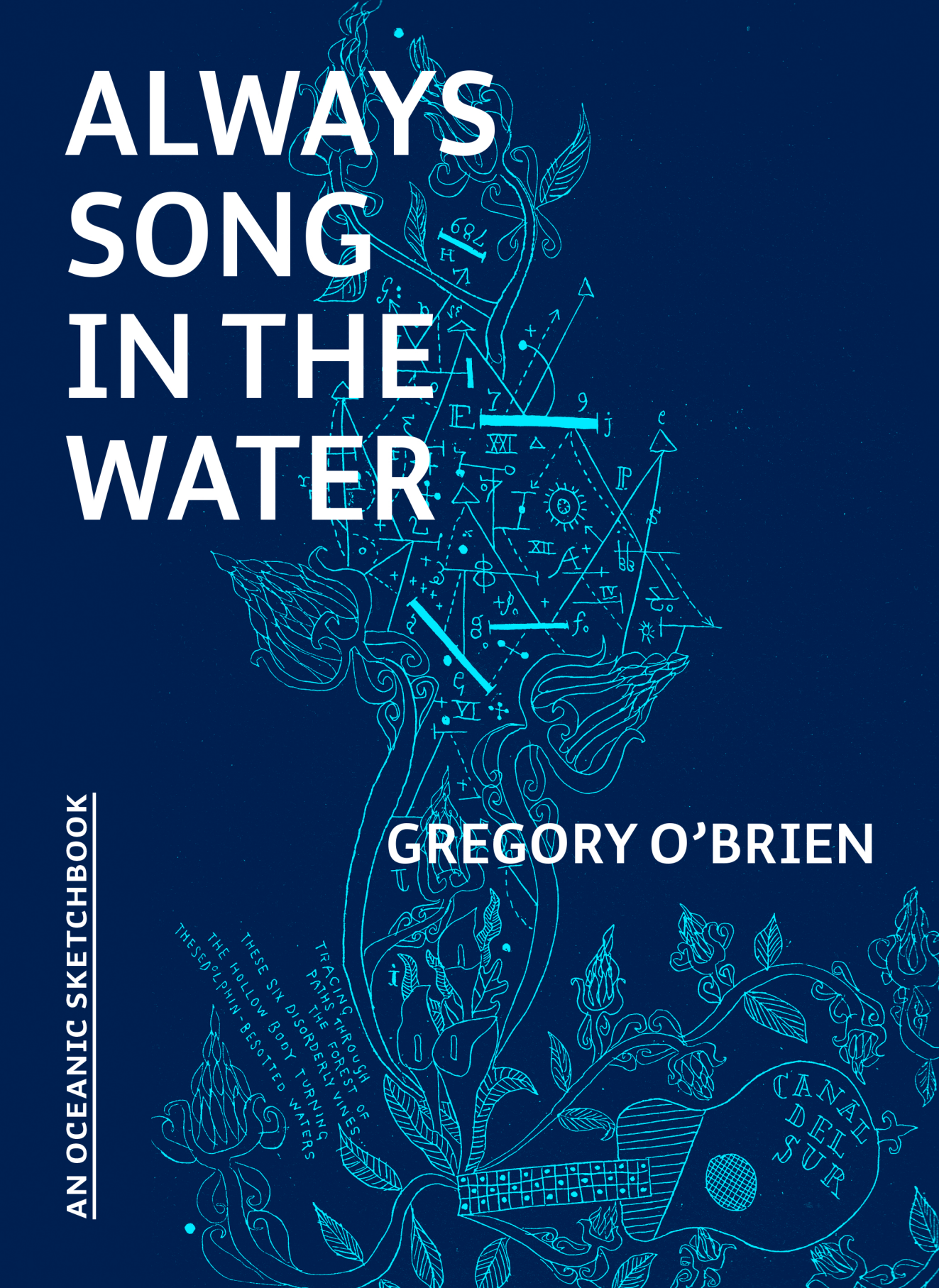


ALWAYS SONG IN THE WATER



GREGORY O'BRIEN

AN OCEANIC SKETCHBOOK

THESE SIX DISORDERLY VINES
THE HOLLOW BODY TURNING
THESE DOLPHIN-RESOTTED WATERS

TRACING THROUGH OF
THE FOREST VINES

CANAL
DEL
SUR



INTRODUCTION – THE DINGHY AND THE DRY LAND

I

I keep a dinghy on or beside the front lawn of my home in the ridgetop Wellington suburb of Hataitai. Each morning, when I pull back the blinds, the second or third thing my eyes fix upon is the upside-down dinghy. This is how it goes: The sun on its way up; the four cabbage trees; sometimes a tūi. And the dinghy. In that order. When pressed on the matter, I tell friends that in this age of global warming and rising seas, keeping a dinghy on a suburban lawn, some 50 metres above sea level and kilometres from the nearest coastline, isn't an outlandish idea. The aquatic world has always been volatile and unstable, and sea level has never been something you can count on – a fact underlined by the recent discovery of a whale skeleton at an archaeological site atop the Miramar Peninsula, only a few kilometres from where I live, and an impressive 45 metres above sea level.

In a 2015 lecture at Victoria University of Wellington, Bruce McFadgen posed the question: How could such a huge creature have ended up on this hilltop? The scientific consensus, he proffered, was that the humpback had been lifted from Cook Strait while still alive and posited atop the ridge by a massive tsunami. This would have occurred during a period of great seismic unrest. A few hundred years back, most likely. Other findings in the surrounding terrain support such a theory and time frame.

