Washing up in Paekākākāriki

(aka Parrot Bay)

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Paekākāriki Station Precinct Trust

in association with ESAW

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Frances on Paekākāriki Beach, circa 2015.

Introduction

> Linda stood on the viewing platform and looked down at Parrot Bay. The houses and strips of road were more like a model than a real township. To the west the expanse of sea seemed to go on forever, and the island looked so small. Beyond the houses miles of park and sand-hills curved into a narrow, tree-covered point, stretching out into the sea.[1] [1]

In her innovative, lesbian, spiritualist novel, *Washing up in Parrot Bay* (published in 1999), those who knew Frances Cherry are aware that *Parrot Bay* is a fictitious name for her beloved Paekākāriki (The perch of the green parrot).

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1 This description captures the view of Paekākāriki from the Lookout in Queen Elizabeth Park, once the site of Wainui Pā.

Frances Cherry was a New Zealand writer and author of a raft of books and short stories. Although she was ambivalent, at least in later life, about being labelled as a particular sort of writer, much of her work is feminist. It is aimed primarily at women, addressing the often thorny themes of marriage, motherhood, divorce, lesbianism, and widowhood. Later, Frances's junior fiction series addressed the challenges of parental separation, custody and step parenting. Unafraid to explore the often dark, emotional undercurrents of diverse relationships and ways of living, her stories have a therapeutic quality.

Paekākāriki was close to Frances's heart, her spiritual home, her tūrangawaewae. It was here she lived as a young married woman, raised five children, and helped run various family enterprises with her husband, Bob Cherry. It was also the home, in their later life, of both her parents and her younger sister. It was to Paekākāriki that Frances returned as an older woman, before making what was to be her last move, back to the Wellington suburb of Kilbirnie where she grew up. Even in the Rita Angus Retirement Village, she still spoke longingly of Paekākāriki, of how she might stage a return, while knowing full well this was no longer a possibility. Yet she continued to enjoy tales of village life until Parkinson's disease overtook her at the end.

Birth & childhood

Born on 25 November 1937 in Wellington to communist parents, Connie and Albert (Birchie) Birchfield, Frances was set for an unusual life. For starters, her mother was almost 40 years old when she had Frances; old, especially in that era, to give birth to a first baby. Not surprisingly, Frances was an especially cherished and coddled child. Elsie Locke, her mother's good friend and fellow communist, visited Connie and found her 'ecstatic' to be holding a baby, 'Because I think you had perhaps, in a way,

expected...that you wouldn't have children, and now you have a real live one, a pretty one too'.[2]

Frances's sister, Maureen Birchfield, wrote a biography of their mother, which was published in 1998.[3] A brief description of Connie hardly does her mother justice, but it helps to explain Frances. Connie had more than her fair share of energy and could always be relied on to defy trends. She was a Lancashire lass who worked in the cotton mills before emigrating to New Zealand where she became involved in unions and the Labour Party, joining the Communist Party in the 1930s. Connie became a well-known identity in Wellington, a soapbox orator and agitator. For her daughters, she was a source of immense mortification. Seeing her communist mother standing on a soapbox in Wellington's Courtenay Place was Frances's 'most embarrassing moment'[4], closely seconded by the sight of her father selling the *People's Voice* on Cuba Street.

On becoming pregnant, Connie had to relinquish the running of Wellington's *International Bookshop*, a Friends of the Soviet Union bookshop which she had founded in 1932.[5] But motherhood was not going to stop her political activities. Frances was only fourteen months old when Connie appeared in court for taking part in 'a procession without a permit'.[6] Before Frances turned two, her younger sister, Maureen, was born. Both sisters were good-looking, Frances blonde and blue-eyed, and Maureen with darker hair.

With her inimitable energy, Connie managed to balance activism with motherhood, throwing herself with gusto into cooking, sewing, gardening, crocheting, knitting and wallpapering. The Birchfields' home life was characterised by the toing and froing of communist friends, guests and lodgers. Political discussions were always on the table.[7]

Like Connie before her, Frances's later political concerns came under a wide umbrella of local and national issues. (Connie also fought for

neighbourhood changes, such as the placement of the Rongotai airport away from houses during the 1950s). Frances took these lessons forward into her own life: how to be political, how to have a voice, how to be visible, how to be heard. Along with her mother's milk, Frances imbibed a sense of political agency: the importance of making a difference.

