dumping of fertilizers, the way we build things: it was just too hideous, and he faced his fears and went back. In fact many Germans spoke to me about this: New Zealand does not care enough for itself. For a country that says it's clean-and-green, that sells those qualities, we're not trying hard enough. After living in Germany, it's difficult not to think: the only reason New Zealand is as clean and green as it is because we have a small population.

Look: This is where we live. We're so lucky – we don't have acid rain dropping in from the primitive economies across the border. We don't have a thousand years of manufacturing as an inheritance. So what are we thinking about?

I suppose that's where, circling, circling, I start to bear down what is at the centre of what, after five years, I find in this country.

I mean, I love it here. I can't tell you how I maundered on about New Zealand to my poor colleagues at the Jewish Museum. I explained our recent history – they all know what the Treaty is, they were sick of hearing about our extraordinary founding document. I was like a one-man promotional campaign, I couldn't stop myself. I ignored their glazed looks, I just kept on singing. It was a kind of homesickness, I think, and maybe an anxiety that the place wasn't really as good as I made out. Pride – national pride, it's such a spooky business. The Germans by and large don't have it. They are hugely conscious of where national pride once got them. They all exit Germany, constantly – not like us, because we have to see the world, but because they want to escape their own country. They're huge travellers, you know. Though when you hint that they might come down here for a visit they all say, "Such a long way!" New Zealand for most Germans is a paradise they would love to visit...but won't. I kept plugging away with the boosterism – despite which, the Jewish Museum offered me a permanent contract. So, you see, we could have stayed in Germany. We chose to come home.

And it's as though, having done that, somehow you end up holding your own country to account. "I committed myself," you say, "so you better deliver." It's unfair, really. What part, tell me, of the modern world really measures up? The problem is, when it doesn't, then you feel: Okay, then I don't have to either.

After a few weeks, as I've said, various things started to come to the surface. The visual clutter; the casualness – which, in the main, I see as a huge positive; the obsession with superficial style; the indifference to beauty.

All done too with great confidence. Confidence, now there's a thing. The magazines, Metro, Next, Pavement, various magazines I found on coffee tables, had pictures of us, the New Zealanders, shot from below, gazing confidently into the middle distance. A gas station attendant with a good tan – what a hero. A king of business – look at the guy. Look at those haircuts powering their way along Lambton Quay. Yep, there's real confidence here these days. It's as though we've come through. Come through what? I guess that would be Rogernomics – we took the pain and suddenly here we are, out on the other side, and thriving. And why not? It's good to be confident, it's good to love your country.

But, magazines – whatever happened to *New Outlook*? *New Republic*? *Quote Unquote*? They're gone. Okay, magazines do come and go, that's their nature – but what's replaced them? Style bibles, full of heroic portraits, full of flattery. Where's *The Listener* as it used to be? *Metro* as it used to be? Does no-one want that kind of serious consideration of the country any more? My most recent novel, published earlier this year, received, in total, about half as many reviews as my first one, published twenty years earlier – because the book review spaces don't exist any more. The reviews for the new book were very positive – but, actually, trivial; essentially fluff. I mean: positive, I'll take it! But what's going on here?

Within a few weeks of being back I heard three times in various media broadcasts people saying, "You're not trying to get into that old 'national identity' crap are you? ... "All that navel gazing about national identity" ... "the national identity discussion is such old hat." I found this hard to believe. Okay, the literal phrase "national identity" has probably done its dash. But all over the world people are debating the idea of their nation – in France, in Germany, in the States. The whole world has, since September 11th, had some hugely fundamental questions thrown at it: can we live with one another? Can we keep living like this? Surely the discussion about who we are, about what the essential, it-must-not-be-lost quality of this country is – that's a discussion which, one way or another, has to go on forever. But, coming back, I pick up a great reluctance to talk seriously about these things, to consider who we are, where we're going. The only question everyone seems happy to address is, Is it good for business?

Where are we, Switzerland?

Because that's what I'm getting. That this is a nation obsessed all over again with material satisfaction; that anyone who wants to discuss things in any context except, "What will it do to the sharemarket?" is just causing trouble – "Come on, wanker, get your boat shoes on, get down to the Loaded Hog." You know, it's like a return to the nineteen fifties. We're alright. We're satisfied. We got what we wanted. Everything's okay. Don't frighten the horses.

