

The Disruptive *Witness*: A Dunedin Boilermaker and the Manufacture of Cultural Capital

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This article originates in a project indexing literature published in the *Otago Witness* newspaper from 1900-1932. A popular, weekly, illustrated newspaper published in Dunedin from 1851-1932, the *Otago Witness* describes itself in a jubilee publication as “a weekly budget of news for backblocks people.”¹ It began as an overtly political and moralistic publication, but these tendencies soon calmed to the point where the *Papers Past* website describes the latter years of the *Otago Witness* as “inoffensive” and considers that “the *Witness* was probably the most conservative of the pictorial weeklies.”²

My methodology derives from Ross Harvey’s writing on newspaper publication in *Book and Print in NZ: A Guide to Print Culture in Aotearoa*, where he notes that the illustrated weeklies deserve further research, particularly into their contents “or into their influence, for example as a factor promoting social cohesion.”³ By considering the role of the *Otago Witness* as a factor in the literary sociology of the early-twentieth-century Dunedin (and beyond), I shall examine how the paper’s policy of receptiveness to reader submissions functioned to disrupt hegemonies of class and taste.

Sociologist and cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu notes that “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social difference.”⁴ He also allows, however, that it is possible to transgress these boundaries of social difference by a process of “cultural consecration” which “confer[s] on the objects, persons and situations it touches, a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation.”⁵ My subject — John MacLennan, a Dunedin-born boilermaker and a volunteer writer on the *Otago Witness* newspaper at the turn of the twentieth century — is an exemplar of Bourdieu’s process of “cultural consecration,” for what interests me is the manner in which the newspaper both accommodated and consecrated him, demonstrating a radical tendency that contrasts with the commonly held perception that it was merely an organ to disseminate the views of the Presbyterian and Anglican conservative colonial hegemony.

On 25 January 1911, the *Otago Witness* carried the death notice for one John MacLennan, late of 26 Wilkie Road, Dunedin;⁶ an address in the middle of the

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industrial flatlands of South Dunedin which spread outward from the nucleus of the Hillside Railway Workshop. MacLennan, known to readers and indexers of the *Otago Witness* as J. M., was an industrious contributor of poems and short stories whose work was first published in the newspaper between 1879 and 1884. Precisely when he began to contribute to the paper is uncertain, as the initials J. M. were distressingly common among contributors to the newspaper in the Presbyterian settlement. Fortunately for the indexer, the later addition of addresses aids identification. He was most active while William Fenwick was editor of the *Otago Witness* (1879-1906), publishing more than three hundred pieces of verse and short stories in the newspaper in addition to a volume of poetry, *Neptune's Toll and Other Verses*.⁷ Although other figures within the newspaper community published as much, MacLennan is remarkable for spending his working life as a boilermaker, toiling on large-scale engineering works such as the Waipori dam⁸ and in the railway workshops at Addington⁹ and Hillside Road. The notice records that he died on 22 January, leaving a wife named Jemima and three young sons. While this notice is in itself unremarkable, although to have lived only to forty-seven and to leave a young family will always be a tragic event, subsequent issues of the *Otago Witness* reveal that MacLennan's literary output was larger than I had realised because further obituaries unveiled a network of pseudonyms which he used, and a list of other outlets in New Zealand and Britain in which he published.¹⁰

In the same issue of the *Witness*, Dot's Little Folks page featured an obituary mourning one of the best and most prolific of the regular adult contributors to the children's page, as well as one of its patrons, who wrote under the nom de plume "Blondel." His widow is a Mrs MacLennan and the Dot's Little Folks members extend sympathies to her and their three boys, a cross-reference establishing that John MacLennan was indeed "Blondel." A further obituary in Emmeline's Cosy Corner Club again connects John MacLennan with "Blondel" and the Dot's Little Folks while also revealing that he was known to the Cosy Corner Club members as "Boy Friend," and his wife as "Girl Friend." Once the obituaries connected MacLennan with "Blondel" and "Boy Friend," I could add another sixty literary contributions to MacLennan's already impressive listing (338 items) under the J.M. pseudonym.

