

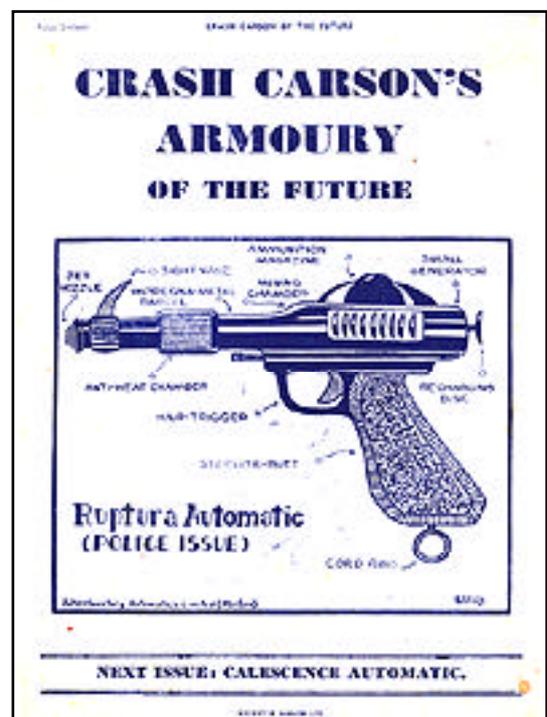
History

Comics in the Antipodes: A low art in a low place

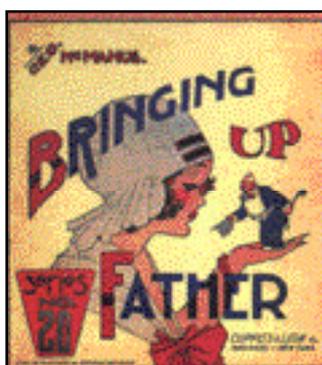
by Tim Bollinger

The phenomenon of kiwi comics is that they are a part of its popular culture without ever having been very popular. In fact, two recurring themes in the development of New Zealand comics, with the notable exception of a few newspaper strips like Murray Balls Footrot Flats are 1. that they have been (almost always) self-published - a result of New Zealand's lack of an established comic book industry'- and 2. that they have (again, almost always) been overwhelming commercial failures. Few comics have made it past their first issue, and fewer still made it to issue five.

This is less surprising when one recalls that New Zealand is a nation generally noted for its sporting achievements and an international reputation for social and moral enlightenment.



Comics are anathema to both. Comics are a voice for the naive, the uneducated and the sedentary, audible across generational boundaries to the most impressionable in our society. They are as ideal a medium for propaganda as they are for pornography (though not as good as television).



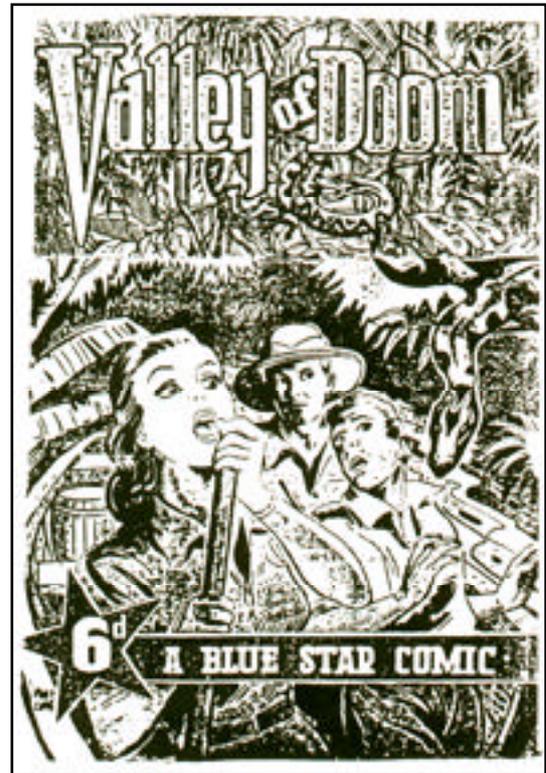
Comics are by their very nature a medium of subversion. With a strong tradition of social conformity and state control, New Zealand proved itself to be an unsuitable environment for comics to flourish. And yet people have drawn them anyway. I believe it is the imaginative freedom of the minds of children that has inspired and perpetuated the New Zealand comic book tradition. A love of comics amongst all the artists and writers I have met in the course of my research appears to have been adopted in childhood. It is perhaps that spirit of youth and newness also inherent in the national psyche that has promoted the development of the art form here.

