

“Little Old New Zealand”

“What brings you to little old New Zealand?” “What do you think of New Zealand?” were the questions constantly asked when I first moved to New Zealand. Why these questions? Why are New Zealanders so anxious about their image abroad and what visitors to their country think of them? Why this insecurity? But this year, when 3 English tourists visited us, I found myself asking the same questions in the same hesitant tone. (1)

New Zealanders have feelings of anxiety about their place in the world. This has been called the ‘Cultural cringe’: the belief, according to Australian sociologists Head and Walter that one’s own country ‘occupies a subordinate cultural place and intellectual standards are set and innovations occur elsewhere’ (2). This is a typical feature of colonised nations such as Australia and NZ and leads inhabitants of those countries to devalue their own country. Our nation, New Zealand, is suffering from cultural cringe

This manifests itself in 3 ways: the need for reassurance (as we have seen), constant self-criticism or self-deprecation and a defensive reaction to anyone who criticises our country or culture. One example of our critical attitude to ourselves is attitude to our accent. The New Zealand accent has been subject to criticism ever since it emerged. A visitor in 1934 said the New Zealand Accent sounds like “the baaing of sheep.” Dame Ngaio Marsh called it “the ugliest accent in the world” and others blamed nasal infections, the fear of flies entering the mouth, or the result of a perpetual smile or ill-fitting false teeth! Recent examples of our defensive attitude have been the national hysteria over Duncan Fallowell’s negative comments in his book, ‘Going as Fas as I can’ and the outrage at the French rugby player, Mathieu Bastareaud, who claimed to have been beaten up by five youths after the game, when it was discovered he was lying and had actually injured himself being drunk and falling over (3).

But isn’t it time we left the cultural cringe behind and started to take pride in ourselves as a nation? Our colonial past and pioneer culture have left us another very different legacy: a ‘can-do’ attitude of resourcefulness as expressed in our ‘Number 8 wire’ attitude to life (4)- spreadable butter, jogging, tranquiliser guns, egg beaters and jetboats, all invented in New Zealand. We are an innovative nation of “firsts.” Not only is New Zealand the home of Sir Ed the first man to reach the summit of Mount Everest and Ernest Rutherford who first split the atom, our country was the first in the world to give women the vote! New Zealand’s creativity has been acclaimed world-wide. We have a Nobel prize winning novelist, Janet Frame and Lloyd Jones was recently shortlisted for the Booker prize with his novel Mr Pip. The film Whale Rider earned prizes at festivals from Sundance to Toronto; Lord of the Rings showed not the beauty of our country to the rest of the world but Weta’s incredible film technology. Split Enz an internationally famous band and Flight of the Conchords became a cult programme in the US.

With our amazing history and achievements, it’s no wonder we have the saying “If anybody can, a kiwi can.”(5).

We may be a small country, but we continue to punch above our weight! We need to recognise and acknowledge this! Cultural cringe needs become a thing of the past! With all these amazing attributes, imagine what New Zealand could accomplish if we truly believed in our own country.

