

AOTEAROA--and WAHINE TOA

("New Zealand--and Strong Women")

by Robin Morgan

It had been in the planning stages for almost four years, this trip. The New Zealand feminist movement, and most particularly the United Women's Convention Committee, had invited me to visit their beautiful country on a national speaking tour, to strengthen the "networking" between the women's movements in our respective nations, and to further the communication of sisterhood in the vast and diverse international women's movement.

But scheduling had intervened--two book deadlines of my own, and the chronic hectic pressures of American (and especially political) life: organizing, lecturing, and traveling in my own country and in other countries where I had previous commitments. So it was not until September of 1984 that I finally set out to cross--as I was to learn--more than a mere dateline, and enter "the other side of the world."

Only fifteen days in, as I have come to call it, Aotearoa, preferring the mellifluous Maori name which means "the land of the long white cloud." Yet those fifteen days flickered by in a blur of wonder, loveliness, ~~and~~ vibrant energy. Being a prose writer, I have little doubt that an entire book could be born for me out of the experience; being as well a poet, I have even less doubt that poems will emerge, strangely resplendent with imagery of sun-splashed kowhai flowers languidly drooping open, of glowworm-spangled caves, of turquoise, scarlet, and chartreuse striations in volcanic rock. But until such longer works emerge, let the following montage suffice--a tiny sampling of multiple vivid memories:

* Flying over the majesty of the Southern Alps into the exquisite tidiness of Christchurch; its cathedral and square, its Botani

cal Gardens which daringly mingle ^{subtropical} indigenous flora with blooms straight from the English countryside; only in Christchurch would the massive town clock be built entirely in the shape of ^{growing} ~~living~~ flowers--and still run on time.

* The warmth of the various university communities which welcomed my lectures--Canterbury, Victoria, Auckland, Massey, Waikato; the hospitality of the faculty members who received me, and especially the enthusiasm of the students who came to hear, question (and teach) me.

* The stun of spring, just when back home I had been braced for winter; the almost iridescent green of fields and pastures, hillsides and even city parks (Cornwall Park in Auckland, for example) tufted with young lambs, their bleats echoing contentedly through the crisp air.

* The celebration of the anniversary of Women's Suffrage ^{(September 19),} a moving day made moreso by New Zealand having been the first nation in the world where women won the right to vote (in 1893).

* A drive northward to Rotorua over stretches of earth the color of burnt sienna streaked brackish green and orange, the bush a sunbleached gorse, ~~the~~ terrain as filled with eerie splendour as a moonscape. And then, amazingly, a snow blizzard (on the Desert Road!) relenting just as suddenly, so that the active and semi-active vol⁷ canoes ahead could loom through the fog, their own spumes swirling edgelessly with the mist above.

* The faces of women, both Maori and pakeha (European descent). Old and young, lined and smooth, laughing, crying, talking animatedly. Faces filled with the energy of a just anger at women's powerlessness in a patriarchal world, but also radiant with a vision of a different, humane, egalitarian society in which female human beings would be

empowered.

* Huka Falls--its water the blue of a young iceberg, its triple boil dancing and falling in slowmotion grace toward a cello-[^]shaped basin.

* The black sand beach of Te Henga on the North Island's West Coast; fine blueblack powder sequined with phosphorescent dunelets of lilac, violet, midnight purple.

* Memorable conversations with so many specific women: the Maori feminist poet Hinewirangi Kohu reading her poems aloud; the pakeha feminist painter Juliet Batten and the great Maori artist Digger Te Kanewa sharing their creative vision with me; the wit of Cath Tizzard, mayor of Auckland; the quiet commitment of Margaret Shields, Minister of Customs and Consumer Affairs; the determination of Ann Hercus, Minister of Women's Affairs; the ~~electric~~^{electric} dynamism of Marilyn Waring, former Member of Parliament who, with a single vote, brought down a government so that Aotearoa could ~~remain~~^{be} nuclear-free.

* A particular geyser-bedazzled dawn at Rotorua, when Pohutu's plume seemed to invoke the gathering light with rainbow-^primed steamsparks, while velvety pools of boiling mud burped and gurgled mischievously below.

* The simplicity and stateliness of a Marae (Maori meeting ground); the sophisticated power of Maori art.

* Waimungu Thermal Valley, forged by the 1886 eruption of Mt. Tarawera--steaming lakes, silica terraces, rivers that boil, cliffsides hot to the hand's touch yet aglow with fiddlehead ferns; the aptly named Emerald Pool Crater--a grotto of savage delicacy at once serene and passionate, both utterly alien and instantly recognized as a forgotten dream.



* The natural underground Chartres cathedrals that constitute the Waitomo Caves--vast, awesome caverns whose stalactites chime in pure notes when gently flicked by a finger, as if the entire cave system were one great pipe organ in tune with the chord struck and held by subterranean river-roar, a living "Sanctus" from the Bach B Minor Mass.

One could go on . . . and I will, someday. For now, it is enough to try and celebrate the beauty of the country and the strength of its women. Surely their fierce longing for a more just society for everyone everywhere has something to do with their fierce love of their land. That longing was familiar to me; I've heard it in the voices of women from Finland to South Africa, from California to Kuwait. But there is something unique, untamable, and astonishing about ^{New Zealand} ~~Aotearoa~~ itself: a relentless, joyous, wild lyricism that erupts freedom; a visceral celebration in the self.

And one leaves something of that self behind forever, singing in the fern forests with the tui birds, locked in glacial ice, fossilized in volcanic rock. Something of the soul that Aotearoa seized, stretched out on the Southern Cross, and sent spinning into the Southern Hemisphere, alive and eternal.

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(BIO): Robin Morgan is the author of four books of poems and four books of prose, the latest of which ^(is) The Anatomy of Freedom ^(Doubleday USA and) ^(Martin Robertson/Blackwell) ^(Commonwealth); her newest work, Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology, has just been published in the US (Doubleday) and a Commonwealth edition is forthcoming from Penguin. A founder of the contemporary ^{U.S.} feminist movement, ~~in the US~~ ^(a political) she has been ~~an~~ activist for twenty years, and is also an award-winning journalist and ^{Conf} contributing Editor to Ms. Magazine.