Introduction

In September 1911 a 36-year old man died, of a weakened heart, in his father’s house in Wellington. He had contracted rheumatic fever as an 18 year old and had never fully recovered. Despite that he’d married, fathered sons, travelled extensively in Europe with his wife and parents, in part to seek medical treatment, and at the time of his death was manager of the National Insurance Company branch office in Perth, Western Australia.

His widow and their boys had to return to Wellington to live; they had no relatives in Perth. Moreover the father-in-law was well enough off to be able to sustain the household costs of his daughter-in-law, and her five, soon to be six, children – for she was expecting another child, duly born the following year.

25 years on. The father-in-law dies, leaving an estate of £70,000 – about 6 million dollars in 2010 terms. Is the widow, the daughter-in-law, well off and comfortably situated? No. She is living in a ‘back of beyond’ Taranaki township, running a fruiterer business. She is estranged from her father-in-law, and has had little or no contact with her children of 1912 since 1913, but has another son and daughter, now near adulthood. She receives nothing from her erstwhile father-in-law’s estate, probably never received the widow’s pension, and dies 13 years later in the same reduced circumstances that had been her lot since 1913.
By my reckoning that’s ‘downhill’ and it’s what I want to talk about today. If I were a sociologist I would call it downward “mobility”, which in effect means focusing on the context not just the individual – the implications of ‘downhill’ for socio-economic status, income, opportunities. . . and class. In using ‘downhill’, I want to create distance from sociological language, to get closer more to the way ordinary people conceptualize such matters, or indeed whether they do.

For me this is a new research question – when I came up with the idea of the topic it was because it was something I wanted an answer to, rather than had one. That’s a risky way to commit to talking about something to an informed audience and at a date not too far into the future, but it certainly got me exploring. Consider this lecture then as a kind of research proposal.

Starting with the literature first, one obvious starting point was ‘what part does “downhill” play in novels or other fiction? If you go by UK writer Christopher Brooker, author of The seven basic plots: why we tell stories (2005), it doesn’t. The closest of his seven plots to downhill is perhaps the commonest one – rags to riches – Cinderella (also Aladdin, Jane Eyre; and the dark version e.g. Stendhal,Rouge et Noir). The key driver is obviously uphill not downhill and that’s hardly surprising, if you want to end your novel on an upbeat note or even with a degree of resolution.

[The others, in case you were wondering are]

- Overcoming the monster (Beowulf, Dracula, Nicholas Nickleby)
- The quest – Don Quixote, Odyssey, Pilgrim’s Progress
- Voyage and return – Gone with the Wind, Alice in Wonderland, ?Wizard of Oz
- Comedy – ‘absurd’ problems are resolved – Austen, Middlemarch and War and Peace all instanced
- Tragedy – Macbeth, Anna Karenina
- Rebirth – Sleeping Beauty, Christmas Carol1]

1 http://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/10/the_seven_basic.html
But if ‘downhill’ doesn’t feature as a ‘master plot’ it certainly features in plots. Even Cinderella may have a bump on the road upward to the ‘sunlit uplands’.

For my purposes we need something a bit more specific however – stories of relatively secure and established people ‘going down’ – not so much personally as socially. It’s wanting to know more about the ‘ugly sisters’ – what happened to them afterwards – did they make the ‘best of bad deal’ and make themselves Cinderella’s best friends, or did they get the push or give themselves the push?

The trigger for this is personal – well partly. The woman whose fate I described above was my grandmother. So precipitous was her ‘fall from grace’ – and you could probably detect reasons even in the bare-bones account I gave – that my twin and I never even knew of her existence (other than genetically as it were) until we were adult and it was only in our late 20s that we made contact with this ‘other family’ whose lives and circumstances had diverged so markedly from those of my mother and her siblings.

Scroll forward a few decades, to the 1980s in fact, and, like you, I am sure, I was aware of individuals whose finances and circumstances went belly-up in the stock market crash of 1987 and/or in the pressure on Lloyds’ insurance names in the 1990s. One family I recall meeting some years later, had lost all their land, the husband was working in the local freezing works, the mother was in paid work, the son and daughter at the local district high school, not a boarding school. Doesn’t sound so bad does it? But it was a marked ‘fall’.

