



Geoff Cochrane

Photo: Lindsay Rabbitt

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEOFF COCHRANE

Richard Langston

For years Geoff Cochrane has sat in a chair in his small city council flat in Wellington and turned out startling and distinctive poetry. He's set about the daily task of writing with monkish devotion. In his latest and 16th book, *RedEdits*, he again explores some of his pre-occupations—addiction, mortality, painting, Catholicism, cinema, the marginalised, his own life, and the elemental nature of Wellington. Richard Langston visited the author in his home and they talked for an hour (above the roar of jets at the nearby airport, and the bluster of the Wellington wind).

You describe the Wellington wind in one of your new poems as 'irrational'.....

Quite so, Richard. I take it very personally, as recently as this morning I had this very hat (beanie) snatched from my head. It's as if the wind has a persona, the same as the earthquakes... Living here in Miramar, I can hear them. I'm adept (*laughs*) at hearing them coming. I'm not naturally one of these gifted or fey people but I am quite pleased with myself about this. Anyway, Richard, you're here on the pretext that you enjoyed my latest book...

I always enjoy your books. I went back and read one of your earliest, *The Sea The Landsman Knows*. There's quite a strong presence of your voice in that book, but your voice now to me is unmistakable, you have become yourself in an unmistakable way...

It's very nice of you to say so. I was winnowing out some poems that I'll give you as you leave, which means I was going through the 30 odd pages I have of the new book and I have to say it was a very dispiriting experience. I've been very preoccupied with this business of aging, or latterly, of *being old*.

It's a much more daunting experience than I at first thought. It's characterised by a certain amount of suspense (*laughs*). One is constantly waiting to see what the next misfortune is going to be; is this cold going to prove to be the one that puts you in hospital. No one prepares you for having this as one's constant background radiation, the background hum.

You say suspense, and I see that you quote Saul Bellow on that very fact in your new book...

Yeah.

— The Author —

Richard Langston is a poet, a writer, a journalist, a broadcaster, and the former editor of *Garage* magazine. He is also a director for the television programme with the greatest theme ever, *Country Calendar*.

That's something you often do, you use other writers' work to illuminate a thought you want to open up to your own way of thinking...

That was an aspect of *RedEdits*. There are reviewers out there who get it all arse about face, they think I'm purporting to be the author of things that you might expect any reasonably literate reader to know was said or written by other people.

Can you explain why you work in that mode?

As a working writer you end up with bits and pieces, out-takes if you will, that haven't actually made the cut. The worksheet was a form I invented in order to give habitation to these little snippets that hadn't found their way into larger works, and I'm a great believer in the short and sweet. I find it quite satisfying to put something together that you can read at a glance and reflect on at leisure.

Your Wellington, Geoff, is a distinct place in your work – a place of boarding houses, of people living on the margins, the addict, the junkie, of people who have in one way or another suffered a loss...

I don't think anyone who knows my work will be ignorant of the fact that I spent the first 20 years of my adulthood drinking alcoholically and only stopped when I absolutely had to, when I hit rock bottom, but for many of those years I lived in rooming houses in the Aro Valley, and one naturally lived amongst other alcoholics and junkies and drag queens and all sorts of people who didn't quite make the grade.

There was a landlord by the name of Robin Young who maintained houses for these people. There was a sense in which one lived on Skid Row without actually living on Skid Row; instead of Wellington having Skid Row, it had dear old Robin's (*laughs*) rooming houses. He was performing really a great social service and saving the police and other agencies a great deal of trouble by at least keeping these people, of whom I was one, housed.

What sort of bloke was he?

I think he was an almost saintly man really in retrospect. There was nothing avaricious about him. In fact, he would lend you money to go and buy booze (*laughs*)... An accountant by trade he always made sure he got it back.

He sounds like someone you might write about...

There's a lot of things I should write about but I'm finding, Richard, at the age of 66 that really the tide has gone out, seems to have gone out a long long way, and that's another sort of anxiety. I was 40 before I formed the habit of writing daily and wrote a couple of novels. And in order to write a novel at all you have to write every day, if you don't you'll simply never finish it. That's where the habit began and it's persisted really until very very recently. And I find it irksome in the extreme

when I get up in the morning and I find I haven't anything to relate.

Writing seems to have been the reason for your life, your anchor...

Absolutely. Yes, it was always going to be, even as I was drinking I was aware that I had this responsibility to do something about my talent. It took me a lot longer to get myself organised than I ever thought it would and in fact all that alcohol taught me it could've taught me in the first fucking six months.

But you've described your alcoholism as the gift that keeps giving as a writer...

Well a little bit of back-story for a writer comes in handy, yes, so there is that. But I draw on it with less and less frequency.

It all but killed you...