Frances's activism did not manifest however until she was much older. By her own description, she was a 'normal', self-obsessed and self-conscious adolescent. Later, as a kind of party trick that never failed to make people laugh, Frances would read aloud passages from her teenage diary: a dramatic account of the feelings and activities of an expressive young woman. A reluctant student, Frances was more interested in friends, dancing and boyfriends, falling desperately in love with a blond haired, blue-eyed and married American sailor from the icebreaker *Northwind,* that docked in Wellington Harbour in September 1957.[8] Frances even took her Yankee mariner, Don, home to meet her communist parents, who politely welcomed this representative from the heart of capitalism. Decades later she contacted him only to find, to her disappointment, that he was a rabid Republican and supporter of the United States' president George W. Bush - as far from her own political leanings as was possible. This story, with its suggestion of a rekindled late-in-life but unlikely romance, became more tragi-comic with each retelling.

Frances loved rock and roll dancing.
(Reprinted in colour as Frances's 70th birthday invitation).

Paekākāriki round one: marriage & children

Frances, Bob, Brent, Jane and Robert in their Paekākāriki garden, 1971.

Frances Cherry with her oldest child, Brent, in 1959.[9]

In September 1958, Frances married a Tasmanian man, Robert Hume Cherry. Bob Cherry originally came to New Zealand with the Australian Navy, later landing a job in Wellington as a wool presser.

Those Paekākāriki old timers who remember the larger-than-life Bob Cherry are a dying breed. Darkly handsome and impossible to overlook, Bob stood taller than most people around him in stature and presence, as well as in assets and achievements. A small-town property magnate, Bob soon became known, not always flatteringly, as 'Mr Paekākāriki'. Like most big personalities he had a multitude of friends and supporters, as well as his share of detractors.

Bob's Ocker manners may help explain why some New Zealanders found him brash and, much to Frances's embarrassment, even an occasional braggart. This swagger may have partly reflected his Australian heritage, a one-man diaspora from that land to the west where most creatures are bigger, brighter and noisier.

Frances and Bob tied the knot at the tender ages of 20 and 23 respectively in St James church in Newtown, Wellington, in a ceremony presided over by a 'left-wing parson'.[10] The frugal Connie sewed Frances's wedding dress. Although Connie was an atheist, she did not show disapproval of her daughter's decision to marry in a church.

After a time living in a bleak, cold Wellington flat, Frances and Bob drifted incrementally northwards: first to Plimmerton, then to Pukerua Bay, before finally alighting on Paekākāriki in 1966. Paekākāriki made sense as Bob was already managing the Europa petrol station at the bottom of the Paekākāriki Hill Road on the main highway, with further business opportunities in the village beckoning. By then they had four young children in tow, Brent (born in 1959), Craig (1961), Jane (1963) and Robert (1965). Caitlin, the youngest, was born seven years later in 1972.

The Mission House, a large homestead built by Paekākāriki's early

settler Smith family - and later a sanctuary for Open Brethren Church missionaries on sabbatical - became their nest. Although its official address was 69 Tilley Road, the house sits with several others in what is now known as Mira Grove at the top of the hill in Tilley Road. Overlooking the sea and directly behind the school, the homestead's main aspect faces the steep Paekākāriki hills and Perkins' Farm: then the home of Frances's good friend, Betty Perkins. Just a short walk down Ocean Road were the glistening sea and Ocean Road steps: a social hub in summer.

A trip to the beach down Ocean Road, late 1960s.
Bob (with ball), Frances, Maureen, Birchie, Craig and Robert.

In stark contrast to the Cherrys' own grand property were the railway cottages further north on Tilley Road: the once subsidised housing for the families of men who worked for the railways. Some rail families had a large number of children and many were hard-up. Sadly, these families have long since gone, as part of New Zealand Rail's privatisation.

Hot on her heels, Frances's parents moved to Paekākāriki in 1968 buying No. 55 Wellington Road, then 'a bachy little place with a long section

that ran alongside the Sand Track that led from Wellington Road to the beach.'[11] Birchie worked for a couple of years as the groundsman in Queen Elizabeth Park, while still missing his life in Wellington where he was a known identity with many friends and acquaintances. He died in 1984. By contrast, Connie revelled in Paekākāriki, surrounded by grandchildren and involved in various groups.