A potted history

In the first few decades of the century New Zealand was a market for British illustrated humour magazines (from which the word 'comic' is apparently derived).

In exchange for our lamb and butter were imported titles like *Funny Wonder*, *Chips*, *Puck*, *Playbox* and *Butterfly* whose tradition dated back to the 19th century (New Zealand's founding constitutional document was only signed in 1840).

The country exported cartoonists from an early time. Perhaps New Zealand's greatest contribution to world comic book history dates from 1924 when Auckland cartoonist Noel Cook drew one of the earliest recorded science fiction strips ever, *Peter and All the Roving Folk*, for the *Australian Sunday Times*. Legend has it that in its first year of publication Cook was offered a lucrative contract in New York to continue the feature for Bell Syndicate. Cook turned down the offer only to witness the popular rise of Buck Rogers (billed by international comics historians as 'the first American science fiction strip') some five years later.



The 1930s saw the rise of full colour weekly comic supplements in many of New Zealand's leading newspapers. These mostly featured syndicated American strips like *Bringing Up Father*, *Mutt and Jeff*, and *The Katzenjammer Kids* and the occasional New Zealand one, like the *Tee Wees Adventures* which ran in the *Christchurch Star* during 1931.

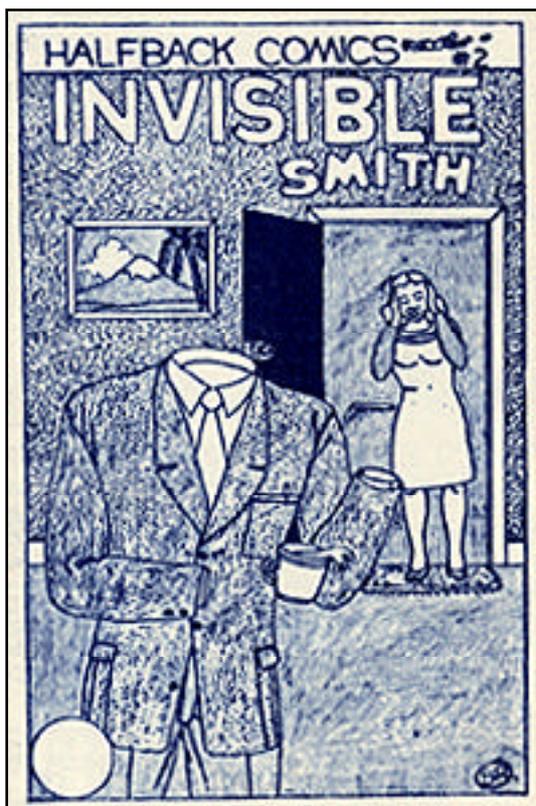
The advent of the American adventure strip alerted the fears of the establishment to the 'dangers' of comics (mainly because they were American) for the first time. *NZ Truth* began the regular publication of an 'Adventure' comic supplement in 1938, featuring the early Hal Foster and Alex Raymond strips. That same year tough new import controls were introduced.

Exchange controls gave a built-in bias to British imports. British comics were considered culturally morally and artistically 'superior' by the state authorities teachers and librarians alike. Those with fewer speech balloons and more explanatory text as in the British style, were considered more sophisticated and thus more beneficial to younger readers. Under import controls the invasion of American comic culture was effectively delayed until the 1950s. In response to demand, there developed a small local comic book printing and publishing industry.

