

## **Haiku on Boulders — Katikati Pathway**

by Riemke Ensing

When New Zealand's economic recession hit historically prosperous Katikati in the 1990s, the heartland town turned to conjoined poetry, art and the Uretara River to entice travelers.

Led by localite Catherine Mair, founding editor of SPIN, the haiku-focused literary magazine, a gathering of poets hatched the concept of a "Haiku Pathway" along the banks of the river. The project won enthusiastic support from architect Ted Harris, chairman of the Heart of Katikati Project committee, and the District Council. Much labor, dedication, perseverance, intensive fund-raising and a grant from Creative New Zealand marked the first phase of a path meandering past 12 haiku-inscribed boulders and across a captivating footbridge was dedicated at a dawn ceremony in January 2000. A year ago June, with contributing poets from England and Australia present, the second phase was opened, extending the pathway by another 12 haiku boulders.

Originally an integral part of Japanese culture, haiku has captured the imagination of poets everywhere and is practiced extensively in New Zealand. Competitions run by the New Zealand Poetry Society frequently attract up to 900 entries. For the celebratory "Have a Go Haiku" contest in Katikati, 370 were submitted by the local population and judged by writer/editor Bernard Gadd, whose own creation stands judiciously under and old oak planted by Catherine Mair's grandmother:

Under a shooting star  
click of acorn fall

It is fascinating to consider that this ancient, highly stylized, terse form of poetry, consisting in the original Japanese of three lines making up 17 syllables, but gradually modified to suit the English language and all its differences, should find itself so wholeheartedly embraced in a small New Zealand town. In fact, the very concept of a "pathway," with its allusions to the mystical and spiritual, might seem almost anathema to what one would expect in a practical, hard-working, even conservative environment.

Both ancient and recent past were tapped along the roadside near close-by Featherstone, with a haiku by the landmark 17th century poet Basho, placed to commemorate the death of Japanese prisoners of war held captive there in a detention camp.

Behold the summer grass —  
All that remains of  
the dreams of warriors

Although Basho's work is not represented on any of the 24 stones along the pathway in Katikati, Takabe Ayatari and Yosa Buson, both of the 18th century, have poems that are reflective of the local scene. Full of allusions and double meanings, local and international haiku chosen by Catherine Mair to represent the variety and scope of the surrounding landscape invite the viewer/reader to add his or her own associations and imagery. In a sense, as you take in the poem and the view, you become a co-creator of the expanse and pleasure before you.

A slender, elegant footbridge, with its cut-out *pukeko* footprints as if Matisse had just walked past, takes on a different aspect through Takebe Ayatari's haiku, strategically placed at the beginning, where the structure joins the town's new "Highfield" development.

Elsewhere, a complicated attempt to lever an inscribed stone into the river added poignancy to its ancient haiku:

In the evening  
the bridge becomes dangerous —  
tonight's moon

More than a mere observation of nature or a statement of feeling, here is an implied identity between two seemingly distinct components, requiring an intellectual as well as an emotional response and heightening physical awareness on the part of the reader/observer.

Usually a path has a destination. One thinks of pilgrims on their way from London to Canterbury. In Katikati, the Haiku Pathway is not a route from here to there, although it may eventually function as such. Presently, for the sake of convenience to visitors, a suggested starting

point is indicated just back of the Information Centre, where a scroll containing details of the path and its history can be obtained. However, there is no marked end, or beginning. Rather there is the experience not of purpose but of enjoyment, the chance to wander, to stop and gaze and contemplate the view both literally and by reading the boulders patiently chiselled by carver Brian Beamsley, who took up to half an hour for each king-size letter, working from the edges toward the center.

The andesite boulders, roughly six tons each, were quarried from deep in the Kaimai Ranges. Selecting, lifting, transporting and placing them was a mammoth operation. Once positioned, they seem to have shaped into their new resting places, and the poems selected for each site have become an integral part of the boulders' being.

On one bend of the path, for instance, as you cross an unobtrusive wooden plank bridge your eye is arrested by a boulder more than three-quarters submerged in a swampy area. Its size, its shape, its placement capture entirely William J. Higginson's words carved in the stone:

Holding the water  
held by it —  
the dark mud

In that moment of reading you are at one with the world of water and stone, refuge, strength and depth — the yin and yang of nature that is so much part of the philosophy inherent in the verse. In the same way, Jim Kacian's stone, out in the open, flat expanse facing the Kaimais, whose presence on the horizon is constantly felt on the pathway, reflects admirably on

clouds seen  
through clouds  
seen through

Then there's Cyril Child's powerfully concise haiku:

Summer dusk — the silence

It stands just to the back of a Maori carving of tribal ancestors.

In the splendidly planted and distance-stretching natural world that surrounds and encompasses the park one is constantly reminded, in effect, of the songs of praise in the Psalms. It is ironic that here a discordant note should come from the local Ministers' Association. They cited a lack of "Christian messages" on the boulders and asked to be allowed to add their own inscriptions. Reading the haiku, however, and being directed to recognize the larger world beyond, it is hard to imagine a clearer message than the ones selected here from a huge range of available poems culled from anthologies and literary magazines published worldwide.

Catherine Mair has persevered these last years. For awhile, local vandals uprooted newly planted trees and attempted to burn down new seats placed strategically to take the view.

One at each end  
of the park bench  
a man a woman

Mair's own haiku carries a full measure of connotations and nuances:

shadows  
on the river  
darker than the birds

Despite the occasional shadows which accompanied the construction of this visionary project, the haiku pathway, just as the primeval boulders that mark its course, shines like an enduring symbol of longevity. Each stone, each poem, through constant interaction with the environment, the passing movements of light and shade, captures a sense of the essence of wholeness and the infinite. These truly are rocks of ages.

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