Frances and her father (Birchie), date unknown.

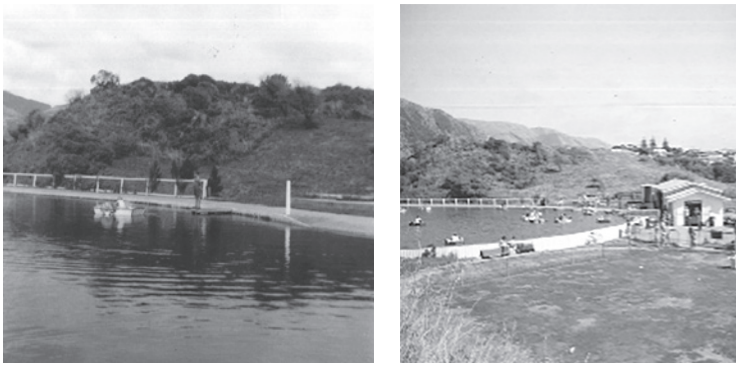
A typical day for Frances was spent doing housework, shooting the breeze with other housewives over coffee, and gasbagging on the phone, always conscious there might be flapping ears on the party line. The telephone exchange was in the old Post Office in Beach Road. In her memoir, Frances records:

> There was a telephone exchange in Paekākāriki and everyone was on a party line. We had a big box on the wall with a handle to turn so many times to get hold of people. Ours was something like two long rings and one short turn of the handle. Sometimes people would listen to other people's calls (you could hear them breathing) and the women (only women of course) at the exchange would often tell us where Mrs So and So was – 'She's gone shopping in Paraparaumu.[12]

Close family friends at that time included Tipene O'Regan, then a teacher at Paekākāriki school, and his wife Sandra. The young O'Regans and Cherrys often played together.

Along with his business partner, Len Reid, Bob bought up large in the village: a block of shops, a small TAB, the grocery store, and the vegetable shop. They also owned a septic tank company called Spick and Span; the Belvedere motels – purchased in a mortgagee sale – on the main highway next to the Europa service station, and the neighbouring house (another homestead owned by the settler Smith family), and later converted by them to the 1906 Restaurant.

In the early 1970s, Bob and Len took over the concession at Queen Elizabeth Park. A drawcard for young families, there was a boating pond, putting green and shop to which the Cherrys added trampolines, a merry-go-round, a chairoplane and a miniature train. Frances helped run the park and sometimes cleaned the motels.



The Boating Pond, Queen Elizabeth Park, circa 1970s.

Reflecting their social aspirations. Bob bought himself a black Austin Vanden Plas Princess and a crimson pink, two-door Austin Marina for Frances.

After starting a group for mothers with young children at home, Frances threw herself into playcentre, then held in the tennis club rooms, eventually becoming its president.

As Frances's stories depict, she had mixed feelings about motherhood. Although her love for her children was never in doubt, Frances chafed at society's restrictions, judgements and expectations. It was the opinion of other mothers that she dreaded the most. Later, when she left her own marriage for life in the city, she imagined a sense of schadenfreude among those Paekākāriki women friends whom she suspected of being trapped in unhappy marriages: a feeling that finally this cocky family who ruled the village from their roost on Mira Road had got 'their just desserts'.[13] Maybe this is why, later, she rejected any form of feminism that subscribed to the simplistic binary of 'good women / bad men'.

Frances loved Paekākāriki as she knew so many people there, and the children loved it. Bob knew everyone, as he sold them all petrol. For a time, their homestead became Party Central. Frances told of how late one night she lay drunk with a neighbour on Tilley Road looking at the stars, without a thought to traffic of which there was little then. And every Guy Fawke's night, along with many other Paekākāriki-ites, they went to Perkins' farm where there was a bonfire.[14]

'Paekākāriki was the world and Bob was king of it', wrote Frances.[15] While initially proud of her husband, Frances became increasingly conscious of the envy their lifestyle inspired; how some people viewed them as a kind of Paekākāriki royalty or mercantile elite because of the size of their house and Bob's many business interests. The children suffered too. Frances's older daughter, Jane, tells of being called a 'rich bitch' and chased home from Paekākāriki school.[16]

As she drove around in her crimson car, Frances experienced self-doubt. Was this marriage a form of rebellion against her upbringing and

her mother's avid dislike of individuals who exploit others: those greedy capitalists who made Connie's 'blood boil.'?[17] And what did her father really think of her marriage? Although Frances understood Bob's showing off was a reaction to his childhood, she become increasingly embarrassed when hearing him telling people what he owned. Her pride in her husband was on the wane.