Of course there are things that people mention. The violence. It's hard to get good figures for comparison but it seems that Germany has about as many murders, per capita, as New Zealand. But you'd never know that from the news. The same is true of violent crime. There's an obsession about these subjects in this country – but no commitment to discussing why that might be. A friend remarked recently that this was "a country full of rage." Is it true? Why? Sure, the media kick things around – but always in the context of who's the winner and who's the loser – the big concern is on, who lost face. Politics in particular. Never focusing on, Where is this taking us? What are we becoming? The public transport systems: the clear message they give you here is, "If you can't travel by car you're just shit and that's how you'll be treated." On the bus to work each day, I can't sit down properly because I'm too long from hip to thigh for the moulded plastic seats. But I'm not that tall. Who says our buses should be so squashy, so noisy, so jerky, so ill-lit? Is it because public transport isn't the stylish way to go, so it's okay to default to like-it-or-lump-it? German buses, compared, are like limousine luxury. Everybody hates our public transport but does anybody have anything to say except, "That's what the market dictates"? I don't mean, just moan. I don't mean, find out who is to blame. I mean: ask ourselves: Is this who we are? The media: everyone bellyaches about it, but then we tune in just the same.

The news: there's Judy saying, "Today the fig leaf of political respectability was torn from the bleeding body of Rodney Hyde, who was exposed as having sold his principles down the drain when he dot dot dot." Isn't she trying to say, "Today the Act party changed one of its policies"? After five years of listening to the BBC World Service, the language of the news here is just astonishing to me – as though it's being tabloid-ized for a tabloid nation.

On the cultural scene, there's a powerful sense that there's a rich cultural life, that terrific work is being produced, and lots of it, some amazing stuff – the "Small World, Big Town" show, for instance, at the City Gallery in Wellington is full of art that is at least as exciting as anything I saw in Berlin galleries – but does anyone care? Somehow, it's work in which there's nothing essential at stake. The nation has found a way to consume culture without being affected by it. And the practitioners feel that, and turn their faces towards each other, each looking in towards the "higher ground" of aestheticism, towards "those who know." The cultural scene is segmented, the literary arts cut off from the visual, architecture cut off from theatre – and all of it cut off from "real life."

Isn't this is what people used to say about New Zealand way back? Aren't these the clichés I grew up with in the nineteen fifties? But maybe they're coming back to bite us.

Or was it that they never went away and we just forgot about them? It's only a few weeks since his death, but the passing of David Lange really gave me pause. I can't help remember that time, that first year when he came to power and, even though our economy was on its knees, we found ourselves. Remember the excitement of us going nuclear-free. Of having a prime minister who could make us laugh. New Zealanders laughing – that was a real breakthrough. New Zealanders who could really talk – Kim Hill, Derek Fox, Bill Manhire, suddenly that's what New Zealanders were, interesting talkers. That same year Keri Hulme won the Booker and soon after Lauris Edmond and Dinah Hawken won Commonwealth Writers Prizes for poetry – we all read those books and everyone was talking about them. An Angel At My Table – first the books and then the wonderful movie. The Treaty settlement process was launched. The rugby tour to South Africa had been stopped. There was a sense that we were going somewhere. The Rainbow Warrior went down – suddenly we were worth attacking – and we had a heightened sense of who we were. In 1991 I had lunch in Paris with Judith Trotter, who at that point had been our ambassador for four years; she said, "This nuclear free nonsense, New Zealanders have no idea of what it's costing us." And I got on my high horse. "I think you've been away too long," I said. "I think New Zealanders know the price and they've decided they're prepared to pay."

That's the thing I ask myself, now: is there any price we prepared to pay, for anything? What are we prepared to forgo, in the interests of "something better"? Tax cuts?

Interesting when you turn to Germany. That is a nation defined, even today, by the terrible things done in its name sixty years ago. It's true that, fifteen years ago, the fall of the Wall did provide a new focus. But then the problems of reunification gradually swelled, most visibly in the unemployment numbers, at the same time as economic growth subsided, so that today the country is at a loss: unable to afford the strong social provisions it has regarded as eternal but not yet ready to give them up in favour of a market-driven society. Good on them, I say. Hang in there, Germany.

Of course, in many ways there's no real comparison possible between the two countries. Totally different histories, languages, geographies, climates, social make-up. Levels of discussion: in Germany they really know how to give an issue the complete three-sixty – by judgement day, you're heard all the angles. Is that true of us? My impression is, New Zealand is made up of what I call "agreement groups." People only associate with people they agree with. Are we afraid everything will fall over if we say boo? Our books: after twenty years in the book trade here what I think people want from a new novel is, one, to be flattered; two, to be comforted; and, three, that the book be decorative. Doesn't exactly sound like Günter Grass, does it.

