

Allen Curnow
Collected Poems



Edited by
Elizabeth Caffin
& Terry Sturm

This is the definitive collection of work by New Zealand's most distinguished poet. Throughout his lifetime, Allen Curnow revised, selected and collected his poetry in various ways. For the first time, this collection brings together all of the poems that Curnow collected in his lifetime grouped in their original volumes. The notes reproduce Curnow's comments on individual poems and include relevant editorial guidance.

Allen Curnow (1911–2001) was at the time of his death regarded as one of the greatest of all poets writing in English. For seventy years, from *Valley of Decision* (1933) to *The Bells of Saint Babel's* (2001), Curnow's poetry was always on the move – from his early approaches to New Zealand identity and myth to later work concerned with the philosophical encounter between word and world.

Curnow also played a major role in New Zealand life as editor, critic, commentator and anthologist, as well as a much-loved writer of light verse under the penname of Whim Wham. In his later years he acquired an impressive international reputation, winning the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Sturm CBE was a professor of literature at the University of Auckland for many years, editor of *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* (1990, 1998), author of *An Unsettled Spirit: The Life and Frontier Fiction of Edith Lyttleton* (AUP, 2003), and editor of a selection of Curnow's verse written under his pseudonym Whim Wham, *Whim Wham's New Zealand: The Best of Whim Wham 1937-1988* (Random House, 2005). **Elizabeth Caffin** was Allen Curnow's publisher and director of Auckland University Press for two decades.

LANDFALL IN UNKNOWN SEAS

*The 300th Anniversary of the Discovery of New Zealand
by Abel Tasman, 13 December, 1642*

I

Simply by sailing in a new direction
You could enlarge the world.

You picked your captain,
Keen on discoveries, tough enough to make them,
Whatever vessels could be spared from other
More urgent service for a year's adventure;
Took stock of the more probable conjectures
About the Unknown to be traversed, all
Guesses at golden coasts and tales of monsters
To be digested into plain instructions
For likely and unlikely situations.

All this resolved and done, you launched the whole
On a fine morning, the best time of year,
Skies widening and the oceanic furies
Subdued by summer illumination; time
To go and to be gazed at going
On a fine morning, in the Name of God
Into the nameless waters of the world.

O you had estimated all the chances
Of business in those waters, the world's waters
Yet unexploited.

But more than the sea-empire's

Cannon, the dogs of bronze and iron barking
From Timor to the Straits, backed up the challenge.
Between you and the South an older enmity
Lodged in the searching mind, that would not tolerate
So huge a hegemony of ignorance.
There, where your Indies had already sprinkled
Their tribes like ocean rains, you aimed your voyage;
Like them invoked your God, gave seas to history
And islands to new hazardous tomorrows.

II

Suddenly exhilaration
Went off like a gun, the whole
Horizon, the long chase done,
Hove to. There was the seascape
Crammed with coast, surprising
As new lands will, the sailor
Moving on the face of the waters,
Watching the earth take shape
Round the unearthly summits, brighter
Than its emerging colour.

Yet this, no far fool's errand,
Was less than the heart desired,
In its old Indian dream
The glittering gulfs ascending
Past palaces and mountains
Making one architecture.
Here the uplifted structure,
Peak and pillar of cloud —
O splendour of desolation — reared
Tall from the pit of the swell,
With a shadow, a finger of wind, forbade
Hopes of a lucky landing.

Always to islanders danger
Is what comes over the sea;

Over the yellow sands and the clear
Shallows, the dull filament
Flickers, the blood of strangers:
Death discovered the Sailor
O in a flash, in a flat calm,
A clash of boats in the bay
And the day marred with murder.
The dead required no further
Warning to keep their distance;
The rest, noting the failure,
Pushed on with a reconnaissance
To the north; and sailed away.

III

Well, home is the Sailor, and that is a chapter
In a schoolbook, a relevant yesterday
We thought we knew all about, being much apter
 To profit, sure of our ground,
No murderers mooring in our Golden Bay.

But now there are no more islands to be found
And the eye scans risky horizons of its own
In unsettled weather, and murmurs of the drowned
 Haunt their familiar beaches —
Who navigates us towards what unknown

But not improbable provinces? Who reaches
A future down for us from the high shelf
Of spiritual daring? Not those speeches
 Pinning on the Past like a decoration
For merit that congratulates itself,

O not the self-important celebration
Or most painstaking history, can release
The current of a discoverer's elation
 And silence the voices saying,
'Here is the world's end where wonders cease'.

Only by a more faithful memory, laying
On him the half-light of a diffident glory,
The Sailor lives, and stands beside us, paying
 Out into our time's wave
The stain of blood that writes an island story.



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