A similar thing happened across the Tasman where Noel Cook and other kiwi expatriates found plenty of work for their cartooning skills throughout the 1940s.

With an almost total ban on imported American comics in Australia, Cook and Unk White in particular drew for Frank Johnson Publications' Blue Star Comics'. Unk White drew the cover for the first FJP comic Amazing in 1941 and was responsible for the company's first adventure strip Blue Hardy and The Diamond Eyed Pygmies. These were readily available in New Zealand, despite continued objections from the country's moral guardians.

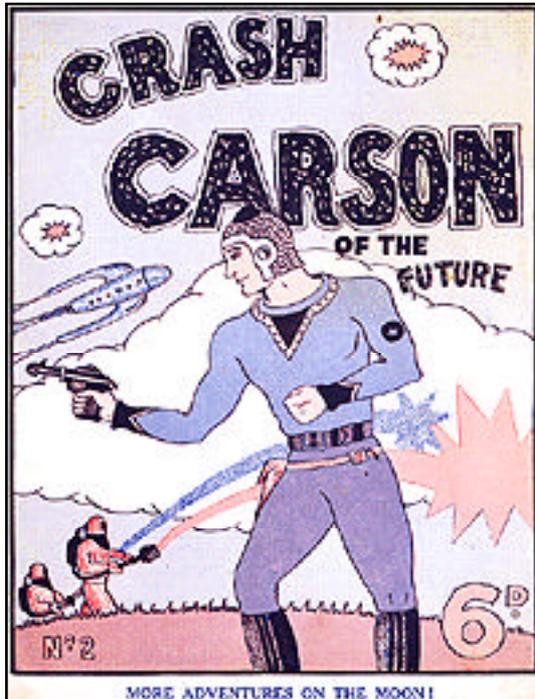
During this time, New Zealand developed its own peculiar practice of publishing collections of syndicated American or Australian newspaper strips, hobbled together from outdated collections. Many never appeared in book form outside Australasia, and they often featured locally rendered cover art. Among these was Lee Falk's The Phantom, which won a special place in the hearts of New Zealanders probably as a result of the unavailability of the more dynamic superhero characters more popular abroad. New Zealand subsequently printed and published its own edition of Lee Falk's comic for around 550 issues between 1950 and 1960. Stories of little old ladies with cupboards full of Phantom Comics in this pre-television age were not uncommon (New Zealand had no TV before 1960 and only one state-run network until 1975).



There were two major comics publishing houses in New Zealand during the 1940s and 50s - Feature Productions in Lower Hutt (Wellington) who published The Phantom, and the Times Printing Co. in Auckland. By 1952 they were producing between them the majority of the 47 titles published and printed in New Zealand.

Times printed a series of locally produced comics for Jaycol, a children's book publishing house, during the war years. Among these were Victory, which featured Dick Hudson's Adventures Berone the Mast, a maritime adventure strip set in the South Seas, and Meteor (possibly a one-off) which featured The Secret Valley, a story in which an Anglo-Saxon family of three (Mum stays home) stumble on a lost tribe of Maori warriors and hunt giant moas (extinct flightless bird). The artist of the latter strip was Harny Bennet, one of the few artists from this period to have been positively identified (they almost all went by nom-de-plumes).

As much an entrepreneur as an artist Bennet drew and published Supreme Comics almost single-handedly for more than 30 issues from 1945 until the early 1950s, as well as other one-off titles like Bonzer, Merry, Stirring and Big Time.



Bennet is recalled as a 'loveable rogue... tall, thinnish, balding with a brown suit and a little black moustache...' This is practically all we know about the gentleman although it is also rumoured that he published a saucy men's magazine.