And yet Germans are ready to feel a great affection for New Zealand; an affinity – they see us as who they'd like to be, if only. There's a shared sense that it's the human that matters.

And they're right. The human side of New Zealand is amazing. I know I've been having a good old moan, and everyone hates a moaner, me especially – so throw your bananas now. But it's the people here. You know, Ken Gorbey and I didn't get that museum open when no-one else could because we were such great museum makers, because of our brilliant skills at synthesizing cultural history. It was because we are Kiwis. Sorry if that sounds a bit trite, but you can't overstate I don't think the way that New Zealanders know how to solve a problem, how to cut through the crap, how to focus on what really matters. This is the upside of the casualness: we have a terrific sense of how far to go, of the unnecessary. Jandals at the dinner party: it's not going to break any bones. When you say of Germans, "They didn't know when to stop," a real shiver goes down the spine. "They didn't know when to pull back." But do we?

As everyone knows, I'm quite keen on pop music. So I've been catching up. Trinty Roots, Fat Freddie's Drop, these are CDs you might pick over music from anywhere in the world. While I'm sitting there listening, I like to look at photographs – at the moment, two books in particular: Marti Friedlander's Godwit collection and Ans Westra's Handboek. Mostly, what you've got there is pictures of the nineteen sixties and seventies. Wonderful pictures, so expressive – but not timeless. On the contrary, they're very much of their time. It's the faces – our sixties and seventies faces – that amaze me. I stare at them. Those people are astonished to be here; and at the same time they're not sure of where they are.

You couldn't say that these days. Those heroic photographs I saw in Metro and the other magazines – New Zealanders are so self-possessed now, so expert, so competent. So aware of their competence. We know where we are. We know who we are. We're in the middle of our lives in the middle of our world here in the middle of Pacific.

But what are we doing with this knowledge, that has been so hard-won? Have we arrived – at the end of our history? Is this it? Is this [**waves hand around**] what we had in mind? Or are we bored with the idea of issues, or are there no issues left, or is it that the media reduces everything to porridge; or are we just too busy with our own struggles to care what kind of society we're making?

Have we arrived, New Zealand, at the place we were going to?

Thank you.

By Kathy Hunter

In the wake of the Going West Festival 'Word of Mouth' literary weekend, I am, as always, feeling invigorated, inspired and blissful. And full of admiration and gratitude to Murray Gray and his team – partner Naomi, Rose Yukich, Lesley Smith and Barbara Cade. Ten years of sparkling literary entertainment, very well done.

Friday night was the opener, with Bill Manhire, Nigel Cox (pictured: left to right it goes Fergus Barrowman of VUP, then Bill, me, and Nigel – couldn't resist this, sorry) and Hinemoana Baker. First was a powhiri with the Rangeview Intermediate Kapa Haka group leading the charge; this talented bunch will be heading off to Canada this weekend to compete in an international competition.

Bill Manhire gave the Curnow reading, named for the late poet Allan Curnow. I was very happy to hear Bill read his Erebus poem and we all had a laugh at his Cornish stories. His father was from Cornwall – the name Manhire comes from menhir or standing stone. Bill said he found it exciting to think that his ancestors may have run phallic cults... and was also rather titillated by a certain Mr Soddy, B&B owner, calling him 'moy dear'.

Then, after telling of how he often uses 'found' phrases as triggers or starting points for poems, he utterly silenced us with one he wrote after seeing a hotel sign in ... Copenhagen. was it? It said 'The fire alarm sound: is given as a howling sound. Do not use the lifts'. He chuckled over it, but in the headstrong way his poems sometimes seem to, this one led him in a direction that was completely other.

The poem is called Hotel Emergency and for those of you who have read it in his latest book Lifted (VUP) I can tell you that the effect when read to yourself, versus the effect when Bill reads it, could reasonably be compared to a static shock versus Electric Shock Therapy.

Interesting, the physical response to this sort of thing. Hair standing on end, watering eyes. I said to Bill when I accosted him later that I found it very hard to review poetry given its subjective nature and often rely on physical reactions such as this to decide on its (subjective) greatness. He gave a quote from Emily Dickenson: 'If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry.'

After Bill's reading, we were all given a bracing, verbal kick up the arse by Nigel Cox. Nigel has, as many of you know, recently returned from a long sojourn in Berlin and he made a point, on his return, of writing down the things he noticed about being home 'before he went blind', i.e. before sameness set in and such things became unnoticeable again.