Each spring, laid flat beside our front path and blanketed in clematis, the dinghy erupts into vibrant, seasonal life. Warmed by the sun, the aluminium hull generates an agreeable micro-climate. Plants accumulate snugly around it. During winter, the

LEFT
The author's dinghy,
photograph by Bruce Foster

encompassing vegetation is reduced to an entanglement of vines, beneath which the boat glimmers, dimly – a scale model of an abandoned, overgrown Eastern European steelworks. Since my brother Brendan and I bought the dinghy in 1974, it has served a variety of functions, not all of them practical. It featured – alongside Motukorea (Brown's Island) and the artist Christo – in my short story, 'Belly of Jonah', which Robin Dudding published in his literary journal *Islands* in 1987. Two years previously, a drawing of it appeared on the cover of that same archipelagically titled journal. The vessel, reconfigured in wood, then resurfaced in a suite of illustrations by Noel McKenna for my poem 'Great Lake', published in a hand-printed edition from Niagara Galleries, Melbourne in 1999:

... Now he is rowing
a dinghy across this calmness which is the

exploding of calmness. Clinker-built fifty years
ago, the dinghy was restored by a local Māori
carver – his weekends devoted to boats – to

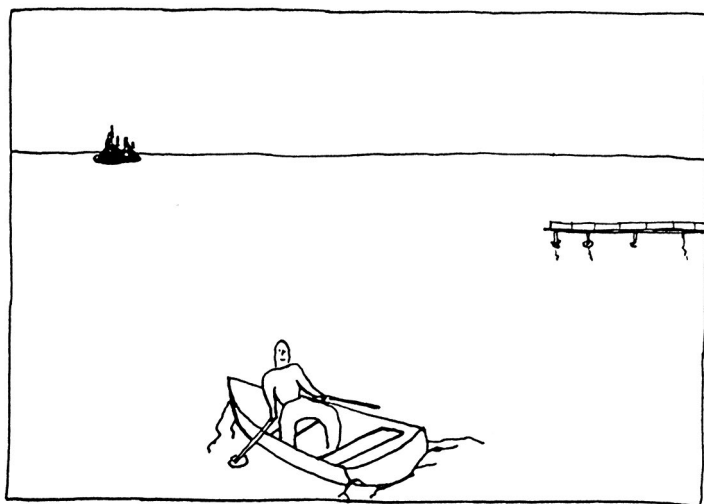
the smell of varnish and trees, its perfection ...

