



# The LAND NEAR Oz

『 TWO GAY YANKEES  
MOVE TO NEW ZEALAND 』

Aaron Allbright

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## THE LAND NEAR OZ - Chapter 1

### A BIG WELCOME FOR NEW ZEALAND'S NEWEST IMMIGRANTS

It's our first day in New Zealand as permanent residents, our first day as New Zealand's newest immigrants from the good ole USA. Our first day and our big welcome.

Just not the one we expected.

It's June 4 and we're staying in the holiday apartment of our solicitor's in-laws, down on the waterfront at Viaduct Harbour (solicitor means "lawyer" Down Under). This came about because of our phone conversation with him two weeks earlier—both Beau and I were on the line with him.

"We land in Auckland at six, the morning of the fourth." "Of June? This is terrible!"

"Yes, June. What's so terrible about June? We know June's the middle of winter in New Zealand but it never gets that cold in Auckland and..."

"It's the Queen's Birthday Weekend. National holiday. Everything will be full. You Boys shan't get a reservation anywhere."

We thought he was making a joke at our expense. The queen's birthday. How very droll. We looked at each other and Beau held his phone away and rolled his beautiful eyes. "Must be Kiwi humor," he whispered.

“You must stay at my in-laws’ apartment at the Princes Wharf.” We both heard “Princess.” Now I rolled my eyes.

“Queen’s Birthday Weekend. Princess Wharf,” I said. “And what queen would that be? And which little princess are we talking about?” I looked at my beautiful Beau.

...

Our first morning at the Quays Apartment Building at Princes Wharf was indeed the queen’s birthday. As in Elizabeth Regina. Elizabeth II. Well, actually not her real birthday, but the day it is celebrated in New Zealand. Her birthday is celebrated on four different days in Britain, in Canada, in Australia, in New Zealand, and none of those celebrations coincide with her actual birthday, which is in April. There must be some reason for this British inconsistency which nonnative-born citizens of Her Majesty’s dominions, citizens like us, will never understand. Citizens like us who have only recently stood and recited at an official ceremony, “I swear allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of New Zealand, and all her heirs.”

Which all the non-English-as-a-first-language immigrants pronounced “hairs.” “I swear allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II and all her hairs.”

Don’t think about it too much. ...

So it was our first morning in this far-flung corner of Her Commonwealth Realm and Beau went down to get us a newspaper, some coffee, and breakfast rolls while I stared out at the diamonds on the water in the Hauraki Gulf and looked down at the big, sleek, and beautiful America’s Cup sailing yacht, which hangs there above all the pedestrians just at the entrance to Princes

Wharf in Auckland. I couldn't believe that, yes, we were really here, permanently this time.

Beau returned with the goodies and dropped the weekend edition of the New Zealand Herald on the coffee table in front of me. With a thud. The headline screamed up at me:

The logo for the New Zealand Herald, featuring the words "New Zealand Herald" in a blue, stylized, gothic-style font. The text is centered within a light blue rectangular background, which is itself set against a white background with a thin vertical line to its left.

## **A WORLD WITHOUT GAYS**

"Toto, honey, I don't think we're in the O.C. anymore," he said.

I was in shock. This was so un-Kiwi. I mean, we know there aren't many gays in New Zealand. But that is because there aren't many people. Barely more people in all of New Zealand than there are in all of California's Orange County, Disneyland included. But A World Without Gays? Completely un-Kiwi.

I stared at the headline and remembered the first real-live Kiwi I ever met. Some years ago in the erstwhile Boom-Boom Room, that famous gay bar hanging on the cliff above the Pacific Ocean in Laguna Beach, California. She was petite, pretty, dark haired, and I fell in love with her accent and her eyes. She had a lovely indigenous-brown complexion; thick, thick black shiny hair; and the most stunning green eyes I had ever seen. Uncanny green eyes in her native-costume of gorgeous brown skin. Like so many Maori-Pakeha we were to

meet all these years later. But she wasn't walking the empty beaches of New Zealand's Far Far North (which I didn't know about in those days); there she was right in front of me, tending bar in the Boom-Boom Room. She set my margarita down on the bar and slid it toward me.

"No, honey-buns, not Australia. I am a Kiwi." I looked at her.

"New Zealand," she said. "Never heard of it?"

"Of course I have. I even know where it is." I huffed to show my mock displeasure. Well, maybe not so mock. "What's it like there? And what brings you all the way here to Laguna Beach? Is it the Boom-Boom and all these stunningly gorgeous, beautiful gay California guys like me?"

"What's a nice girl like me doing in a joint like this? I like this joint and I like all the gay blokes here in California. Does that make me a fruit fly?" She ran a slim index finger around the rim of my margarita and then sucked the salt off her finger.

Fresh. Saucy.

"Don't you have any gay 'blokes' back home in KiwiLand?" I pronounced the word blokes as if it were a foreign word, which it was.