I have also pondered – as no doubt have you – the variation that can arise within families, in the class or socio-economic trajectory of individual lives, in the natural course of events, rather than as a result of the kinds of catastrophes I’ve just outlined.

This is in two ways. One way is the effort that middle class families put into maintaining the class status of their sons and daughters. That can be caricatured as one too many
ballet or pony-riding classes; it’s more accurately captured by the sums of money sunk into offspring who fail exams, or drop out, or break the law or engage in a host of other actions which would irretrievably compromise their class status if those back up resources, both material and social – ‘Jack’s going to look out for a job for you, he’s prepared to give you a chance’ – were withheld.

The other is the way that within a couple of generations members of the wider family group can diverge markedly in socio-economic status. That in turn can translate into variations in income and wealth but I’ve long been more struck by the way it refracts into variations in taste, style and, for want of a better word, culture.

Think about your own wider family – first cousins, second cousins, third cousins – to see if you come up with patterns like these. Where do these variations come from and what point do they translate into class distinction, class demotion?

So these are starting points. In this talk I want to tease out the extent to which ‘downhill’ is a theme in New Zealand life and New Zealand literature – by which in practice I mean novels (to some extent short stories, got to get Katherine Mansfield in somehow) in the 20th century, with the underlying assumption that it does not appear nearly as much in literature as it seems to feature in life. But is that in fact the case? Is it so common in ‘life”? And is it so uncommon in literature? To explore this involves presenting arguments about both literature and life.

I will do this by first considering the evolution of the novel, the European novel that is, and the extent to which it was or was not set up to explore such themes.

I will look next briefly at colonial New Zealand society and the extent to which it was characterized by ‘downhill’.

The main part of the talk will break 20th century New Zealand into three roughly equal segments – 1900 to 1933; 1933 to 1966 and 1966 to the end of the century. In each period
I will consider both the social pattern and the kinds of novels or other writing with an eye to this ‘downhill’ theme. These roughly approximate to Lawrence Jones’ frequently cited demarcations of 20th century NZ literary history into late colonial, provincial and post-provincial. Jones also offers a research challenge in saying ‘response to social change has usually lagged behind the change itself.’ Meaning creative or literary change I think. Is that true?

In preparing this talk I have not been encumbered by specialist knowledge about either subject, that is either 20th century New Zealand society or 20th century NZ literature. I have researched around the edges of New Zealand social history in exploring its historical geography and its economic history, for example, and I have read a fair number of novels, including a fair number of 20th century New Zealand novels. But my primary expertise, if such it could be called is in knowing how best to answer a question, it having been asked – in other words generic rather than specialist research skill.

The European novel to c 1900

The European novel first appeared in the eighteenth century. As I’m sure will be known to many of you, the first examples were epistolary, famously Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, but ultimately breaking away from that to present multiple angles of vision in a less cumbersome way. Sociologically, the advent of the novel reflected the development of a literate and leisured class large enough to support both novel writing and selling business and to able to enjoy the essentially private leisure that lent itself to novel reading (fast forward to turn-of-century Wairarapa and you get the same thing at Brancepeth).

Much of the setting of the novels reflected the advent of social formations which supported such practice. But with benefit of hindsight we can also see that the novels themselves – and the societies out of which they emerged – were preoccupied with rank. And rank implies a world of relatively fixed status (it could be regarded as midway

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between caste – completely fixed – and class – more fluidity) in which uphill and downhill are difficult to achieve. Downhill is indeed not truly downhill, that is the whole point of Cinderella, or any other captive princess narrative – that rank, birth, will always tell in the end. *Pamela*, it could be argued, also delivers this message.

A couple of generations on from Richardson, if we consider Jane Austen’s novels, we can see that rank is still at the heart of the social order and woe betide those, as Emma Woodhouse in her determination to marry off the illegitimate Harriet to Mr Elton, who seek to breach its rules. The social range of Austen’s world doesn’t allow for class demotion to be central to the narrative, though it comes close with characters like Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax.