BELOW

Land of Seas: Anthology of New Zealand Poetry, translated into Russian, ed. Mark Williams and Evgeny Pavlov, cover design by Mark Harfield, with drawings by Gregory O'Brien

BELOW RIGHT

Noel McKenna, illustration for 'Great Lake', ink on paper, 1999





When I was asked, in 2005, to design a cover for an anthology of New Zealand poetry translated into Russian, *Land of Seas*, the dinghy with oars became the cover motif. More recently, while writing a monograph about the Sydney-based, New Zealand-born painter Euan Macleod, my self-image as both captain and crew of such a vessel gained another dimension. In the course of that project, I was co-opted as a model, shirtless and holding on to the transom, while Euan worked on *Rowing Rudd Island* (2009). The painting was not a radical departure for Euan, as a dinghy – almost identical to mine – had been a presence in his art for many years before I clambered aboard. In his mind, the dinghy had established itself as a symbol of his late father, an amateur boat-builder who constructed a considerable yacht in the living room of their family home, rendering the space unusable for much of the artist's childhood. Euan remembers standing, aged nine, on the front lawn one Saturday morning as the windows at the front of the family home were removed and his father's magnum opus was hauled forth into the outside world.

ABOVE
Euan Macleod, *Rowing Rudd Island*, 2009,
oil on canvas, private collection, Sydney

Whatever the personal resonances, the recurrent dinghy in Euan's paintings is alive with broader possibilities – as a symbol of both exile and homecoming, confinement and liberation, death and life; it can be the Ship of State or its close relation, the Ship of Fools. With its keel and skeletal framing, it is a human torso with spine and ribcage, or the interior of a church or a place of habitation. It could as easily be a lifeboat as it could be D. H. Lawrence's 'Ship of Death'.

When Euan's father died in 1994, he was laid out in the living room of the family home where the yacht-in-construction had once been installed. In subsequent paintings of his dead father in this darkened space, the coffin has become a sailing dinghy or punt for crossing the River Styx. 'Sleep! In your boat brought into the living-room. . . .' The lines of John Berryman (from *Love and Fame*) could never have found a more apposite illustration, '... supreme admirer of the ancient sea'.

In a similar fashion, shortly after his death in 2004, painter Pat Hanly lay in an open coffin in front of the altar at St Matthew-in-the-City, central Auckland. An avid sailor, Pat had a reputation for donning his life-jacket before leaving his suburban home in Mount Eden and wearing it as he drove across the city to the bay where his yacht was moored. In the coffin, the legendary life-jacket was fastened tightly around his chest, while a large protest banner from the 1980s – NO NUCLEAR SHIPS – hung above him.

The last email I received from historian Michael King, only a few days before his death in late March 2004, contained an attachment detailing a range of nautical vessels which were being deaccessioned from a local museum. Without offering any real explanation, Michael had it in his head that I might have some use for one of these. I wondered at the time – but even more so later – if this was a cryptic message. Was he suggesting some kind of voyage? A few years earlier, shortly before my family and I were to travel to Menton in France, Michael summoned Jen and me to the Deluxe Café in downtown Wellington, to show us his photographs of a clearly memorable sailing excursion on the Mediterranean during his time as Mansfield Fellow. Perhaps he was assuming I was a more

serious boatsman than is in fact the case – a conclusion he could, I guess, have drawn from the nautically inclined titles of many of my books: *Days Beside Water*, *Great Lake*, *A tarpaulin for Torpedo Sam*...

Michael's valedictory gesture came back to me some years later when I was driving up the Coromandel Peninsula and took a detour to his last place-of-residence, just north of Whangamata. A year or two earlier, Barry Brickell had designed a memorial to Michael, which was erected on a roadside reserve – on the left as you enter the estuary-side settlement of Ōpoutere. The dinghy-with-oars which graced the memorial immediately brought to mind Bill Manhire's elegy for Michael, 'Ōpoutere', which concludes with an image which is, at once, a fading-out and a blinding flash:

Here in the place of posts
I think I can just make him out

a man in a boat
rowing across the last half-mile of twilight

The plaque made me reconsider Michael's final communication and wonder why Brickell had chosen not to include a figure in the dinghy which was clearly at sea. Were we to presume that Michael had fallen overboard – or had he now become the vessel itself, the hull his ribcage and the fish his heart?