Kate Moananui Spencer proceeded to give me a lesson in Aotearoa 101. Now, "Aotearoa" means "Land of the Long White Cloud" in the Maori language and was a name some of the Iwi, some of the tribes in the islands, like to call their place. Those beautiful long white cumulus clouds often float and hover in the blue skies of the blessed islands, the North and the South Island, and can be seen for miles as one approaches the land in a boat or a plane. Or a Polynesian

double-hull canoe. It seems the name became a popular alternative name for New Zealand sometime in the twentieth century. All indigenous-like.

“Land of the Long White Cloud,” I said. “I like that.”

“Land of the Wrong White Crowd, more like.” She laughed and put some peanuts in front of me. “We’re not exactly upper-crust British, you know. But more so than the blokes in Oz.”

“Oz?”

“Australia. If you ever come Down Under, you’ll see that we all call it Oz. Now they’re a rough bunch. You should see them chanting at a rugby match, Ozzie-Ozzie-Ozzie-unh-unh-unh! Like Captain Cook pigs. Kiwis are wild too, but New Zealand...well, we are...we’re the Land Near Oz. And we are Progressive with a capital ‘P,’ ” she added.

She taught me that New Zealand was the first nation in the history of the world to give women the vote. Way back in 1893.

Eighteen ninety-three. I was amazed.

“Well, not exactly the first country, because New Zealand was still a colony of Great Britain then. We didn’t become an independent country until sometime between 1907 and 1947. Our constitutional historians can’t seem to agree as to exactly when we became independent.” She laughed.

“Makes it hard to celebrate your version of the Fourth of July.”

“We don’t have one. We have The Treaty of Waitangi Day. February 6, 1840. When the Maori and the Pakeha, the whites, decided that Queen Victoria was the queen of New Zealand. Queen Victoria and all her heirs.”



And Kate Moananui also taught me that day that New Zealand was one of the first to give nearly full equality to gays. Since meeting Kate in the Boom-Boom Room way back when, I accepted as a matter of faith that New Zealand was one of the most progressive lands on the face of the earth, a worthy distinction in my book. And now here we were in Auckland, Aotearoa, and here was the newly elected Anglican archbishop of Aotearoa, the first Maori to handle the post, declaring on the heels of his investiture that homosexuality was “unnatural, not morally right,” and saying that he dreamed of a new moral uprising that would “rid the world of gays.”

Too bad, I thought, that Mr. Archbishop Whakahuihui Vercoe hadn’t stayed with the pre- Christian Polynesian beliefs. Polynesian societies accepted a much wider variety of sexual— what should I say—proclivities...accepted and appreciated them centuries before European

societies did. And long centuries before the European mapmaker Amerigo Vespucci lent his name to that famous ‘discovery’ of Chris Columbus. Or long before the Vikings met Pocahontas’ great-great-ancestors, for that matter. Certainly long before Captain Cook headed toward Van Diemen’s Land, Tasmania and New Zealand. There are the fa’afafine of Samoa and the faka leiti of Tonga and the mahu of Tahiti. The truth is, as everyone who knows anything about it knows, the Pacific has played a seminal role in the emergence of modern gay identity. Pacific Islander and Maori views on homoeroticism are very different from Mr. Vercoe’s oh-so-very-Queen- Victorian, colonial views.

“Get dolled up, Beau. We are going to church. I just wish Kate were here to accompany us. She’d enjoy this.” Kate was part Maori, part Pakeha. As is just about everybody who has been in New Zealand longer than Beau and moi.

Kate died of breast cancer ten years ago, shortly after she returned to New Zealand from California. You’ll learn more about health care in New Zealand later. Anyway, she died before Beau and I even dreamed of trying to become Kiwis ourselves. I especially missed her on this, our first day in Aotearoa.

Beau had the taxi driver stop at the big Dymocks Bookstore on Queen Street (of course on Queen Street, the main drag of downtown Lord Auckland City). My darling Beau merely gave me a La Gioconda smile when he returned to the taxi clutching a small black book.

I consulted my little blue Auckland guide and we made the rounds of several Anglican churches: St. Aidan, St. Columba, St. Barnabas, St. Alban the Martyr, St. Swithin (who were all these

unheard-of saints anyway?). Next we went to All Saints—that’s more like it, I thought. We didn’t know exactly where to find a bishop on the Queen’s Birthday Weekend (I felt as though we were in a chess match), let alone the archbishop of New Zealand, especially after he had made such a stir in The New Zealand Herald and on all the talk shows. We continued our rounds and decided to choose more familiar-sounding saints and whatnot. St. Mary’s, Holy Trinity Cathedral...

We finally struck pay dirt, struck it rich. Found the mother! (As in mother lode). Struck it rich...

Yes, I especially missed Kate when we entered the big modernistic church, the last church on our Anglican tour, for here it was that we found the archbishop and suddenly I needed a big dose of Kiwi courage. We entered the vast space and no one was about. Not a soul, not even that quiet church mouse. Not even a church possum (New Zealand is plagued with imported possums, which are eating up all the native trees at a rate of thirty thousand tons of leaves per night. I don't know who measures these things—or how). Just as we were about to exit the nave, we heard someone coming toward us from behind. We turned and, as he got closer, I recognized the Most Reverend Vercoe himself from his photo in the paper.

