

Censorship, subversion and short fiction in 1940.

Stephen Hamilton

During the first four decades of the century, the four colleges of the University of New Zealand developed a strong tradition of academic freedom, a tradition often coloured 'ramping red' by successive generations of students attracted to Marxism in its various forms. Victoria College in particular was widely regarded as a refuge for radicals and revolutionaries, with students frequently suspected of shirking their duties, subversion, and worse. From its founding in 1938 the student newspaper *Salient* was increasingly cited as evidence of this, dominated as it was by members of the college's left wing, including A. H. (Bonk) Scotney, Morrie Boyd, Derek Freeman, Vesta Emmanuel, Ronald Meek, Dorian Saker, Jim Winchester, Mary Brisco, and Peter and Moyra Mitchell. Many of these same young men and women were also prominent on the Students' Association's executive.

Following the outbreak of war, *Salient* and hence the Association as publisher became vulnerable to the restrictions imposed by the wartime Emergency Regulations. These placed New Zealand writers, publishers and printers in an highly invidious position, prohibited from publishing any works which might be deemed seditious or detrimental to the war effort on pain of possible imprisonment, fines, and confiscation of both the works concerned and the plant and equipment used to produce them. What was to be deemed seditious was largely left to the police officers concerned, but in the minds of many New Zealanders communism, pacifism and sedition were synonymous terms.

After several disputes over copy with the paper's increasingly nervous printer, in 1940 it was decided to revert to a cyclostyled format, to be published monthly under the editorship of Morrie Boyd assisted by many of the same staff members mentioned above. The issue of academic freedom was broached in the first number for the year, when O. A. E. Hughan gave an account of the dismissal of the college's Professor of Modern Languages, Professor von Zedlitz, in the First World War and of the events of 1933 when the radical newspaper *Student* was banned, *Spike* was censored and the discussion of controversial topics proscribed. In his opinion, the newly imposed regulations constituted a definite threat to academic freedom and, moreover, they seemed particularly directed against the free and open discussion of left-wing ideas (Hughan 2-3).

Hughan need not have worried. In spite of the prevailing political atmosphere, the left-wing at Victoria remained as vocal as ever, determined to

ensure that the college's tradition of political engagement should continue unstifled. Over the next few months *Salient* repeatedly addressed issues which might have been avoided by a more circumspect publication. It supported the establishment of a college Peace Society, initially opposed by the students' executive, for fear 'the College would be brought into disrepute' by such a society, (see Meek), and advocated (in *Salient* 27 May 1940) the formation of 'soviet style' committees to deal with such matters as physical education, compulsory medical examinations for freshers and greater student involvement in curriculum development.¹ However, by May the Labour Government had strengthened the Emergency Regulations to the extent that printers in particular were becoming extremely nervous.

In early June the Superintendent of Police in Christchurch visited H. W. Bullivant, printer of the fortnightly newspaper *Tomorrow*, warning him that 'the Police have power to seize any printing press and they would not hesitate to use this power if any subversive articles were printed.' The editor and publisher of *Tomorrow*, Kennaway Henderson, quoted these words in a letter to his subscribers dated 17 June (subsequently reproduced in *Salient* 27 June 1940), and further pointed out that 'under the Emergency legislation "Subversion" is very vaguely defined, so that almost any critical writing might be regarded as subversive. Consequently, no printer is prepared to print *Tomorrow*, and, in effect, we have been suppressed'. First published in 1934 and by far the most significant political and literary journal of its day, *Tomorrow* had long proved itself a thorn in the side of both government and big business, devoted as it was to providing an outlet for ideas which the mainstream press refused to entertain. It provided the editors and staff of *Salient* with a model to aspire to. Its dramatic closure proved portentous for the more junior paper.

Around the time that H. W. Bullivant was being interviewed by the police in Christchurch, an issue of *Salient* appeared (13 June 1940) devoted to the topic of censorship, which carried the following short sketch entitled 'There's a war on', 'There's a war on' had in fact already been published earlier in the year, in the March issue of the literary magazine *Oriflamme: a Literary journal of youth and the fine arts* (Vol. 1. no. 2, March 1940), which was itself edited by *Salient* staff members Dorian Saker and Tony Murray-Oliver. Here, in a magazine with something approximating the same circulation as *Salient* (four hundred hand stencilled and mimeographed copies), it had prompted little or no comment, despite effectively being published from the nascent National Library, the Alexander Turnbull Library, just down the hill from the Victoria

² Perhaps not surprisingly, *Salient* staff members occupied five of the new Society's six committee positions.