As a by-word, if somewhat in contradiction, have you ever noticed that, to give her heroines a plausible freedom of action, Austen decapitated the social order to which she is ostensibly loyal by either removing or making ineffectual fathers or any other male authority figure? I think this is in part why Austen’s novels have remained popular through the ages – they are the very opposite of ‘period pieces’.

It was the mid-century European novel that was to come to terms with ‘downhill’ and over that creative breakthrough, if it be liked, hover two great names, Balzac and Dickens. Both moved the novel firmly into the city, the metropolis indeed, and into a world in which rank, if it had survived, had been monetized, in which the bourgeoisie was no longer an ‘estate’ or part of one, but a burgeoning social formation, celebrated by Karl Marx, no less, for its brutal combination of creative and destructive impulses and – and here comes the ‘downhill’ – for individuals, characterized by extreme insecurity and volatility. Into the novel ‘walk’ - what were to become some of its most familiar settings and characters – the heroines who find themselves ‘cast out’ – as in Willkie Collins’ and Mrs Henry Wood’s melodramas and the hit and miss life of Dickens’ protagonists. The tenement buildings in which Balzac’s and later Zola’s characters plot and maneuver, are populated with individuals who have fallen on hard times, or fear that they will.
In these settings, those of the middle class or bourgeoisie who were comfortably enough situated to have time to read novels, could vicariously experience the chill of the sudden turn in fortunes – the bailiff at the door, the furniture sold off, the genteel daughter forced to be a governess . . . “ruined, mother, utterly ruined!”

Colonial New Zealand

We know enough about reading in colonial New Zealand – and you will know even more than me, if you listened to Lydia Wever’s talk on Brancepeth last month – to know that novels were as widely read here as they were in Europe – both the more ‘respectable’ English ones and the less ‘respectable’ French ones. And to what society could they be more suited? For every upswing and downswing in personal or collective fortunes that took place in Europe, a colonial society could replicate tenfold.

For, as James Belich has so vividly reminded us, not least in his latest book, Replenishing the Earth, these were boom and bust societies, and if that were true of the society it was also true of individuals. This was not just a matter of gold rushes – though there were those of course – but of endless other kinds of enterprises – whaling ventures, sawmilling ventures, other kinds of mining ventures – petroleum, antimony, coal, etc, etc – insurance, shipping, sheep – all could boom then could bust. The Keenes of the Swyncombe run near Kaikoura could identify the clump of trees beneath which rabbits were released in the 1860s, less than twenty years later those same rabbits, as it were, drove them off the land.

So there is plenty of scope for ‘downhill’. Not necessarily in an urban setting, as beloved of Dickens and Balzac, but always in a capitalist one, be it on the land or in the nascent cities.

But there are no novels. Well not none, but not enough to detain me in this particular talk, and not enough to establish a ‘template’, if you like, of the ‘downhill’ New Zealand novel. So I turn now to 20th century New Zealand.
New Zealand 1900-1933

With respect to the novel between 1900 and 1933 we find efflorescence, as women in particular take to the pen, although it is difficult to find common themes, impulses in the work of Katherine Mansfield, Jane Mander, Jean Devanny and – one man to put amongst them – William Satchell.

From the point of view of the issues I am exploring today, Mansfield is probably the least fruitful (I’m considering here entirely here stories with a New Zealand setting) but I’ll come back to that.

Mander and Satchell overlap, using as they both do northern settings. Both also introduce a wide cast of characters although their principal protagonists – Alice and her daughter Asia in Story of a New Zealand River, Allan Adair in the eponymous novel and the protagonists of The Land of the Lost and The Toll of the Bush – come from within a fairly narrow social range. So, somewhat more surprisingly do the principal characters in Jean Devanny’s The Butcher’s Shop although it is not so surprising if it’s accepted, as Heather Roberts I think argues, that the primary focus of the novel was gender rather than class relations.

What then about New Zealand society itself through these years? Was it full of individuals going ‘downhill’. On first glance, ‘no’. Which is to say that in 1933 (well that date itself is not that useful, but 1930 will do), most of the NZ population was better off, and had a higher standard of living, than its predecessor population did in 1900 (the exact opposite of what Marx expected in other words). The population was also more urban, and more ‘native’ – the proportion of NZ-born rose steadily through the three decades (it was to keep rising until 1951) and older, the average age of I think it was 21 in 1900 would have moved up by 1930 as the large families of the 1880s gave way to the smaller families who were coming to adulthood in the 1920s.
All of which would suggest that the experience with which I opened the lecture were either unrepresentative or becoming more so – i.e. becoming less representative.