The second significant artist from this period was Eric Resetar (aka Hec Rose). 'Hec' was a 12 year-old schoolboy in 1941 drawing blood and thunder' stories for his mates. One day he approached a local print firm asking for them to publish his stories. The printer was so taken by the boy's brazen attitude that he suggested he write to the Minister of Internal Affairs (it being wartime) to request an allocation of paper for the job - which he did.

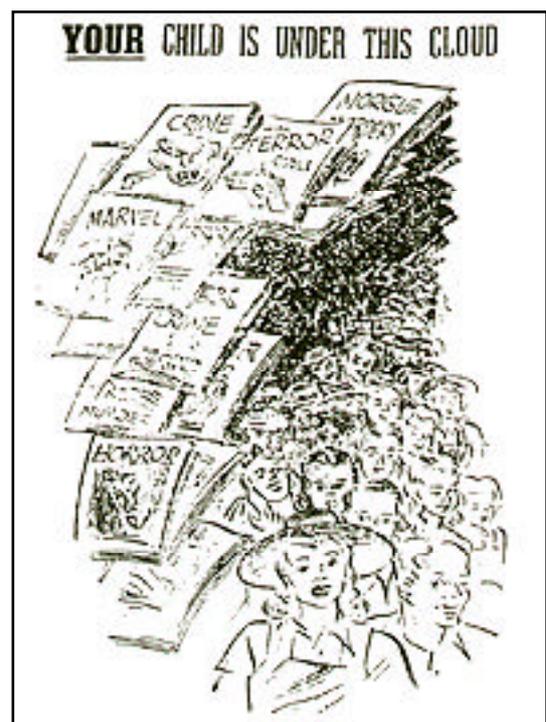
In granting the school boys twice the requested weight of paper, the government of the day clearly regarded the project to be of some strategic national importance.

Perhaps they thought a comic production in the hands of a school boy would be altogether less harmful than in the hands of rogues like Harry Bennet.

If so, they were mistaken. There followed a series of action adventure titles, each with increasingly violent blood and thunder elements.

By the 1950's , when he was deliberately trying to tone down his act, Resetar teamed up with Plymouth magician, hypnotist and astronomer James Casson, as special technical advisor on a new project, Crash O'Kane: An All Black On Mars.

The back cover of this comic provides 'A word to our readers' which read in part: 'We trust that no reasonable person will take offense to any of the characters and situations in this work...we will not attempt to evade any criticism written in good taste...'



Going Underground

As controls on imports were following the war, the New Zealand literary intelligentsia came down hard on American comics once again. Frederick Wertham's famous 1953 treatise *The Seduction of The Innocent* was readily available in public libraries up and down the country for young comics fans to peruse even though none of the comics that it discussed had ever been available here.



By 1958, a government-appointed committee had prohibited as many as 260 comic book titles. The committee comprised a Justice Department representative, an ex-head teacher, a head mistress and a supervisor of prison education.

The only true American comic books obtainable in New Zealand for many years were the Classic Comics, presumably because of their 'literary superiority'.

As in America, comics went underground. The generation who had grown up reading the American titles in the early 1950s turned into the rebellious and degenerate riff-raff that the moralists had predicted they would.

Worse still, many of them became the educated literati of the next generation. It all started in the country's universities. Through 'capping' (annual graduation event) magazines and student newspapers, all variety of young New Zealand Cartoonists and comic writers found an outlet. During the 1950s, Bob Brockie (now a well-known NZ political Cartoonist) did comic book parodies of 'Classic Comics for Cappicade magazine' in an abandoned fashion reminiscent of MAD (which wasn't readily available in New Zealand until the early 1960s) or the underground comics of a later era.

In the 1960s, the satirical Wellington journal *Cock* started up, featuring the illustration talents of Brockie and others.

Cock operated by the philosophy of the 'alternative press', which, in an age 'pre-dating the photocopy machine' meant owning your own offset printer and doing it out of your garage. *Cock* combined some serious political radicalism with a light-hearted hippie aesthetic, using bright clashing colours, cut-and-paste photos, plenty of nudity and comics,



just to make sure the squares were sufficiently offended. *Cock* editor Chris Wheeler was constantly being taken to court and having his press confiscated by the police.