II

As well as being a steadying presence in my day-to-day life, the dinghy, with its metaphorical as well as metamorphic capabilities, has had its uses and applications. I think of all the aforementioned dinghies, coffins and other vessels as a flotilla falling in behind the dinghy on my front lawn. Requiring continual adjustment of balance and an occasional burst of strenuous rowing, the dinghy has become both my means-of-transport and vantage point – a suitably flexible and mobile platform, in my mind, from which to survey and consider the shape and nature of Aotearoa New Zealand at large.

Unexpectedly, early in 2011, a Royal New Zealand Navy offshore patrol vessel, of some 87 metres length, was added to the imagined flotilla following my dinghy. A few months earlier, I had been enlisted to help organise an artists' expedition to the rarely visited Kermadec Islands, just under 1000 kilometres north of mainland New Zealand. In environmental circles, the Kermadec region had been designated a 'Global Hope Spot' – by some accounts one of the twenty most significant left on the planet. The proposition – put to me by Bronwen Golder, the New Zealand representative of the Washington-based Pew Environment Group – was to hitch a ride north on a naval vessel and spend time on the seismically active, volcanic Raoul Island – New Zealand's only subtropical territory – before continuing on to the Kingdom of Tonga. The resulting art would be exhibited around New Zealand and beyond, raising awareness of oceanic conservation and the need for a sanctuary in the Kermadecs. Pew had already tabled a document proposing that an area of over 600,000 square kilometres be declared exempt from fishing, mining and other human industry. What they now needed was public support and political leverage.

Along with my co-travellers, I emerged from the experience and subsequent travels across the Pacific with a profoundly altered sense of both the shape of Aotearoa New Zealand and how it fitted in to the broader Oceanic reality. As is noted later in this book, the nation lost its outline, its fixity. The expedition also knocked Aotearoa New Zealand off its north-south axis, and threw all of us involved in the Kermadec project into a deep blue ocean-space, literally as well as metaphorically. Time and again we were made aware of the fact that only one seventeenth of the area that constitutes New Zealand territory is made up of dry land. This realisation was the beginning of a process of unmooring, of becoming immersed in what felt like an expanded and greatly empowered version of the country.

It was five days north of Devonport Naval Base that this redefinition of Aotearoa New Zealand really hit home: A voice, the captain's, came over the ship's intercom, announcing that we were

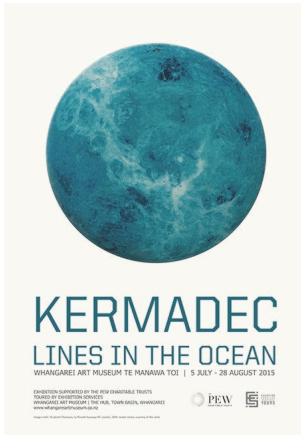


now leaving New Zealand territory. Therein lay a galvanising fact of the voyage: Everything we had encountered, up until that moment, had been within the bounds of 'New Zealand'. We were now 200 nautical miles north of Raoul Island and it was only a matter of hours before we entered Tongan territorial waters. Aotearoa New Zealand didn't end at Great Barrier Island or, for that matter, Cape Reinga. It followed us this far north.

Much of the writing in the second part of this book relates directly to the Raoul Island voyage and was composed in the years since then. After the voyage, my fellow travellers and I remained caught up in the great rhythm of the sea. Opportunities to visit other Pacific islands arose and, as I continued reading across the expansive South Pacific literature, I warmed to Ross Gibson's notion of an 'aqueous aesthetics', a realm that was defined by change and motion rather than finished things. This was far from a new idea – it goes at least as far back as Heraclitus