I think in a general sense that may be correct, if only because families were becoming smaller, and one of the main triggers to poverty was family size. But there are a number of caveats.

Firstly, to return to the family history I outlined at the beginning of the talk. Whenever I have told the story to others, they have almost invariably commented, ‘oh something similar happened to my aunt’, or ‘there were neighbors of my grandparents and . . .’

One case, not entirely analogous but suggestive, involved a woman appearing before a magistrate in 1920 for using bad language when asked to leave licensed premises run by a former police officer with whom she had differences over her son, whom according to her, he’d accused of being a thief. The publican claimed that ‘she said she would go when she was __ well ready’ . . . and that as she walked out the door she said ‘you are only a __ __ ___’ which Truth helpfully elucidated as ‘the usual two startling Australasian adjectives, plus the pothouse noun, were alleged.’ Isabella Eckhoff was in fact the widow of a distinguished sea captain, but at age 70 or thereabouts had fallen on hard times fortunately for her not so hard that the case was not dismissed (she denied the charge saying that she had only called the licensee a ‘dirty mongrel’).³

Nineteenth-century frontier New Zealand may have been receding – 1920, the year of Mrs Eckhoff’s mishap, is as good a date as any – but the urbanized society which was replacing it was one in which, despite the advent of measures such as the old age and the widow’s pensions, there was relatively little security of income, employment or health. Individuals and families, even if they were not laid low by collective economic catastrophes such as played out in the early 1930s, might be laid low by more specific ones – the rise in the cost of living through the First World War, poor housing and accompanying poor health, and too many children. A memorandum to Wellington’s town

³ NZ Truth, 4 Dec 1920, on www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz
clerk from an inter-church committee instances one family with six children under 16 who, after having paid rent had just 16s to meet the weekly expenses of eight people. That was in 1934, and they may have been working class, but it is suggestive of the extent to which numbers of children, when coupled with other mishaps, could provoke familial crisis.

So what do we see in the writers of this period? As I foreshadowed in my earlier comments Mansfield does not really address ‘downhill’, her New Zealand stories show intense awareness of social patterns but the frame of reference is drawn tightly around the family rather than extended to a wider social world. Jane Mander, in *Story of a New Zealand River* comes much closer to today’s theme, which is perhaps why I like it. Alice Rowland has made a loveless marriage to provide a home and respectability for her daughter and herself – the ‘downhill’ therefore precedes the opening of the novel but shadows it all the way through, until energetically dismissed by the young Asia. Some of Mander’s male characters, in both *Story* and *Allan Adair*, as Satchell’s, have clearly fallen on hard times, but as for the most part they’re errant sons from well-established English families – remittance men and the like – so they don’t fit particularly well into my theme. (I haven’t recently re-read the *Butcher’s Shop* so can’t comment reliably about the characters in that.)

So for my money, there’s fictional gold yet to be extracted from the social history of pre-depression 20th century New Zealand. It will of course be different, because the novels must be *historical* not contemporary, and that brings with it a whole different set of concerns, but the opportunity is there.

**New Zealand 1933-1966**

I now turn to the mid-century period, viz, from approximately 1933 to 1966, from the trough of the depression to the ‘end of the golden weather’ as it is sometimes described. The advent of the ‘post-depression’ generation of writers brought about a revolution in
New Zealand letters – it does not seem too sharp a term. An advent, first – certainly in their own eyes and to a fair extent in the eyes of critics – of a generation who were truly ‘of New Zealand’. Other changes came with the territory, or so it seemed. Men rather than women writers, man alone rather than women or women and men together, a loosely articulated proletarian, Marxist vision of the world, a marked influence from some US writers of this and earlier times – Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway are cited. The period Lawrence Jones calls ‘the provincial period’, I’m not quite sure why. Leading the charge was of course Frank Sargeson, but also Dan Davin, John Reece Cole, AP Gaskell, David Ballantyne, James Courage, Bill Pearson – this last right at the end. Women writers don’t get on the radar in this period to the same extent though I am going to mention two later, Ngaio Marsh and Nellie Scanlan.

