

HISTORICAL NOTE

Literary Mt Victoria: Pat Lawlor



In December 1936, S.P. Andrew, the Wellington photographer, heard about a gathering at **Pat Lawlor**'s house and sent his son to capture the event. Shown here in the study in Lawlor's home in **Hawker Street** are some of Wellington's leading 'bookmen', Eric Bradwell, James Wilson Hogg, ON Gillespie, Stuart Perry, Victor Lloyd, Alan Mulgan, Leo Fanning, CAL Treadwell, GG Stewart and Redmond Phillips with the host (seated, second from the left).

Lawlor explained a few months later: "I timed the business to have them out of the house by 12 but while I was out of the room Gillespie discovered a cache of beer I did not want them to see because I had work to do on the morrow. When I returned they were hard at it and would not go until the hops had vanished."

Photograph: Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

Pat Lawlor (1893-1979) was an important figure in New Zealand literary life in the 1920's, 30's and 40's. He also had strong Mt Victoria connections and lived at No. 6 Hawker Street for a number of years.

A journalist by trade, who started as copyholder at the Evening Post when he left school in 1910, he called himself a 'bookman'. He was an enthusiastic believer in the idea of the literary life and worked hard to establish a lively 'bookish' culture in New Zealand, particularly in his native Wellington. He organised writers groups, did his best to foster a male bohemia like those associated with the great newspapers in London and Sydney, and wrote literary gossip columns. He put writers, editors and publishers in touch with one another and championed women writers. He also initiated a ground-breaking New Zealand Authors' Week in 1936 and edited and published the *New Zealand Artists' Annual* from 1926 until 1932. Pat and his fellow 'bookmen' advanced New Zealand cultural and literary life through their own creative activities and through helping get other writers, such as Eileen Duggan and Robin Hyde, into print.

Through his own writings, we know a lot about Lawlor. Many Wellingtonians interested in history will have at least dipped into his *Old Wellington Days* and *More Wellington Days*, in which he reflects on his diary entries as a seven to fourteen year old. He was the son of an Irish Catholic bookseller and stationer and grew up in Cuba Street but, long before he came to live in Mt Victoria, he fell in love with it. As a lad he delighted in roaming over the mountain, climbing the manuka trees and struggling with the wind. In the early 1900's he played in the pine trees in Kent Terrace ("Altogether an ideal place for boys to play in. There were so many things to do. On the turnstiles, worn as smooth as glass by many hands, you could lay on your stomach while your mate turned you around till you got silly-giddy to fall flat on the ground and see the trees above going round in circles.") and recorded local happenings which captured his fancy: "I remember Coley's horses being let loose from their stable in Hawker Street to thunder down the hill and take a sharp turn to upper Marjoribanks Street. In a few minutes they would be kicking up their heels on the grassy slopes of Mt Victoria."

No. 6 Hawker Street was the scene of a colourful episode in Lawlor's adult life, too. In May 1936, he contacted fourteen Wellington writers and put to them the idea of collaborating on a murder mystery novel "on the lines of similar composite novels published recently in England and Australia." "Briefly," he explained, "the scheme is that one writer is selected to write the opening chapter, which is then passed on to the next writer, so that the plot is gradually built up in successive chapters each of the fourteen writers taking his turn." Maurice Gee uses this event in his book *The Scornful Moon*, where a clubby 'band of scribbler's' get together to write a detective novel. In that book, Sam Holloway is loosely based on Pat Lawlor.

Most of Lawlor's collaborators were friends or fellow 'bookmen' rather than having real potential as murder mystery writers. In the photograph taken by S.P. Andrew (on the front page), the writers are gathered to discuss *Murder by Eleven*. There had been some attrition by this time and, as might be expected, problems emerged in the writing. All the contributors seemed to have different approaches and concepts for the novel. Lawlor's chapter 'mixed sensation with levity', but others were not so given to 'literary levity'. Lawlor later wrote in the preface for the manuscript that one of their number, Marris, "considered that the murder trail was so encompassed with clues, counter clues, secret societies, motor cars and radio sets that the whole scheme was as intelligible as a static-driven broadcast of the laying of the foundation stone of the Tower of Babel." The author of the chapter following Marris's felt compelled to explain the dullness of his own work: "I had a lot of explaining to do – it seemed about time for some one to do a little."

Unfortunately, the manuscript never found a publisher and feedback from two readers was pretty scathing. Even Ngaio Marsh, whom Lawlor asked to help edit *Murder by Eleven*, confessed that she could not unravel the tangled threads. It had a comic spinoff as *The Thirteenth Clue*, however, which was serialised in the *Railways Magazine* (where Lawlor was literary editor).

Pat Lawlor's tastes reflected the character of the New Zealand literary scene in the 1920's and 1930's. He and his contemporaries celebrated reverent poetry at the same time as they fostered popular entertainment. By the late 1930's, however, they were seen as aesthetically and socially conservative by a new (and rather misogynistic) literary wave which included the likes of Glover, Sargeson, Curnow and Fairburn. Lawlor continued to act as a literary patron and to snipe at the authors and critics whose views differed from his. By 1950 the bookmen had been eclipsed; the literary world was changing, with universities and academics taking over from newspapers and journalists.

When his health necessitated a move to Auckland near the end of his life, he was given a civic farewell by the Mayor and the small lane off Brougham Street in Mt Victoria was named Pat Lawlor Close in his honour.

Lawlor played a significant role in the development of the New Zealand literary scene, and particularly in Wellington's. He has also left us with a number of important books of local history. The quotation below comes from *Old Wellington Days*, his book of reminiscences about growing up in Wellington between 1900 and 1907.

*"When I was a boy, I would, on some winter's day, when there was more than a capful of wind from your ample store, set my scarf about my neck to climb your Mt Victoria. Oh the glory to be found in the fight for your heights midst the sweet acrid smell of the waving manuka, and you, chasing the green grass about my feet . . . Proudly I inscribe myself
Pat Lawlor of Wellington
May 11th, 1959"*

By Joanna Newman