College in Wellington. However, in June, amid what Henderson called ‘a wave of hysteria . . . sweeping the country’, (*Salient*, 27 June 1940), the story was clearly liable to be judged detrimental to the war effort.²

‘There’s A War On...’

So there’s a war on? No, you don’t say. Who could have told you that now? Ain’t it just too bad, and what’ye going to do about it, sonny? Ain’t it just a nice time for getting into that pretty uniform.

The newcomer looked sheepish. He was fresh from the country, with a glow like ripe Jonathan in his cheeks, and his eyes liquid like sun on water. I came to get a job, he said. Wanta get into a factory. You go and join up, boy. Don’t you know there’s nothing better than fighting for your country? Look at Harry over there—see his arm? His king and country took that. He leaned over and whispered in the boy’s ear. Maybe you’ll get something took like that.

And Jim the wit said. If you want kids, have ‘em before you go. Those ne bullets make a hang of a mess. I new a chap had his doings blown clean away.

The boy blushed.

He doesn’t want any kids. He couldn’t even if he wanted ‘em. He’s not old enough!

What’s the pay like? said the boy.

Swell! they said. Nine bob a day, an’ you can’t spend it. Can you beat that now? Hey! Here’s the recruiting sergeant come for a drink. Here’s the chap for you, Sarge!

Wanta join up, lad? Good pay, good meals, good friends, and fine clothes—best in the country! Anyway, let’s have a drink...and that same again.

Name taken, address, everything; he couldn’t escape. O.K.—he was in the army. He still looked a shy country boy.

They said: Hell! Wait till you’re out in the trenches; then you’ll have some fun.

But Jim the wit said: Better have some fun before you go, son! They’re dirty bitches out there.

The barman said: Good luck, boy—give ‘em my love!

The veteran said: Give ‘em what we gave ‘em in 1914.

He said: I was going to get a job in a factory; seems I’ve got something different. S’pose I’d better write to ‘em at home. Mightn’t be seeing them for some time.

Pick up your traps, blast you! the sergeant said...

Michael du Fresne

² It appears that considerations of morality and obscenity did not feature in the discussion of the story, despite its use of what was, for the day, strong and suggestive language.

Written with an obvious debt to Frank Sargeson, then approaching the height of his influence among younger writers, the story was attributed to one Michael du Fresne. It was in fact written by Dorian Saker: Saker's middle name was Michael and his mother's maiden name was Frain.³ Though it lacks Sargeson's subtle touch, its jaundiced view of the army recruitment process would have made it suitable for the pages of *Tomorrow* itself. As it was, its second publication prompted a concerned citizen to pass a copy of the paper to the police. About a month after publication, Saker, editor Morrie Boyd and Association president Ron Corkill were interviewed by Detective Murray of the Wellington Police acting under the Emergency Regulations. They were asked to make a joint statement on the matter and after admitting that 'publication of such an article might be indiscreet', were assured that 'the case was not serious enough to warrant a prosecution' and advised 'not to worry about the matter' any further. With obvious relief, a statement in defence of 'freedom of utterance' was prepared by Corkhill for the next number of *Salient*, due to appear on 18 July, but before the issue could be distributed Prime Minister Peter Fraser contacted the college principal Sir Thomas Hunter about the matter (see 'Report on *Salient*'). With the possibility of prosecution once again in the offing, Hunter instructed that *Salient* cease publication forthwith. An executive sub-committee was convened and in its report to the Professorial Board it argued eloquently for the continued existence of the paper. A set of editorial guidelines were prepared and, with the Board reassured, the issue of 18 July eventually appeared on 10 September, although without Corkill's statement. *Salient* had survived, but only just.

WORKS CITED

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Henderson, Kennaway. 'Notice to Subscribers'. Reproduced in *Salient* 27 June 1940.

³ I am grateful to John Saker for his assistance in establishing his father's authorship of the story and to Yvonne du Fresne and Karl du Fresne for confirming that they know of no Michael in their family. The adoption of the French form of his mother's name may be attributed to Dorian's interest in New Zealand history and literature. As John Beaglehole noted in 1936, 'Marion du Fresne, who had done some injury to the natives, was killed and eaten together with a number of his crew' (*New Zealand: A Short History*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1936, p.15). Perhaps Dorian had some inkling of a similar fate for himself on publication of the story amid so heightened a political atmosphere.

Hughan, O.E.A. 'The University and the War'. *Salient* 14 March 1940, pp.2-3.

M.L.R. [Ronald L. Meek], 'History of the Victoria University College Society for the Discussion of Peace, War, & Civil Liberties.' *Salient* 17 April 1940.

'Report on Salient by the executive of the Victoria University Students' Association', [23 July 1940]. Mary Boyd Papers, VUWSA Archive.