Bob's friends called him the Tasmanian Devil. According to Frances, 'He was a devil of a kid and a devil of an adult'.[18] In *Dancing with strings*, Frances describes her larrikin husband as a clown, 'Who else's husband would steal the bell off the Paekākāriki railway station and want to hang it on their own veranda? She hated feeling like a mother, making him take it back. But then he had another story to tell people, how the stationmaster believed him when he said he'd found it on the side of the road. People laughed thought he was funny – but they didn't have to live with him.'[19] Frances weighed up leaving – there was no Domestic Purposes Benefit payments until 1974 - and secretly hoped that Bob might desert her so she would be left with the house.

Some evenings, Frances looked wistfully into the neighbours' kitchen where the husband stood drying the dinner dishes, while her own husband was down at the pub.[20]

Doubts aside, Paekākāriki was a paradise for the kids.

> They could wander more or less where they liked, climb up the hills, and swim at the beach. After school in the summer we often went down to the beach where there were other mothers and kids… Paekākāriki was a real community where everyone knew each other. Many were involved in the school, play centre, tennis club, bowling club and surf club. Also there was St Peter's Hall, which was hired out for films, concerts and sometimes plays – and the shops where people caught up with each other.[21]

Much like today, in fact.

The pub was a different story. It was the one Paekākāriki institution that Frances bitterly resented because it stole her husband away from her and the family. Hooked on the masculine company, the big talk and the booze, Bob would come home only after closing time, which, thankfully, was at 6pm in the early family years. At least during the week, when his work finished at 6pm, he would not usually get there. Most weekends, he spent at the RSA Club in Wellington Road, drinking or playing pool, or at the pub.

In *Dancing with strings*, Frances wrote: 'Some people complain that New Zealand is an uncivilised country because the pubs close at six o' clock but all [I] can think of is how much worse it would be for her if they were open later. Then [I'd] never see him and he'd probably get drunk all the time.'[22]

However, on 9 October 1967, New Zealand introduced 10 o'clock closing and 'all my fears came to fruition. Now Bob went to the pub every night when he finished work and I never knew when he was coming home… Sometimes he'd claim he hadn't been to the pub, but I could smell the alcohol and cigarette smoke on him.'[23]

Much later, lamenting the Paekākāriki Hotel's demolition in 2005, Frances wrote a poem, which was published by the Dominion Post:

DOWN AT THE PAEKĀKĀRIKI PUB

When I met him he was young

And at the beginning

Anything was possible

I loved him

Even when I was unhappy

But being the big man down at the Paekak pub

Was the most important thing for him

I hated that place

But now it's gone (and he's gone)

And I think it's a bloody shame.[24]

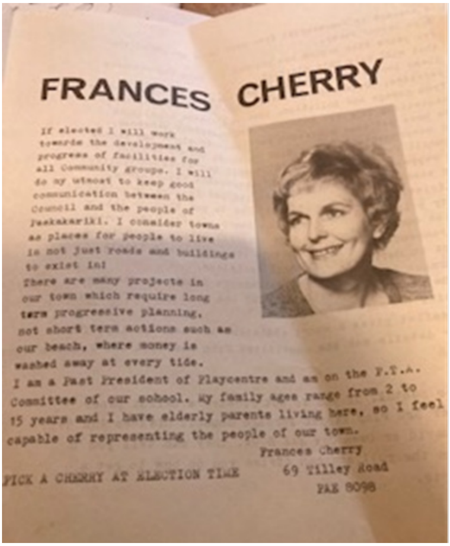
Paekākāriki Hotel, Date Unknown. Photo: Andrew Ross.