Yep, that was him.

He smiled warmly at us. Until I held up The New Zealand Herald with its screaming headline. Suddenly his face fell. I modulated my voice and spoke as gently and as kindly as possible, in my best and broadest long-ago-but-never-forgotten southern Missouri accent. But I arched my eyebrow archly at the archbishop.

“In Aotearoa, it is the weekend of the Birthday of the Queen. She is not amused. She does not like to think of a world without gays. How rancidly dreary, she says.”

Mr. Vercoe looked silently at Beau. Beautiful, brown-skinned Beau. No mistake about it, his look said, “Save me. Help me out here, bro.”

That is when I felt sorry for him and really looked at him. Really saw him for the first time. Not as an adversary but as a poor, deluded, unhappy

fellow. And it was obvious that he was very unhealthy. You could see the weariness in his face, his mouth. Mostly his eyes.

Suddenly I thought of Kate. Or felt her presence there more than thought of her. She once said to me that people quarrel with each other as if they are going to live forever. But if we face the fact of death, our quarrels will come to an end. What folly to fight among ourselves when we are all destined to die. We are all dying. Some just go sooner than others (a lesson to be brought home to us again, strongly and personally, not so long after that first day in New Zealand).

I looked into the archbishop's eyes more deeply then. He has already given up, I thought. On his fight against gays. On his fight against female bishops in the Church. On everything, really. Already on his way out.

Beau spoke up but even more gently than I had. "A world without gays. No Leonardo da Vinci. No Michelangelo, Michael Angel. No King James I. No Horatio Alger. No Oscar Wilde. No Jane Addams. No Frank Sargeson. No Katherine Mansfield. No Queequeg." He looked at me. "No

Aaron." He looked at the archbishop. "No me, Archbishop. And a whole lot fewer priests and bishops and parishioners in the churches around you."

All three of us fell silent for a time, as though it were marked on our music score, a full rest, and then the archbishop sat down on the nearest pew. He took out a bright cranberry handkerchief that matched the color of his bright cranberry clerical shirt and dabbed his brow. All the bright lovely cranberry made his face seem all the more washed out, so old and tired. I wondered if he had any lavender hankies and clerical shirts. Pink ones. Chartreuse. Teal.

“You must understand, my sons,” he said very softly, “that I am—and always have been—and always will be a conservative Christian...”

“There is no such thing as a conservative Christian!” said Beau urgently. “Read the words of Jesus and get back to me on that.” He handed the archbishop the small black New Testament that he had bought on Queen Street, took me by the elbow, and slowly turned me around and walked me up the aisle and out of the religious building. Slowly, a stately gait, as though practicing for our wedding ceremony.

There is a coda to this slow, graceful, ceremonial little minuet that the three of us performed in the church that afternoon in Auckland. A sad one. The Most Reverend Vercoe died not so long after that.

And here’s the saddest bit. Everyone noted in their obituaries that he had always aligned himself with groups seeking justice and that he had always championed the rights of the poor. As long as

they were not women or gays. Of course, his remembrancers did not put it that way; they simply noted in passing that he had “never been afraid to stir up a lot of controversy” by refusing to attend the ordination of women bishops and by dreaming aloud in an interview of a world without gays.

Several women bishops attended the funeral rites of the Most Reverend Vercoe, saying that although they disagreed with many of his views, they respected him. Of course, their real message was this (even for those of them who kept it hidden in their subconscious) —

Archbishop, the dream of a world without women bishops and a world without gays is negated by our presence here. It is negated by our affirmation.

As I read the obituary, I wondered aloud to Beau how many of those women Anglican bishops at his tangi, his funeral, were also gay. Double whammy.

Checkmate.

# The LAND NEAR OZ

Aaron Allbright

Like Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* and Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun*, this memoir shows the explosive, endearing, unforgettable follies of being an expat, as well as the wild mysteries of living a full life. Here readers glimpse what comes after adventure-and are given intimations of mortality in Paradise.

A sort of modern-day Gay Huck Finn, who becomes a professor and then runs away from it all, author Aaron Allbright lights out for the Territory and moves to the land of cannibals and flightless birds. With his beautiful lover Beau, an IBM exec who chucks Big Blue, he makes a life Down Under. More Down Under than Australia-called OZ by folk thereabouts.

Not since Herman Melville voyaged to the Antipodes-not since Ishmael shared a cozy bed with Queequeg, that affectionate cannibal from New Zealand-has an American met Kiwiworld in the way you will meet it in this memoir. Allbright describes their wanderlust for exploring this Newest World and the bright, cheeky landscapes of humanity they encounter.



AARON ALLBRIGHT was born in Missouri and grew up on the banks of the Mississippi. He spent three years in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone before knocking about other parts of Africa and crossing the Sahara twice. He called Saudi Arabia and France home and trekked extensively in the Himalaya before settling in California with his spouse. For the past seven years, they have lived in New Zealand with two cats, two dogs, sheep, cows and a donkey named Don Quixote. *The Land Near Oz* is his first memoir.

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