Another 'alternative press' publication that ran to several issues out of Auckland from the early 70s was the Ponsonby Rag, which often featured the comics of Barry Linton, among others. By his own admission, Linton was something akin to a hippie. In his own words: 'Hippies around New Zealand were something closer to California or Texas hippies... But here you didn't even have to get dressed. Just get in the Vauxhall and go out to Piha. You were primordial already.'

Linton travelled round the country throughout the late 60s and early 70s as a sort of a hobo. In 1970 he met Joe Wylie, who along with a number of other Canterbury Art School students got control of their capping magazine that year and turned it into a psychedelic comic book called Lead Lettuce.

1970 was a good year for capping magazines. Auckland University produced something called Superbag, featuring paper cut-out dolls of the royal family and an accompanying comic book called Ngarie Ball-Swinger, a piece of nationalist parody by cartoonist Murray Grimsdale.

Aspiring comic artists of this era found a natural home in the university newspapers. Linton and friend Laurence Clark, who had produced his own psychedelic comic in 1970 called The Flying Fish, both drew for Auckland's Craccum. Famous painter-to-be, Philip Clairmont, and Ron Currie, who as well as drawing subversive comics was a member of left wing activist 'yippies' the PYM (Progressive Youth Movement), drew for Christchurch's Canta. And Colin Wilson, who was to be the founding editor of Strips magazine drew for Dunedin's Critic.



Out of this pool of artists New Zealand's second longest-running comic book (after Harry Bennet's Supreme) was to finally emerge in 1977 - Strips.

Running for ten years, Strips was initially the creation of Colin Wilson, a truly masterful Comics craftsman who went on to draw professionally in Europe in the style of the comics masters whose work he sought to imitate in Strips. Wilson went on to produce the first full-colour New Zealand comic book Captain Sunshine in 1979 - a commercial flop designed to promote a plastic sundial watch, for which he created one of the world's first 'ecological' superheros.

For the first ten issues of Strips Wilson was joined by Terence Hogan (now design editor for World Art magazine), Barry Linton, Joe Wylie and latterly Laurence Clark whose 'The Frame' epic aspired 'to do with comics, what Lichtenstein had done with painting'.

Strips was highly original, mixing the underground flavour of Wylie and Linton's humorous work, with the commercial comics stylings of Wilson, and the more experimental commentaries on the comic form displayed in the work of Clark and Hogan.

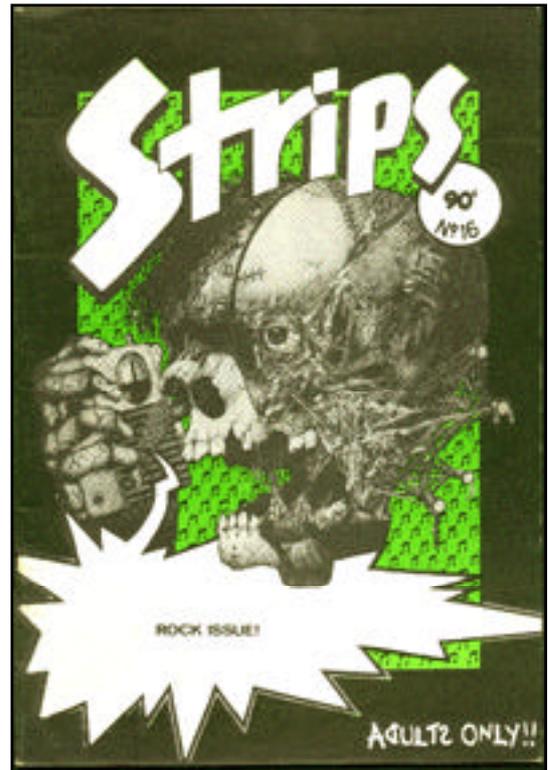
Linton's edgy pacific-flavoured illustrations gave the publication much of its local personality. He was as enamored with the local landscape as he was with the female form. Wylie's work in Strips is notable for the fact that it was influenced by his trip to Nepal in 1975 (after working for five years as an animator for Hannah Barbera in Australia). There, he had lived under the instruction of a Tibetan monk who taught him how to draw classical buddhist art, and he applied many of these techniques to his work in Strips. His Maureen Cringe and Kabuki stories which otherwise resemble Popeye on acid, are all set in a place called Ultra-Tibet and feature cloud fire, and mountain motifs rendered in the traditional manner he'd been taught.

