

# Each to their own

The inspired idea to appoint a New Zealand Poet Laureate was hatched in a pub, and involves rather a lot of wine...

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**NINE POETS LAUREATE** walk into a room" sounds like the start of a joke, but nine did just that at Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa National Library recently, to celebrate 25 years of the Poet Laureateship, and the launch of a hand-printed edition of poetry written by current Laureate David Eggleton. Awarded biennially to a highly regarded poet who can speak about New Zealand poetry to its readers and potential readers, the Poet Laureateship has been bestowed on Bill Manhire (1997-1999), Hone Tuwhare (1999-2001), Elizabeth Smither (2001-2003), Brian Turner (2003-2005), Jenny Bornholdt (2005-2007), Michele Leggott (2007-2009), Cilla McQueen (2009-2011), Ian Wedde (2011-2013), Vincent O'Sullivan (2013-2015), C. K. Stead (2015-2017), Selina Tusitala Marsh (2017-2019) and Eggleton (2019-2021). Of those, Tuwhare has died, and Stead and Leggott couldn't make it to the celebration.

"With nine attending the event, this was the biggest-ever assembly of the Poets Laureate," says Peter Ireland, the National Library's quietly spoken exhibitions manager, who has looked after the laureateship for 14 years.

The role began in 1996 when John Buck from Te Mata Estate winery, who was founder – and initially funder – of the Poet Laureateship, overheard two Cabinet Ministers discussing Poet Laureate positions abroad (the United Kingdom has had one since 1631). Could New Zealand have itself a Poet Laureate, he wondered. He, publisher Brian Phillips and the late publisher Keith Stewart invited poet Bill Manhire to the pub to talk about it. "They started describing the Poet Laureateship, what it might entail, how long it [each term] would last, and the connection with Te Mata winery," says Manhire. "I said, 'This is a very good idea. If I were you, I would do this and

do that.'" They offered him the inaugural appointment, with the sweetener of a butt of Te Mata wine – that's roughly two standard barrels. All the Poets Laureate have received a generous gift of wine, says Buck. "The first English Poets Laureate got paid in butts."

"Thankfully, there's no requirement to write for royal deaths and births like the English Poet Laureate," says Manhire. "But I took on a few auction commissions. At one fundraiser, I said I'd write a love poem for whoever made the biggest bid." Peter Dunkerley, who has a shop in Hastings known for selling first-division Lotto prizes, had the winning bid of \$2500. "So I actually had to write a poem from Peter to his then-squeeze." As Laureate, Manhire found himself intentionally writing poems for the public sphere rather than keeping them to himself. "My highlight was going to the South Pole for three-and-a-half weeks in

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1998, through Artists to Antarctica."

Buck funded the Laureateship for nine years until 2006, when the National Library became custodian because, in 2007, thanks partly to Buck's advocacy the government made the position of New Zealand Poet Laureate "official" and allocated funding. (Buck has since made occasional financial and in-kind contributions.)

Before choosing the Poet Laureate, 60 to 100 nominations arrive, says Ireland. The Poet Laureate Advisory Group has three or four rotating members, including John Buck's son Toby and Ireland; they generally agree, but vote if necessary. Each Laureate gets \$80,000 and a tokotoko: a traditional Māori walking stick, carved by Jacob Scott. The Laureates work with their publishers to produce a poetry collection during their tenure. Each has also contributed to the organisation's blog/archive, such as Cilla McQueen's novella based on images from the National Library's collections.

There are few prescribed tasks, says Ireland: "Each Laureate has inhabited the role quite differently." Manhire agrees. "You'd think everybody would do the same thing – behave the same way – but each writer has their own voice and gives the Laureateship their own character."

From 2017 to 2019, Selina Tusitala Marsh made the role her own. "How you do it, is just to be it," she says. "I was already speaking at schools and that skyrocketed

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after I became Poet Laureate. I've visited 11 countries, 40-plus towns and cities, and presented to more than 5000 kids. Michele [Leggott] took her tokotoko into public spaces, and I took mine everywhere."

In 2016, Tusitala Marsh wrote a poem for the Queen, "Unity", which she read at Westminster Abbey, with her Majesty present. She also wrote the award-winning graphic memoir *Mophead* about what it means to be Poet Laureate in Aotearoa. "It's an extended family," she says. "I went to Napier and was welcomed by the family of tokotoko carver Jacob Scott – and John showed me around his winery. Being Poet Laureate isn't just an official role. It comes with a whole whānau." [poetaureate.org.nz](http://poetaureate.org.nz)