In 1972, following the birth of their last child, Caitlin, Frances had run out of excuses for putting off writing. She went to a WEA writing class run by Fiona Kidman, then to VUW Sunday writing workshops, the first one run by Christine Cole Catley. As became her style, her stories sympathetically addressed those often silent, but insufferable, situations in which people can find themselves. In ‘About Janice’ she writes of the girl who does badly at school, unable to do her homework due to her parents’ fighting and forced to clean up after her father and his boozy mates each night[25]; while ‘Nothing to Worry About’ evokes the alienation and dissociation of a woman she had read about in the news who had killed her children.[26] Here, as so often in her writing, Frances took something deeply shocking and made it relatable: ‘I wondered what had caused her to do it. I wanted to write a sympathetic story. Even though my life was nowhere as bad as hers, a lot of the feeling of waiting, worrying and hoping was.’[27]

Despite the apparent irony of the communist daughter wedded to the wealthy capitalist, Frances had not abandoned completely the values of her childhood. In the mid-1970s, along with Ames Street resident John Cox, she stood as a Labour candidate for Kāpiti Borough, promising to represent the needs of Paekākāriki. She felt it was important that a woman stand but, as no one put themself forward, she decided to do so. Her catch cry was ‘Pick a Cherry at Election Time’. Unfortunately, their bid was unsuccessful but Frances was pleased to get 200 votes.

Pick a Cherry at Election Time

Mid 1970s Frances stood as a Labour candidate for Kāpiti Borough, promising to represent the needs of Paekākāriki.



FRANCES CHERRY

If elected I will work towards the development and progress of facilities for all Community groups. I will do my utmost to keep good communication between the Council and the people of Paekakariki. I consider towns as places for people to live in not just roads and buildings to exist in!

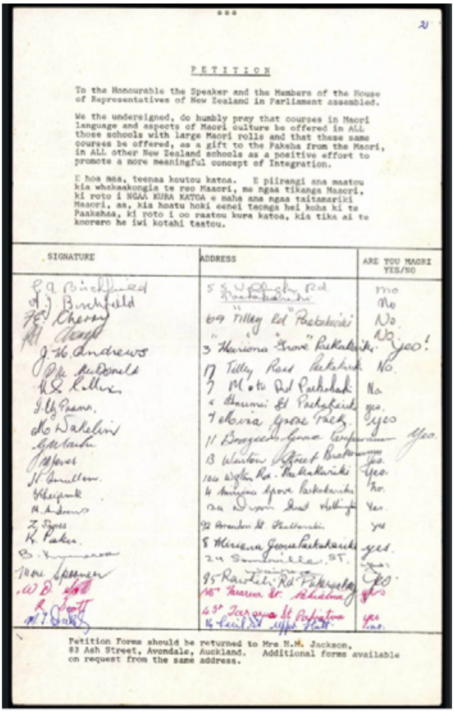
There are many projects in our town which require long term progressive planning, not short term actions such as our beach, where money is washed away at every tide.

I am a Past President of Playcentre and am on the P.T.A. Committee of our school. My family ages range from 2 to 15 years and I have elderly parents living here, so I feel capable of representing the people of our town.

Frances Cherry
69 Tilley Road
PAE 8098

PICK A CHERRY AT ELECTION TIME

1972 Petition to Parliament to promote Māori language and culture in schools signed by Frances, her parents (the Birchfields), and other Paekakariki residents, including Jean Andrews (Ngāti Haumia, Ngāti Toa).



21

P E T I T I O N

To the Honourable the Speaker and the Members of the House of Representatives of New Zealand in Parliament assembled.

We the undersigned, do humbly pray that courses in Maori language and aspects of Maori culture be offered in ALL those schools with large Maori rolls and that these same courses be offered, as a gift to the Pakeha from the Maori, in ALL other New Zealand schools as a positive effort to promote a more meaningful concept of Integration.

E hoa maa, teenaa koutou katoa. E piirangi ana maatou kia whakaakongia te reo Maaori, me ngaa tikanga Maaori, ki roto i NGAA KURA KATOA e maha ana ngaa taitamariki Maaori, aa, kia hoatu hoki eenei taonga hei koha ki te Paakehaa, ki roto i oo raatou kura katoa, kia tika ai te koorero he iwi kotahi taatou.