The *Otago Witness* newspaper facilitated the process whereby a boilermaker from South Dunedin became a valorised literary luminary. Particular columns within the *Otago Witness* encouraged readers to be interactive participants so that the newspaper itself acted as a legitimating channel through which the mostly pseudonymous participants could add to their cultural capital. Thus, publication in the column performed the "cultural consecration" of which Bourdieu writes. Given

the extent to which Dunedin functions even today as a village — and some would apply that comment to New Zealand more generally — the identity of those behind the pseudonyms was likely to have been an open secret, ensuring that their “cultural capital” was a matter of unofficial public record. As particular personalities emerged from the generality of submissions, establishing themselves as cultural authorities within the particular contexts of the columns, the newspaper assisted in disrupting or disregarding social and cultural hegemonies of class and taste.

Two columns particularly relate to John MacLennan. The first is the Cosy Corner Club — a sentimental name so capable of constructing an image of an overstuffed red-plush late-Victorian parlour it is small wonder it has been disdained by literary historians and bibliographers — which was part of the Ladies’ Page. Cosy Corner Club members wrote in to a pseudonymous newspaper staffer who set a topic for the letters. These topics were of the “hoary old chestnut” variety such as “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” or “Is it ever possible to have one’s cake and eat it too?” The correspondents were fond of including verse extracts to illustrate their points; some would write in with their own verse or occasionally, short stories. Participants referred to one another by pseudonym although the letters would often report gatherings of Cosy Corner Club members in different parts of the country, suggesting that many of the pseudonyms were quite open secrets.

One of the early journalists presiding over the Cosy Corner Club was “Alice,” a pseudonym of Louisa Alice Baker (1856–1926). Perhaps best known as “Alien,” the pseudonym under which she wrote her sixteen novels and a volume of short stories,¹¹ she certainly employed the forum of Alice’s Cosy Corner Club to establish her cultural capital and to transmit her cultural authority, although her courage in disrupting her domestic life and leaving her husband and Christchurch to move to an independent life in Dunedin testify to her unconventionality. Her column included a substantial component of her own work, not only answers to correspondents’ letters, but a letter of her own together with her own literary endeavours: predominantly poems and serials. The success of her approach may be gauged by the approving responses of her audience, including Jane Mander and the Canterbury Women’s Institute.¹²

Terry Sturm, writing on Popular Culture in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, notes that the genesis of many literary careers of well-regarded popular authors such as Baker, Essie Summers, Grace Phipps, and Edith Lyttleton (G.B. Lancaster) lay in weekly newspapers.¹³ One would expect, as in Baker’s case, that a named column would legitimate its author, but my research also suggests that significant participants in the communities that developed around these columns

were also able to establish cultural authority. John MacLennan is a case in point.

The similarly constructed pseudonyms of MacLennan "Boy Friend" and his wife (Jemima Janet Bell, 1871–1940)¹⁴ as "Girl Friend," suggest corresponding with the Cosy Corner Club was an activity they shared and are likely to have begun around the time of their courtship and marriage (30 December 1897). The comments of MacLennan's fellow correspondents in the Cosy Corner Club testify to his popularity and to his status as an arbiter of culture, a status for which his profession and social origins (his father was a baker, probably an assisted immigrant)¹⁵ would not have suggested he was destined. In fact, MacLennan's writing resulted in the double obituaries¹⁶ and later, Samuel August reconsidering MacLennan's published poetry¹⁷ in a nationally circulated newspaper. Such recognition suggests his work for the *Otago Witness* disrupted received expectations about societal origins and educational attainment, and promoted him to national prominence in the literary world where aesthetic judgements tended to be linked to an elite social class.