ABOVE

Outside the woolshed, Raoul Island, May 2011. From left: Fiona Hall, Bronwen Golder, Marcus Lush, Terry Beddek, Phil Dadson, Jason O'Hara (seated), Elizabeth Thomson, John Pule, Robin White, Bruce Foster, Gregory O'Brien and John Reynolds; photograph by Jason O'Hara



Exhibition poster of 'Kermadec: Lines in the Ocean', Whangarei Art Museum Te Manawa Toi, July–August 2015

– ‘everything is a stream’ – by way of the ‘oceanic feeling’ most famously expounded upon by Sigmund Freud (a notion which I first encountered, in the context of surfing, in Fiona Capp’s 2004 beach-odyssey *That Oceanic Feeling*). In the present context, these variable and vying notions of *oceanism* became an energising and vital proposition. At the very heart of the peregrinations that followed was Tongan/Fijian writer Epeli Hau’ofa’s notion of ‘the ocean in us’. His thought and writings became an integral part of our subsequent journeys, digressions and deliberations. On numerous occasions as we voyaged north in 2011, John Pule and I felt that Epeli, whom we had both met back in the 1980s, was with us on the offshore patrol vessel.

Kermadec-inspired work by all nine artists involved in the project continued to be made during the years after the Raoul Island expedition. As well as the large-scale exhibition, ‘Kermadec – Nine Artists in the South Pacific’, which opened at Tauranga Art Gallery in November 2011 then travelled to the New Zealand Maritime Museum in Auckland and City Gallery Wellington, a smaller iteration of the ‘Kermadec’ exhibition toured to a further 14 venues nationally, from Invercargill to Whangarei. Between 2012 and 2015, versions of the exhibition were shown at the New Zealand High Commission in Nuku’alofa, in a school hall at Hanga Roa on Rapa Nui (Easter Island), at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago de Chile, and at the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Nouméa. Further exhibitions were presented at the National Library’s Auckland premises, Torpedo Bay Navy Museum and, in December 2017, at the Ngāti Kuri cultural centre, Awanui, Northland.

Given the oceanic nature of this post-Kermadec, expanded notion of Aotearoa New Zealand, the dinghy on my property strikes me as far more attuned to its wider environment than at odds with it. It stands as a useful symbol or metaphor, for the most part high and dry, yet still intrinsically a part of the planetary water cycle – also known as the hydrosphere – which extends from ocean floor to the upper atmosphere, spanning a vertical distance of up to around 25 kilometres.

Alongside various other means of public and private transport, the dinghy drifts in and around the territory covered in this book – a symbol of discovery and arrival, on one hand, and of escape or rescue, on the other. As well as being on water or laid, mollusc-like, on dry land, I think of the amphibious, multi-purpose vessel as also being carried water-wards on my back (as was often the case in my youth) or strapped to the roof-racks of a car and clocking up land miles.

The first section of this book, ‘Coasting’, concerns a road journey, hugging as closely as possible the coastline and waterways of Northland. With the Honda Civic at the heart of Robert Sullivan’s 1999 sequence *Star Waka* as a notable precedent and working model, the car in this instance also takes on the function – imaginative as well as practical – of the waka. It, too, becomes a vehicle for discovery – another dinghy in my ever-expanding flotilla. In the second part of this book the aquaticism becomes more assertive and immersive – there is much Pacific island-hopping, and numerous modes of ocean transportation engaged; there is also a good amount of on-deck pacing, descending rope ladders, some diving and swimming; there is a deep sea submersion in waters above the Kermadec Trench and, courtesy of Euan Macleod’s art, an interlude of striding across the ocean floor. In the course of all this, the dinghy also performs another manoeuvre, metamorphosing into the desk at which I sit writing this. And the writerly task at hand becomes the paradoxical endeavour that Derek Walcott elaborated upon in his oceanic epic *Omeros*, one hand on the oar, the other on the writing implement:

... there are two journeys
in every odyssey, one on worried water,
the other crouched and motionless, without noise.

For both, the ‘I’ is a mast, a desk is a raft
for one, foaming with paper, and dipping the beak
of a pen in its foam ...



Robin White, *Braveheart*, 2011, etching