



TOM AITKEN

Poet Fleur Adcock at home in London in 1983. Right, at 85.

Books & Culture

'Monument on my life'

Poet Fleur Adcock reflects on her new collection of poems from a career spanning 60 years, and finds she prefers her latest ones. **by SARAH CATHERALL**

Fleur Adcock's soft grey bob bounces as she shakes her head while flicking through the 534 pages of her new poetry collection. The Papakura-born long-time London resident and celebrated poet has returned to Wellington for the launch of the landmark book, *Collected Poems*, its publication timed for her 85th birthday.

Adcock has mixed feelings about both events. She was initially reluctant when her New Zealand publisher, Victoria University Press' Fergus Barrowman, proposed a collection containing poems from books spanning more than 55 years.

"It felt like a gravestone, a monument on my life. I was worried I'd never write anything again."

Since then, however, Adcock has penned a few poems. Not that she feels they're publishable, necessarily, but she has been able to write. "Not very good, some of them, but enough to make me think, 'There is life outside this collection.' I wouldn't like to think there wouldn't be another book. But it's a bit embarrassing to have this big thing," she says, tentatively touching the brick of a book with her slender fingers, "and then a tiny one after it."

She celebrated her birthday with family a few days before we talk. There was, at her request, pavlova, a fitting dish for someone who's been an expatriate for most of her career. As she wrote in *Blue Stars* in the 2017 collection, *Hoard*: "But my New Zealand nationality is a part-time thing – a bit of nostalgia."

It's the morning after her official book launch, an event "full of people from my

past". In Bill Manhire's introduction at the launch, he recalled buying Adcock's first collection, *The Eye of the Hurricane*, as a student when it came out in 1964.

"I found that very touching."

Outside, a Wellington northerly lashes the tower block on The Terrace where she is staying with a friend. We're on the 10th floor, facing towards a sunlit Mt Victoria.



In his one-bedroom bedsit, which was next door to where Adcock stays today, her first husband, poet Alistair Te Ariki Campbell – the father of her two sons – wooed her. The poet and novelist cooked her fried rice, and played music. Three years later, in 1952, when Adcock was 18, they were married. She was pushing a pram at 20.

The building has gone, replaced by apartments. In 1958, she divorced Campbell, who died in 2009.

"Alistair and I were okay. He was the

father of my children. We were both too ignorant. He hadn't had a family life. He grew up in an orphanage, so he was never properly socialised. He was always totally insecure."

As for being married to Barry Crump for just five months in the early 1960s, that "was just a little aberration".

Since that decade, Adcock has written poised, ironic poems about men and women, childhood, identity, roots and rootlessness, memory and loss, nature and place.

There are hundreds of them in *Collected Poems*, the cover of which is a striking black-and-white photograph of the poet in her mid-thirties. It was taken in 1970 at her house in East Finchley, which she bought with her wages from being an assistant librarian at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. It is still home today, and full of books. She loves her garden. A friendly robin comes to her back door each morning to be fed.

Adcock first went to London aged five with her family, who lived through the war years there. She and her sister spent much of the time staying with relatives on a Leicestershire farm. She was 13 when they returned to New Zealand.

"That was the age that Juliet met Romeo. I felt that London was my Romeo, and I didn't want to leave."

She longed to return and, after studying classics at Victoria University and working at the University of Otago, she did. It wasn't so much the childhood fondness for London or the two divorces that drove her Up Over, as the weather.

"I knew this weather would kill me.

After a week or two, this constant wind drilling through just crushes my spirit," she says, as the building rattles once more.

As a 1979 poem *Foreigner* begins: "These winds bully me ..."

"I never had any doubt that I was living in the right country. There was this draw of people in New Zealand wanting me back – my parents, my son Gregory – but I just knew I could not live here. I knew I would get depressed."

She's been published and honoured for her work on both sides of the world. After she was awarded the 2006 Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in the UK, she was made a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to literature two years later, adding to an OBE.

Barrowman had wanted to publish the collection in October. However, summer is a good time to visit, as the poet needs a break from frozen winter pipes and "the torture of Brexit".

Flipping through the book, Adcock doesn't think much of her earliest work: "The juvenilia about princesses, and arguments and all that early twenties stuff I can't identify with. I can see the poems are quite well constructed ..." her voice trails off. "I don't think like that now. I never had a sense of humour in those days. I was always so serious.

Collected Poems may date back to 1960, but Adcock is proudest of her most recent poetry, which reflects who she is today. "I think every writer likes their latest work," she says.