MacLennan was esteemed then, among his contemporaries, but what makes him most worthy of scrutiny in terms of hegemonic disruption is his influence over the children's pages in the *Otago Witness*, the Dot's Little Folks pages, which are better known than the Cosy Corner Club column, largely due to the nostalgic encomium given them by Janet Frame in the first of her autobiographical volumes, *To the Is-Land*. Frame, who was known to the Dot's Little Folks as "Amber Butterfly," published her juvenilia there after the *Otago Witness* was incorporated with the *Otago Daily Times* in 1932.¹⁸ From 1905 until 1910, when MacLennan was writing as "Blondel" and based chiefly in Invercargill,¹⁹ he played a leadership role in the children's pages, assisting the incumbent "Dot," at that time likely to have been either Miss Linda Fenwick or Miss Fraser.²⁰ He assisted with correspondence, and organising meetings with eager Dot's Little Folks members visiting Dunedin and Invercargill, the metropolitan centers where the *Otago Witness* influence was strongest and where libraries and clubrooms were available for Dot's Little Folks' Literary and Debating Club meetings. He also provided advice to writers and published his own stories and poems for children. It is difficult to assess accurately the numbers of Little Folk. Children could enter the club as soon as they were old enough to pen their own letter of application and over the years the leavers' age increased gradually from fifteen to twenty-one where, in 1907, it was fixed.²¹ From 1899–1906, *Otago Witness* records show four thousand Little Folk had sent in money to purchase the official badge (that is, 571.4 members a year over seven years were prepared to part with money; membership of the club itself was free apart from postage expenses). By the time of the 50th Jubilee of the Dot's Little Folks page in 1936, J. T. Paul estimated there had been ten

thousand active members and an unknown number of passive members and interested bystanders.²² Such figures constitute a wide sphere of influence by any measure.

What proves MacLennan's success in encouraging a generation of writers is how his former charges esteem him in the 1938 *Dot's Little Folks* 50th Jubilee publication. Excepting William Fenwick, the founding *Dot*, most space is given to MacLennan, or "Blondel."²³ Fond remembrances of his work with the *Dot's Little Folks*, particularly from "Zealia," formerly of Invercargill — its tone conveying affectionate and respectful remembrance, twenty-five years after MacLennan's death — is typical of the "Blondel" tributes in its sentiments. It is also typical in conveying a sense that the *Dot's Little Folks* enterprise contributed in a special way to the lives of its members, encouraging them to aspire beyond the quotidian. These aspirations "Blondel" helped foster:

The Invercargill[!] Club owed much to its beloved patron Blondel who, though never much in evidence at Club meetings, was always behind the scenes to help and encourage with his kindly advice and to give of his great experience as writer and poet. He too has passed on, but before he died he wrote a poem for the Little Folk, and he called it, "Hitch Your Wagon to a Star." I could not help thinking when I entered the hall at the banquet last year that we Old Writers had indeed hitched our wagon to a star. My message to the young folk is in Blondel's words:

"Strive for something good and great;
Even very little folk may be harbingers of fate,
And do something really great—
Hitch your wagon to a star."²⁴

However allergic we may be to the sentimental tone of late-Victorian verse and such irregular prosody, working-class MacLennan has clearly repaid the patronage he received from other literary figures on the *Witness*, such as Jessie MacKay,²⁵ William Fenwick,²⁶ and Louisa Baker. In his turn he guided another generation of writers who might disrupt social and cultural hegemonies.

