

Slipping back into paradise

Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and his family moved to New Zealand from America in 2001. They built a waterfront house at Karaka Bay in Auckland, the children settled into local schools (and joined the NZAGC), and Masson – an author, former Freudian scholar and a vegan – continued to write books about animals and their emotional lives. But earlier this year the New Zealand dream turned sour and the Massons returned to Berkley in California. Five months later, they were back, and hoping this time to stay put. In this article for *Tall Poppies*, Jeffrey Masson explains why New Zealand finally won out over the United States.



I came to New Zealand some eight years ago, enchanted with the setting, the people, the climate and the egalitarian spirit. I wrote a book called *Slipping into Paradise: Why I live in New Zealand*. And then, to my shame, in March of this year I decided to return to the United States.

The reasons were complex, but they mostly involved my feeling that I was simply unable to establish a community of friends with like interests, even though I had tried to do so for many years. By like interests I mean mostly intellectual interests. I enjoyed debate and exchanging ideas on topics on which I was no expert, but which intrigued me (the list would be long, but included such ideas as animal happiness; animal emotions; the problems with psychiatry as a discipline; the history of fascism and especially the Second World War; fraudulent gurus; the belief in UFOs as an example of false belief; the history of feminism; the history of the discovery of physical child abuse, and also sexual child abuse; the faults inherent in therapy; false memoirs; real memoirs; the history of memory; the history of dream interpretation; sleep research; wild children such as Kaspar Hauser in Germany, Viktor of Aveyron in France, or Amala and Kamala in India; veganism; the history of vegetarianism; and on and on).

I had written on many of these topics and when I was asked to speak about them publically in New Zealand, at first I did so enthusiastically. But to my surprise, and chagrin, I did not receive the kind of response I had hoped for. By and large my audiences were silent when I asked for discussion or questions. Something which I could not put my finger on prevented them from engaging in a dialogue with me, in either a positive or a negative sense. This was my experience over and over. It was certainly not a question of intelligence, but rather, perhaps, one of tradition. Often I would be

told it was simply not done to engage an author in debate either by agreeing or disagreeing. It was seen as 'skiting'. Indeed, even to give a talk was considered, by some at least, as a form of showing off (there is, of course, as with most of the criticisms I have received in New Zealand, some truth to this; most authors are, by virtue of their profession, narcissists of some kind or other). People here were so imbued with the ideals of egalitarianism (all of which, in theory, I share) that they did not look kindly on somebody putting on airs by discussing topics of the kind I have enumerated. People read about them and thought about them, but such topics were not, by and large, discussed publically in the same way they are in England or America. At least, that was my experience.

I found it so disheartening that in the end I decided I could not live without some public engagement of this kind, and that since I seemed unable to generate it here in New Zealand, I would have to return to my beloved Berkeley, where such discussions were everyday experiences.

But I discovered, upon my return to California, that while this was true, it was not necessarily as important as I had thought. This came as a great surprise to me! I found that while my main desire was fulfilled – to find lively conversations on the topics that most interested me – and while the level of political analysis was extremely high (I was gratified to see how easily, and almost constantly, Americans – at least the ones I know in Berkeley and San Francisco – criticise their country and encourage others, even outsiders, to do the same), I had to acknowledge the fact that there was so much to be criticised in America – far more than in New Zealand. When I suddenly realised this fact, I was at first shocked. But it was indisputable, so much so that almost everyone I met asked me in wonderment: How could you leave New Zealand to come *here*?

New Zealand was not at war with any country, let alone three (and counting). New Zealand did not have a powerful, rabid, right-wing conservative party so unhinged they would believe anything at all about one of the best presidents America has ever had, including the false claim that he was not born in America, hated all white people, could hardly wait to institute death panels to kill elderly Americans who were unproductive, and was in fact a socialist, or worse, a communist, or worse, a Nazi, or worse, the very incarnation of Hitler. New Zealand did not deny a quarter of its citizens health care. New Zealand did not turn its back on its native people (I am not saying that the Maori are entirely on a par in New Zealand, but compared to just about any other country I know with a native population – Australia, Canada and the US – New Zealand has done remarkably well). You do not find thousands of homeless people roaming the streets of Auckland and Wellington as you do in San Francisco. To eat at a famous restaurant in Berkeley I had to literally step over the body of a woman lying prone on the ground with a sign saying she was homeless and hungry. I certainly believed her. How do you enjoy your gourmet food after having just witnessed a type of hunger and deprivation that we normally associate with war? How did my companions cope? Well, routine brings a deadening of the senses. It is imperative, otherwise one cannot survive – there. But I could survive elsewhere. New Zealand, for example, where I was and remain a citizen. Home beckoned.

How does any of this relate to 'giftedness'? It doesn't, really. I don't think of my intellectual curiosity as a form of giftedness, though it is a gift and a precious one to me. I am not sure how I developed it,

but I do have some ideas about why it is often absent here in New Zealand. I think there is an element of shame in the culture of New Zealand. That is, people are afraid, very afraid, of appearing to be a fool, of appearing ignorant, or of appearing arrogant, or even of displaying gifts (such as intellectual curiosity, language ability, the desire to debate, to question, to challenge). They will do anything to avoid this and one way to do so is to remain silent about the very matters they might actually be interested in. So I have remarked upon the fact that when I am invited out, the discussion, especially among males, is about boats, or cars, or property, or sports or the meat on the barbecue. I do not think, actually, that the people who have these conversations are all that interested in these topics. But they are *safe* topics, topics that can be talked about without appearing to be odd, different, weird and queer. Is this the legacy of a small, village-like country? I am not sure, but I know that it is not essential to the Kiwi character. It is like a carapace, a kind of emotional armour, to protect the more sensitive, softer inside.

I have a friend in California who tells me, ruefully, despondently, about the mess he has made of his marriage. He knows why. He knows he is to blame. He can talk about it endlessly. And I find it endlessly fascinating. I cannot imagine having the same conversation here. It would be considered shameful.

Is this culture of silence changing? I think it is. I meet young people all the time now who are different, or who will certainly be different when they are a bit older. I also meet people who are already very different, and at least some of them have chosen to leave New Zealand for precisely the same reasons I did when we moved to California earlier this year. Some, like me, will return. Others will probably stay away for some years because they are still too young not to be enchanted with the greater freedom of places like America, Australia and England. Their gifts will be acknowledged there, for certain. Here, were they to remain, I am not so certain their gifts would be recognised in quite the same way. There they are celebrated – perhaps even a bit too much. Here they are acknowledged, if at all, with the barest of glances. ‘Good on you’ is not enough encouragement for those who have the temerity, or the courage, to strike out on their own, where others of their countrymen, more timid or more attuned to their own society, have feared to tread.

I have returned, so obviously I am an optimist. But I am also 68. My children are only 7 and 13. They are both, in their way, gifted (who, in his or her way, is not, I would ask – heresy, I know, for this magazine!), and I do worry that they may be stifled here whereas they would be encouraged in America. It is the price that the four of us (my wife, a paediatrician who treats children on the autistic spectrum with diet and supplements, is the most gifted of us all) pay for living in a peaceful country, in a country that respects international law, that cares about the life of its poorest citizens and that is, as I thought eight years ago and still do on a daily basis, unimaginably beautiful.