In the years that followed, Strips became a vehicle for many aspiring comic artists to see their work in print for the first time. In the 1980s, for example, Chris Knox led the procession of rock music-connected comic books with the Strips rock issue. Featuring the poorly scribed work of many local rock musician, the commercial success of this particular issue disheartened many of the regular Strips artists. It also hailed something of a punk comics explosion. Knox went on to later success with his Jesus On A Stick

comic, featuring many of the same artists. Founding Flying Nun band The Clean, whom Knox mentored, produced a comic for their debut Boodle Boodle album. Clean member (now also of The Bats) Robert Scott produced his own comic-cum-fanzine Every Secret Thing for many years out of his hometown of Dunedin.



Also featured in later issues of Strips were younger artists like Dylan Horrocks (Pickle) and Peter Rees (who produced a comic called Playgrounds for Fantagraphics in the early 1990s). By 1986, Horrocks, who then called himself Kupe (a la Herge - Kupe being the mythical first settler of Aotearoa), had teamed up with Cornelius Stone to bring out the alternative comic publication Razor.



Razor was born at the same time Strips died, and in many ways became for the late 1980s and early 1990s what Strips had been for the late 70s and early 80s.

It was younger, less predictable, more underground and esoteric, at the same time as being more self-consciously ambitious and commercial. Although of course, it could never be. Not with Cornelius Stone at its helm. Dylan Horrocks once described Stone as 'a real life genius'.

'Cornelius is a completely self-made man. He's completely self-educated. And all that Comes through in his work. To him there's like just one big cultural plane, whether it's Picasso or a comic book, or Spiderman, or an advertisement for Four Square or something. It's all just a part of this enormous big scene, and he feeds off all that without that kind of self-conscious awareness that a lot of high-brow have when they dabble in 'pop culture'.

While commercial success evaded Stone himself, for many who came within his orbit, an international career in comics was to be forthcoming, most notably Horrocks and Roger Langridge (who originally created the character of Knuckles the Malevolent Nun with Stone, and has since worked for many international publishers including Fantagraphics and DC).



THE STORY CONTINUES...



To conclude, New Zealand comics have evolved despite, rather than because of their role in the popular consciousness - which is virtually non-existent. They have always been brazen, youthful and rebellious.

Because of the almost complete absence of a commercial framework within which the artform has developed in the United States for example, New Zealand comics have developed as something more akin to a 'cottage industry'. While this essay attempts to begin tracing an historical social evolution, this is to some degree contrived. There has been little apparent independent artistic development of the form in this country. What New Zealand comics have in common, if anything, is their environment of isolation and cultural hostility.

If there is anything resembling a 'New Zealand style', it perhaps comes from the very limited exposure to American comics up until the 1960s, described above, and the broad cross-section of British, American, European and Japanese influences that have been readily available since that time. Herge's Adventures of Tintin were distributed in English translation through the national library service during the 1960s, and also appear to have had a disproportionate influence. Other artists and titles that have left a noticeable mark are Lee Falk's The Phantom, Leo Baxendale's, The Beano, Moebius, Crumb, 2000AD... but this is an anecdotal.

The full story is yet to be told, and it continues apace.