Now I like reading the novels of these writers – well I have come to, I have dived into a fair few over the last few years, but this is also the cohort, of the three whose ‘life and times’ I am exploring today, about which I am most exasperated.

I will come back to an explanation but first, some commentary on the social and cultural context. The first is that, if ‘uphill’ seemed to characterize New Zealand in the first third of the century, it did so even more markedly in the middle third. From the trough of the depression to the 1960s, New Zealand as a whole got steadily richer and richer. So speedy was the recovery from the depression indeed that in the late 1930s NZ had a claim to be the richest country in the world, in terms of per capita income. That was probably an exaggeration but it does capture a different reality to the one with which we are familiar today. The advent of ‘social security’ as it was so positively called, teamed with a full employment policy – the true social security – banished the fear and uncertainty that had plagued so many families and individuals in the early 20th century.

When I have done some pieces of social history for this period myself – in the course of institutional histories of government departments – I am overwhelmed by the extent of upward mobility (of course it could be regarded as a skewed sample) by which I mean the predominance of lower middle class (more often than working class) origins in those
who rose to high rank in such government agencies in the middle years of the century. In
the later 20th century doctors are often sons of doctors, professors of professors,
diplomats of diplomats. Such generational transmission was not available in the 1930s
and 1940s – the expansion of employment far exceeded the numbers of what we might
call ‘class-appropriate’ recruits to such professions.

Nonetheless, I think the writers went too far – or in the wrong direction. What do I mean
by that? In 1934 A.R.D. Fairburn, also very important in the story of this generation,
although not a novelist, wrote

Unless he is prepared with Hector Bolitho to become, with care and application,
an English novelist, the young New Zealand writer must be willing to partake,
internally as well as externally, of the anarchy of life in a new place and by his
creative energy give that life form and consciousness.5

Somewhat by analogy the Oxford Companion of NZ Literature in English describes
Sargeson as having ‘captured working-class New Zealand vernacular’.

What bugs me about these comments is the myth-making that lies at the heart of them.
Where was this ‘anarchy of life in a new place’ which Fairburn celebrated? Was it the life
of the clerks in insurance companies, banks and government departments, lives led not
just in the main centers but increasingly in provincial towns as well? Did it include the
lives of women, any women? What about school teachers, nurses and doctors,
accountants, secretaries, postmistresses, musicians, counter staff in department and other
stores and waiters and waitresses in restaurants and cafés? What about their
anxieties and ambitions? These were individuals – and there were hundreds and thousands of them –
for whom order, not anarchy was a motif, as it was indeed of the wider society. It wasn’t
necessary to be enamoured of New Zealand’s ‘Britishness’ to recognize that the social
landscape of Britain probably provided more clues to how to respond creatively to this

5 A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Some Aspects of New Zealand Art and Letters,’ Art in New Zealand, June 1934,
pp. 216-17, cited in Lawrence Jones, ‘Colonial like ourselves: the American influence on NZ fiction, 1934-
1965’, Deep South 2/1 (autumn 1996)
world than did the social landscape of the much more anarchic United States. And as for Sargeson having ‘captured working-class New Zealand vernacular’ – well, yes he did, but he himself was middle class, and his enthusiasm for working class men was as much erotic – in my opinion – as it was ideological. He liked ‘rough trade’ and he put the roughness and violence into his short stories. He wanted to go ‘downhill’ or at least have the vicarious experience of it. It was not the only reality of the world around him.6

There was in fact very little ‘anarchy of life in a new place’ in mid-20th century New Zealand – in this case the writers of that generation, far from striding out ahead, were in fact ‘leading from behind’. They had a notion of ‘downhill’ but it was the wrong one – the man alone was no longer (if he ever had been) the archetypal New Zealand male in mid-century, certainly not central to Mulgan’s own experience.7

I mention two woman novelists, Nellie Scanlan and Ngaio Marsh, because, in their anglophile way, they both had more of a sense of the fine distinctions in New Zealand social life and exploited such in their writing, which was however dismissed, not unfairly as ‘middle brow’. And in fact neither was that interested in ‘downhill’ perhaps because they were so determinedly themselves heading ‘uphill’.