Did it nearly kill me, I don't know... In the end I felt the alcohol had given up on me really. It was as if the alcohol had ingested me whole and was now spitting out the feathers. And I will tell anyone who asks nowadays, in retrospect, something I didn't really see at the time, which was that there was a clock running on my addiction and once it had completed its circle that was it, really, for me; so I got lucky. I have been lucky because when I got sober and began to write I had the great good fortune of being taken on by VUP. Fergus Barrowman of VUP, and I will never tire of saying this, gave me a life after booze, a somewhat posthumous sort of feeling life (*laughs*). And Gerry Melling, he came along later and put his shoulder to the wheel too, so I'm grateful to him as well too.

You write about that marginalised, and that sort of twilight life, without ever romanticising it. You give us the reality of that life...

You have to do something to it to write it, and possibly it turned out on the page more attractive than it was. But I drank in a deluded romantic sort of way anyway...

The days in the Duke of Wellington pub...

Yes. I would've slept in the Duke had they let me (*laughs*).

As I read you, your art has been to create the reality, not the romance...

You pay me something of a compliment there, and it's nice to hear it. I don't know—having writ, I don't spend a lot of time considering what I've achieved or failed to achieve. One works towards accuracy and precision and, if possible, brevity. I wasn't a natural novelist really because it's brevity I like, and as a novelist you're never really finished, there's always more work to do, and long after you've finished and your novel has died and gone to novel heaven you're still writing it. You're still caught up in the technical business of getting it down on paper. I wasn't made for the long haul.

Your work as a novelist crosses into your work as a poet...

Yeah, I hoped that that would be the case.

You write in various modes, but if people come to Geoff Cochrane looking for what a lot of other poets hope to achieve – a lyric poem – they won't find a lot of that in your work...

No, they won't find a lot of it, will they?

I can think of one that is a straight lyric poem, "That Winter with Celeste"...

Yes. It came to me in about 5 minutes. It was wham, bam, thank you, mam. Not Celeste (*laughs*). Yeats said a poem is a piece of luck.

It's such a Wellington poem too, Geoff, the image is so Oriental Parade... 'the ships like chandeliers/parked beneath her window'...

That's where it began and ended really. I had that, those lines. The only unreal thing about it is Celeste, because that wasn't her name, and I've never known anyone called Celeste, have you?

Camus described writing as being a source of joy, would a poem like "Celeste" have produced that feeling in you?

A poem like "Celeste" would've done, but poems like "Celeste" are very rare. You're generally dealing with something that's much more difficult to bring into existence. Having written is a very nice feeling.

We were talking before about how you've written about a certain strata of society, and the Dunedin poet Peter Olds is someone who has worked in similar terrain...

He has lived it. Amongst the alcoholics and drug addicts and drag queens were of course a lot of veterans of the mental health system.

In 2006, Peter wrote a poem called "Glenvale Sweet" about coming to visit you in 1984...

Yes, he came and he stayed in Wellington for some months and I met him. I liked him immensely, and we had a few adventures together. He chummed up with Lindsay Rabbitt. It's all a bit of a blur (*laughs*). He sought me out actually, and I appreciated it, because he enjoyed quite a reputation back in the day, his name was often mentioned in relation to James K. Baxter; he was the heir apparent, really.

Your own poetry's taken you to the Sky Tower where you were acknowledged as a New Zealand arts laureate (in 2014)...

It was a great occasion for me, and I fully intended to enjoy it, and I did. Certainly. It never occurred to me that I didn't deserve it (*laughs*). There was

50-grand attached to it. I was as high as a fucking kite for the rest of the day, until I realised—you'll laugh at this—that this was something I was going to have to run past WINZ (*laughs*). They were quite nice about it, but it still cost me \$50 dollars a week, and still costs me \$50 dollars a week.

An on-going theme in your poetry and a source of creativity is your Catholicism. You lament your loss of God... "Lividity" is the poem I think of in your latest book...

Yes, it's all very well to reject the Church and belief in God for intellectual reasons. You have Aquinas telling you that there is a cause without a cause, and that cause we call God. It's very hard to wish that away, that definition of God: the cause without a cause. You can feel there's a lot wrong with the Church's teaching, and you rub up against it because it constrains you in all sorts of weird ways.

But it's very hard to justify intellectually, unless you're as bright as Bertrand Russell. I was only about 13 years of age when I read an essay by BR called "Why I am Not a Christian", and he writes about his own difficulty with squaring away this notion of Aquinas's that there is this cause without a cause. He said he had great difficulty with this, until he realised that it was just as logical to posit a universe without a cause as it was to posit a cause without a cause. So there I was reading Bertrand Russell's essay and I thought, "Well, there's your answer, Geoffrey". It's all just semantics anyway.

I got fed up with being in a constant state of mortal sin. I'd achieved puberty and I was masturbating and I liked that, but this put me offside with the Church and God, and I was going to go to hell as a result of it. I thought, "Is it possible that it's not me that's in the wrong here, it's this system put together by adults?"

You write also a lot about painting, and there's a poem in *RedEdits* called "Oils and Acrylics" about that...