'Popcorn TV', 'agreement groups' (as opposed to good solid debate from 360 degrees of any issue, which he became used to in Germany), the culture of violence and studied disregard of pain, and our continued, anguishing disregard of our clean, green international branding were some of the depressing kiwi phenomena he covered, although I was unfortunately enjoying it so much I neglected my notebook. Bugger. More from him later however.

The night was rounded off by the glorious, unfettered, so-laid-back-she's-nearly-horizontal Hinemoana Baker, whose words and voice were just as fantastic in the flesh as I expected from her book, Matuhi | Needle. She has a fascinating technique of recording little bits of sounds right there on stage, then looping them to provide a sonic backdrop for her words or songs. Very cool.

And after the song, the wine, after the wine, the single malt courtesy of Murray Gray, and some sitting about chatting in an increasingly deep and meaningful manner (me, anyway) with Chris and the Wellington trio of Bill, Nigel and Fergus Barrowman (VUP's publisher and editor of Sport magazine – rumoured to be out in November), plus lovely poet Paula Green whose work is the subject of a brilliant exhibition at the Corban Arts Estate. Sigh. Then a slightly lurching potter back down the hill to bed.

I only got to a few Saturday sessions – I came back for Bill Manhire talking to Iain Sharp. The session was aptly entitled 'Renaissance Man' and as Iain pointed out, Bill has been so prolific in his output that it's near impossible to figure out what number book he's actually up to.

Bill read some poems, answered some questions and reminisced about some of his most recent projects which include the aforementioned *Lifted*, his two recent anthologies *The Wide White Page* and *121 New Zealand Poems* and *Under the Influence* which is a memoir of growing up with a father who was Southland's first publican and 'an impressive alcoholic' to boot. His talk of the 'six o'clock swill' and the loose policing of closing times were obviously cherished memories also of the brigade of Titirangi pensioners who relish the festival. I do hope I'm one of them eventually.

He spoke a lot about his mother, who is a sprightly nonegenarian. He obviously loves and admires her hugely despite confessing to a continuing adolescent embarrassment of her from time to time. She certainly sounds an exceptional woman. She gained a science degree in the thirties in Edinburgh, taught English to Polish refugees, and in her thirties married a Cornishman who took her to the deep south of NZ – the 'last lamppost of the world' – and spent the best part of her life serving beer to pissed Southern Man. And handled it.

Iain Sharp was a good and thoughtful interviewer; he discreetly covered a fair bit of ground, and if he accidentally sniggered with breathless adoration occasionally, no-one was holding it against him. He had Bill pointing out that although poetry is not an everyday thing for most people, it's the thing we always turn to in moments of formal commemoration or celebration – funerals, weddings, naming ceremonies. And an Antarctic helicopter pilot was remembered who, after a reading on the ice, mused that poetry was a funny thing – 'it's like you're putting words inside the words'. Yup.

The penultimate session I managed to attend on Saturday was with Trish Gribben and Michael Smither. What a lovely pair. Not a couple, but two people sharing a vision, with an obvious deep and abiding friendship which has gone on for years. I'm not a huge fan of Michael's paintings, I have to admit, but it was interesting to hear the process of creating a book which spans a massive body of work, especially having just helped in a small way to do it with Chris's caravan book. And it was lovely just to watch them together. Ennobling, and somehow soothing; such mutual respect. God, I'm rambling.

Trish Gribben has also used 20 pieces of Michael's work to illustrate a children's book called *With My Little Eye – What Michael Smither Sees* which looks great. Aimed at pre-schoolers, it has a similar mission to Greg O'Brien's *Welcome to the South Seas* in that both authors have a passion for exposing our offspring to NZ art.

Finally for this posting, a quick mention of rather spunky poet Sam Sampson who has been working on a project in collaboration with artist Peter Madden. Ah, poetry and art. Like port and stilton. Sam was a riveting reader: not least because he sort of conducted himself; as soon as he began reading, his right arm began to loop and circle. He also has a way of stretching out words or snapping the syllables off one by one that was... interesting. They were rather good words, but I was a bit too distracted by the delivery to take them in properly. Might have to try and track 'em down to read.

Anyway, it's eleven o'bleedin' clock, so it's up the wooden hill to Bedington for me. I shall endeavour to round this off tomorrow. Because I know you're all completely desperate to find out what went on Sunday ...