One of the many functions of a newspaper is guiding cultural consumption which, Bourdieu states, is predisposed to both legitimate and transgress the boundaries of social difference. As my research continues into the literature published in the *Otago Witness*, I predict that similar narratives will emerge in which the public forums of the paper perform the function of cultural consecration, allowing social differences to be transgressed, as in the case of John MacLennan. The respect accorded MacLennan in a nationally circulated newspaper suggests that, through

his work for the *Otago Witness*, he disrupted received expectations about a man of his working class origins and probable educational attainment. MacLennan's cultural consecration also reinforces the importance of the role of weekly newspapers functioning, as predicted by Ross Harvey, as a means of creating social cohesion at a time when mass and elite literary sensibilities in New Zealand were not as differentiated as they would become from the 1930s.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Old Writers' Association, *Dot's Little Folks Jubilee Re-union 1886-1936 Souvenir Booklet* (Dunedin: Otago Daily Times, 1938), 15.
- ² National Library of New Zealand, Te Puna Maatauranga o Aotearoa <paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/data/OW/description.html> 14/1/05.
- ³ Penny Griffiths, Ross Harvey, Keith Maslen eds. *Book and Print in NZ: A Guide to Print Culture in Aotearoa* (Wellington, Victoria UP, 1997), 130.
- ⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984), 7.
- ⁵ Bourdieu, 6.
- ⁶ *Otago Witness*, (25 January 1911), 51.
- ⁷ John MacLennan, *Neptune's Toll and Other Verses* (Whitcombe and Tombs, 1907).
- ⁸ MacLennan's book of verse, *Neptune's Toll* has a poem "The Song of Waipori" (pp.45-47). One of MacLennan's pseudonyms was "J.M., Waipori."
- ⁹ *Neptune's Toll* contains "An Anvil Song: Concerning the Steam Hammer in the Addington Works," 70-72. Another of MacLennan's pseudonyms was "J.M., Addington."
- ¹⁰ *The Huia*, Auckland; *The Pioneer*, Timaru; *The Evening Star*, *Weekly Budget*, Dunedin; *Hope*, Invercargill; *The M.Y.B.W.C. Journal*; *The Ross-shire Journal*, Scotland.
- ¹¹ George Griffiths, *Southern Writers in Disguise: a Miscellany of Journalistic and Literary Pseudonyms with Related Information and Trivia*, (Dunedin: Otago Heritage Books, 1998), 11.
- ¹² Janet McCallum, "Baker, Louisa Alice 1856-1926," *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 16 December 2003. 13 December 2004.
- ¹³ Terry Sturm, ed. *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, 2/c (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1998), 578.
- ¹⁴ *New Zealand Registrar General's Marriage Index*. 1897: John MACLENNAN = Jemima Janet BELL, 4397.
- ¹⁵ H. Spooner, "Otago Settlers' Museum Old Card File/MacLennan." Otago Settlers' Museum Archive.
- ¹⁶ *Otago Witness*, (1 February 1911), 84 and (8 February 1911), 83.
- ¹⁷ *Otago Witness*, (15 February 1911), 83-84.

¹⁸ George Griffiths, *Southern Writers in Disguise: a Miscellany of Journalistic and Literary Pseudonyms with Related Information and Trivia*, (Dunedin: Otago Heritage Books, 1998), 13-14.

¹⁹ Old Writers' Association, *Dot's Little Folks Jubilee Re-union 1886-1936 Souvenir Booklet*. (Dunedin: Otago Daily Times, 1938), 19.

²⁰ Old Writers' Association, 17.

²¹ Old Writers' Association, 17.

²² Old Writers' Association, 18.

²³ Old Writers' Association, 19, 22, 31, 32, 33, 34-36.

²⁴ Old Writers' Association, 35.

²⁵ MacLennan's book of verse *Neptune's Toll* includes a preface by Jessie MacKay dated Christchurch, 9 November, 1907. She writes, "there are twilight times when the great lights of song have left us, but these times are warmed by torches of pure and gentle fancy passed on by earnest hands of those who love Poetry and live their lives gladly as their true children." The volume also contains a poem entitled "Jessie" (p.29) written while MacKay was visiting Scotland and Ireland.

²⁶ *Neptune's Toll* is dedicated to William Fenwick: "He took his place so quietly, laboured so zealously, so nobly, so unselfishly, that few knew how great and good he was until he was called away."