So where are we to look for ‘downhill’ if not in the past, and not in a seemingly undramatic present? If we don’t find, or not so centrally, the kind of catastrophic ‘downhill’ in midcentury as we do in the early part of the century, I think we do find some analogues, which relate to a more general theme which informs some of the discussion about New Zealand society through these years, associated particularly with W.H. Oliver and other historians who have explored what they see as the relative absence of class in New Zealand, or not so much its absence as the ‘low ceiling, high floor’ approach – also discussed by Robert Chapman in a much cited 1950s article, ‘Fiction and the social pattern’, I am sure some of you are familiar with it. In a society where sharp differences

6 See further on masculinity and the NZ novel, Kai Jensen, Whole men: the masculine tradition in NZ literature, Auckland, AUP, 1996
7 See generally on this discussion Stuart Murray, Never a soul at home: New Zealand literary nationalism and the 1930s, Wellington, VUP, 1998
are ironed out and the possibility of dizzying advancement – or, our interest today – regression – are reduced, preoccupation turns to finer gradations of status – which school did you go to, which suburb do you live in (if in Israel, I’m informed, it’s which army unit you served in). This suggests at one level the extent to which we need social demarcation, need to create worlds of insiders and outsiders and that if they don’t exist, we will invent them. I’m not entirely convinced of that, but there areas which approximate that in mid-century New Zealand all of which posed threats of a kind of ‘demotion’ in the minds of the middle class, and which are relatively unexplored in the literature.

The matters are, as might be expected, social rather than economic, and I think particularly of mixed marriages, divorce and illegitimacy. I’m not going to say more about them, because I want to go on to the later 20th century, however briefly, so that I can rant about that too, but it’s interesting, to take just one highly charged example, to see a 1950 issue of the Mirror (a monthly which was a curious combination of society journal, women’s magazine and political comment) having a very frank discussion about relationships and marriages between Maori and non-Maori in its regular ‘advice’ column.

It begs a lot of questions to assume that such a marriage, most likely between a Māori man and a Pākehā woman, was labeled ‘downhill’ by middle class Pākehā certainly begs the question of whether it might have been so labeled by Māori, but let us assume that it was, for the moment, remembering that the 1950s was a decade when the phrase ‘back to the mat’ was still in common usage, when Māori could be denied service in hotels and accommodation in flats that were available for rent.

I’m not familiar with Roderick Finlayson’s novels but my sense is that his rural settings preclude this kind of exploration; it’s Barbara Ewing who comes closest to it in what is however an historical, and autobiographical novel, about inter-racial relations in a Wellington government department in the 1950s, in A Dangerous Vine (1999). Fiona Kidman has also explored the theme, autobiographically.
The same sort of issues arose for many in mid-century as between Catholic and non-Catholic. In this instance we have Dan Davin to thank for providing us with insight, especially in *Roads from Home*, although it’s more an epitaph – the new generation, his generation, are not governed by sectarian prejudices, but it is in the DNA (if that’s not mixing the metaphor) of the earlier generation, moreover we see it more from the Catholic than the Protestant side whereas the thrust of class power in New Zealand society in these years ran the other way; Protestant establishments and Catholic challengers, so what happened if a Protestant married a Catholic, especially if a Protestant woman married a Catholic man?

For more evidence of class demotion we can go to another contemporary writer, Stevan Eldred-Grigg, who in *Oracle and Miracles* (1987) tells the story not just of working class sisters but of the middle class men who marry them. In fact it is primarily a Cinderella story, although a Cinderella for whom the silver slipper – or was it the kiss, I can never quite recall – brought a metaphorical death not life. The implicit demotion of the husband is overlooked and he pretty much disappears from the successor novels of the trilogy.

I’m skating over other mid-century novels important in terms of the ‘downhill’ theme. Very quickly, Bill Pearson’s *Coal Flat* (1963) which captured many social gradations: the errant son’s marriage to a ‘good-time’ girl from Dunedin; the boy who was taken away from the Maori surrogate parent, the intersection between Catholicism and other allegiances. Yet in all it’s a novel which to my way of thinking doesn’t come to life, either in these or in other ways.