Asked for examples, she recalls researching and writing her narrative collection *The Land Ballot* (2014), based on her grandparents' journey to New Zealand and their purchase of land near Te Awamutu.

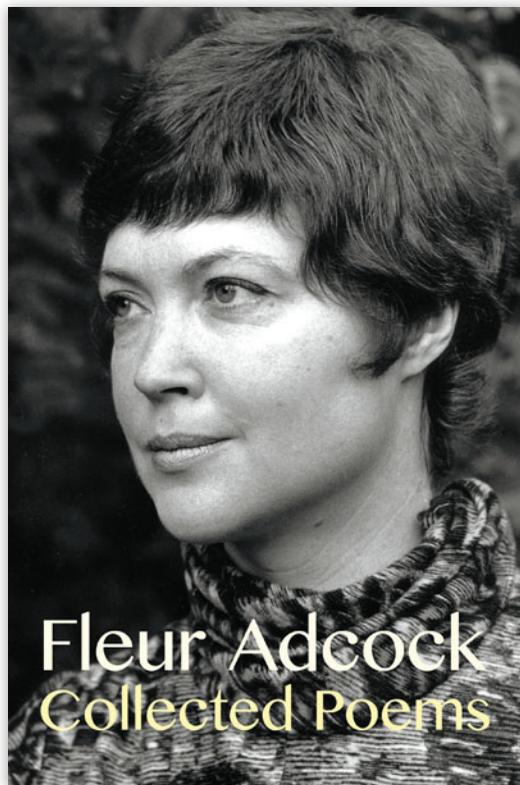
The writer, who says she has an addictive personality (addicted to learning languages, gardening and family history, to name a few), became obsessed with researching the story of her forebears' immigration and purchase of "terrible land" that she describes as "bush sick".

"I was totally obsessed. I was walking around with it in my head, working out how to fit these disparate poems into one narrative."

Adcock stops to read a short poem, *Telegraphese*, from *The Land Ballot*, about her Great-Aunt Alice, who became a widow, was left out of her parents' wills and became a housekeeper with her own children. Alice and her employer were lovers, but never married.

"Young woman with TB sails to NZ/ finds work up and down both islands until/near Wānaka she lands up on farm with no other women; worst happens ...".

From her London home, Adcock pored



"That was the age that Juliet met Romeo. I felt that London was my Romeo, and I didn't want to leave."

over letters, postcards, documents and the local *Waipa Post* paper, through the National Library's online records. Her process of writing was to "gaze out the window" and wait.

"I finished it on New Year's Eve, and I felt quite bereft. It was the nearest thing to a novel. I had got to know all the characters, all the people on the local farms, the army, and the war snapping at their heels."

She frowns. "I thought, what on earth

am I going to write about next? I got on with living, but there was nothing to quite replace this narrative."

On her next visit to New Zealand, in 2016, though, she drank in her experiences and the result was her poetry collection *Hoard*. Some of the poems read like photos in an album, glimpses of Wellington's Miramar and Tinakori Rd. "You can't tell why you write these things," she says quietly.

On her trip this year, she will see her sister, poet and novelist Marilyn Duckworth. Adcock reveals she has written one novel. It sits in a drawer. She shakes her head, says it's unpublishable. "It was another obsession to have. I'm easily obsessed by things. It was just to see what it was like to write something that was going on and on and on."

These days, she likes living on her own. However, she is not a loner or a recluse, and her life in London is full of literary events and catching up with writer friends.

"I'm a very solitary person. How would you write otherwise? I need solitude to write. I'm not easy to live with. I think it's ideal."

Poetry has changed so much in her time. "It has all merged into rap and spoken first forms. All the young poets in London are standing up on stage and they are all performers. They are a different race of people. That's all right. They wouldn't think much of Tennyson. That's the way it is."

If *Collected Poems* is a gravestone, how does she feel about death?

"I'm looking forward to it. It's like Woody Allen says, 'I'm looking forward to it, but I'm not looking forward to being there when it happens.'"

Adcock's mother lived to 93, but she had Alzheimer's. Her father got the disease in his late seventies and died at 82. She naturally worries when she forgets people's names. "I've outlived my father; I've survived. I'm always forgetting keys and that kind of thing. I manage to get around the world without doing anything too catastrophic. But, really, I don't want to go on for too long."

She says: "The human race is not meant to live so long." ■

COLLECTED POEMS, by Fleur Adcock (Victoria University Press)