My father was a frustrated artist, really. As a young man he won a prize at St Pat's, but the next thing he knew WW2 had broken out, he was first in the army and then in the air force, and by the time he got back to NZ he had married, and the next thing he knew he was a young father, and one went to work and earned bread, so nothing really became of his desire to draw and paint.

He always fancied me as a painter. He thought I had it; he thought I was Christmas. Now, he wasn't a great champion of his own children, he thought they were a fairly ordinary bunch, and I was ordinary in all sorts of respects too, except he thought I could paint.

Many years later, when I showed him my first book of verse, *Images of Midnight City*, he went away with it for about ten minutes and came back and tossed it into my lap and he said, "Well", he said, "You'll never make a poet, but you might *once*—stress on the word *once*—have made a bloody good painter". But it's true, had I not become a writer I might have become a painter myself.

I found out to my horror in my last year at St Pat's that, in order to be admitted to a decent art school, you had to be a sort of swot, you had to have marks up there with the best of the best, well that wasn't me. I was a tolerable enough student, though to this day I'm somewhat innumerate. My father could never understand this; my father was a TAB agent and could add a hundred three-digit figures mentally, yet he had this son who was incapable of adding.

And if you had an interest in film you were fucked; they will tell you to go to the National Film Unit and spend the next 20 years of your life filming shags and seagulls on the Auckland Islands. I mean, hopeless. It wasn't that doors were closed to one, they simply didn't exist.

But one thing you could do, and you needed no one's permission to do it either, was to go out and buy yourself a pad and some pens and start writing. I thought they can't prevent me from fucking writing (*laughs*).

You have a particular vocabulary – scientific and medical and Latinate words – the word “phlebotomist” appears twice in your new book...

Yeah, but there must be people out there who know they're going to the phlebotomist when they have their blood taken. It comes up on quiz shows, sometimes (*laughs*). Those quiz shows the elderly watch. It *is* a great word. I've had a fair bit to do with the medical profession over the years, so you pick up some of their medical-speak.

You have a mordant sense of humour. I love the line in your poem where you wake up in the middle of the night and go—and I paraphrase—“Oh Christ, not more consciousness!”... That's laugh-out-loud funny, Geoff...

Good. Thank you. Gerry Melling took to picking me up here on a Sunday, and because he insisted on stopping in, I began to do something I'd never done before, which was show him work in progress, and after a while it dawned on me that when he threw back his head, as he often did, and roared with laughter this was my mark of success as a writer.

We learn a fair bit about your life from your poems. Did you make a conscious decision that you would put yourself in there in a pretty raw and honest way?

I sometimes feel I haven't been quite honest enough about it. That would be the object, to put as much of yourself into your work as you feel you could bear...

I guess as a novelist there's more places to hide than there is as a poet...

Yes. If it was sufficiently painful one wouldn't do it, I suppose. I wouldn't know, really.

There's a school of thought ... Eliot said keep the personal out of the poem...

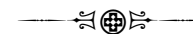
But then he was very successful on his own terms. I don't give a fuck what they say, he's a wonderful poet high-church Anglican; he's a great poet. But you don't go into the game thinking, I will be all these things. It doesn't work that way, you find your way into it.

Your function as a writer is to communicate, and I can't be bothered with poems that require 15 minutes of introduction. If it's so vital to the understanding of the poem, why isn't it *in* the poem? I like to be understood when someone picks up a poem of mine. I want to be sure that I get them at least as far as the bottom of the first stanza and if they switch off after that and put the book down that's fine, I've done my best.

But I read poems all the time that are so disfigured by the first two or three lines, by matters of bad fucking grammar and infelicitous choice of words, that I think, why am I even bothering. I'm not reading anymore.

Do you feel satisfied with what you've produced?

I don't know how much I've achieved, but it's kept me going, it's kept me interested in life. And my difficulty now is I'm finding that I'm waking up and going, well what is there? What am I supposed to be doing? It's not coming, the dam is empty. Days pass, weeks pass, and I haven't written anything and I miss the activity. Do crosswords, they say, but what bigger waste of time could there be than doing a cryptic crossword? —I mean, you don't even learn new words. No, no, it's all a bit disheartening that side of it. I've never had a holiday from it before, never.





ART: BARRY CLEAVIN

TINY BLIGHTER

Geoff Cochrane

Woodsmoke and wax-eyes.
The warmest autumn since 1938.

*

(I'm a card-carrying pensioner now
(a circumstance of which
I'm more than a tad ashamed),
and I wake up every night at three a.m.
with a full bladder
and a highly inconvenient erection.

*

How long do spiders live?

He took up residence some weeks ago,
the tiny blighter living on my sill
(the window-sill above my kitchen sink).

He's calm and self-sufficient,
patrolling his patch sedately;
he makes no sudden moves,
evinces no territorial ambitions,
and he seems to find enough to eat somehow,
keeping the wee machine that is himself
ticking over nicely.