In *Memoir of a Peon* (1965) Frank Sargeson turned his back on his earlier material and drew a picture of an ornate, wordy, comic Tom Jones/Casanova (the protagonist is ‘Newhouse’) type novel; the characters are principally middle class, as the *Oxford Companion* acknowledges, but the fate of Newhouse is personal rather than social as befits his literary progenitor.
Maurice Gee’s *A Special Flower* came out in the same year. The protagonist’s family view his attachment to someone of another class as a betrayal; the *Oxford Companion* is ‘reminded of the ambitious mother and blunt working father in D.H. Lawrence’s life and fiction’ – in particular in *Sons and Lovers* I guess. This fits pretty neatly into my schema because it’s about refinements of social gradation, which is what I would argue are – should be – a specialty of midcentury writing. But *Special Flower* is primarily about constriction vs vitality, death versus life; the meticulously observed social landscape is the enabling setting, not the core of the story itself.

Should later writers return to this period, as Ewing and Eldred-Grigg both did? Both works of theirs which I mentioned have strong biographical and/or autobiographical strands, which have plainly helped them to decode the period. I think novelists setting to work on the period today will have a harder job dealing with ‘downhill’ than if they took a situation from the first third of the century because the nuances are finer. Sadly, the anxieties and fears of those clerks and shop assistants and their ‘betters’ may remain forever absent from the fictional landscape.

**New Zealand 1966-2000**

This brings me to the third and last of the three periods and an explosion of novelists and novels, too many to mention – or to forget – and in any case not enough time to do them justice, barring a few outline points. And even then I am going to pass completely over Janet Frame – too much to comment on rather than too little – and the Maori novelists – Grace, Ihimaera and others – where the intersections of class with race are particularly complex.

That explosion of novelist, novels and short stories makes it much harder to generalize – or maybe the period is just too close. The postmodern tendency, with its critique of the very idea of the novel, also complicates the analysis.
From the point of view of the social and economic landscape, on the other hand, it’s clear that ‘downhill’ had a revival. Volatility returned, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, with the mix of unemployment, inflation, restructuring as a state of life, technological change affecting careers, and the sudden collapse of finance companies and the like, not just in 1987 but in the last few years, attesting to the seemingly permanent impermanence of capitalism.

It’s true that there are ‘stabilizers’ – government spending on unemployment benefits counters the diminution of private spending, government borrowing, as in the last couple of years, keeps economic activity more buoyant than it would otherwise be – this is very different from the pre-1933 world. But there are enough stories, catastrophes and collapses to give pause to, or material for, the novelist and writer.

And we look more closely at some of the novels we come up with another finding. In Maurice Gee’s *Crime story*, set in mid-1980s Wellington, the Proudhonian aphorism, ‘property is theft’ is an underlying motif. Paula Morris’ not very aptly named *Hibiscus Coast* (2005) deals with forgery, theft and murder. Alan Duff’s *Once Were Warriors* (1990) and certainly Craig Marriner’s *Stonedogs* (2001), which replicates Duff’s Rotorua setting, oppose middle class worlds (insofar as they feature at all) not so much against the working class as against lower class dystopias.

Is this what ‘downhill’ required in the last third of the century, when ideas about class, especially from the mid-1980s onwards, were reconfigured as ideas about law and order, insiders and outsiders? The ‘downhill’ character is the embezzler, the drug dealer, the pornographer – it might be that these more personal ‘demotions’ have more fictional power and heft than the more collective kind of demotion I am keen to see explored.
Conclusions

This brings my tiki tour of class demotion in 20th century New Zealand life and literature to a close. If I now present you with findings it would imply a depth to the analysis which is unjustified. I hope though I have convinced you of a couple of things. Firstly that ‘downhill’ is important, compelling, and under-represented in New Zealand writing, despite being an important part of the New Zealand social landscape. Secondly, and this was implicit rather than spelt out in this talk, that women may experience more downhill than do men, and that on the whole they write about it better. I’m sure that will come as no surprise to this audience.

Thank you.