SIGNATURE	ADDRESS	ARE YOU MAORI YES/NO
E. G. Birchfield	5 S. W. [illegible] Rd Paekakariki	No
J. Birchfield	"	No
F. Cherry	69 Tilley Rd Paekakariki	No
[illegible]	"	No
J. H. Andrews	3 Hariona Grove Paekakariki	Yes!
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]

Petition Forms should be returned to Mrs H.M. Jackson, 83 Ash Street, Avondale, Auckland. Additional forms available on request from the same address.

The murder that shook the nation

In March 1975, Paekākāriki hit the national headlines in an event that struck fear and horror into the hearts of local residents and seared itself into the national consciousness. At a time when murder was uncommon in Aotearoa, Queen Elizabeth Park became the scene of one of the country's most shocking killings The newly married Gail McFadyen was staying in a caravan at Paekākāriki camping ground with her husband Graham while they were having a house built elsewhere. On 17 March, Gail saw her husband off to his new teaching job at Kāpiti College. When Graham came home, Gail was nowhere to be found. The police interviewed every person in Paekākāriki separately. Gail's body was later discovered in a sandy grave in Queen Elizabeth Park off a track near the surf club. Frances recalled what a 'terrible time it was with people imagining all sorts of things; many thought that [an old local] had killed her because he was often seen standing up on the road watching the girls on the beach.'[28]

A groundsman at the Park, John Murphy, was convicted of her murder. Mike Bungay was the lawyer for the defence, later including the case in a book about killers he represented.[29] In a strange twist of fate, Bungay's wife, Ronda, subsequently became one of Frances's close friends.

The end of Frances's marriage

Bob turned forty in 1975, but that year fell sick with the heart disease that eventually killed him. Like the Tasmanian Devil, his nickname, Bob was an endangered species. Refusing to heed medical advice to rest, he was quickly back at work and the pub.

The Cherry union had effectively ended by 1978. The commencement of DPB payments in 1974 now offered an economic alternative, although

limited, to marriage.[2] If ever there was a time for exiting wedlock, it was now. In her memoir, Frances writes tellingly of her own and her husband's dalliances. Following a local liaison, Bob visited his family in Australia. Here he met his new wife, bringing her and her daughter back to Paekākāriki to a house in Ames Street, only to return before long to Australia. But, in 1981, Frances received news that felt 'as if someone had thrown a huge concrete block into my diaphragm'.[30] Only 46 years old, Bob had died unexpectedly from myocarditis - some might say from a broken heart from the devastation wreaked upon the family by the ending of his marriage - leaving everything to his new family and not a bean to his original family. In her memoir, Frances speculates that because Bob was not expecting to die so soon, with his money in Australia at the time, he probably 'would have done something about [his will] later.'[31] Later in life her early bitterness having dissipated, Frances looked back at the good parts of her marriage, wondering if she and Bob could or should have 'stuck things out' for the sake of their children.

At the time, though, Frances had to summon all her courage to walk away from her marriage and the small town of Paekākāriki where she imagined disapproval at every turn. 'Selfish' is what she supposed they called her, but that was not going to hold her back.

> I didn't want to be in Paekākāriki any more. I wanted a new start where I could go forward without pain. Everybody knew your business in Paekākāriki and if they didn't they made it up. I wanted to be in a place where, if I went to the supermarket, the staff didn't know anything about me. I felt as if all eyes were upon me when I went down to the village. I wanted to be anonymous.[32]

Frances knew she would lose friends along the way, but she still possessed the golden gift of being able to make new ones at the drop of a

2 The Kirk Labour government introduced the Domestic Purposes Benefit in 1973, with payments commencing the following year.

hat. Did not her mother often say, ‘the sun always shines for Frances!’[33]

This middle stage of Frances’s life was life-changing. The 1970s and early 1980s saw feminism flourishing in New Zealand, with the emergence of numerous groups, magazines, and conventions. At Easter 1979, she went to the United Women’s Convention in Hamilton. Here, she was exposed to radical feminist ideas and met other women who had left, or were in the process of leaving, unsatisfactory marriages.

Poster for the 1979 United Women’s Convention in Hamilton.[34]

One of around 2500 attendees, Frances was deeply influenced by her time at the Convention. There were sessions and workshops on everything from abortion to workplace discrimination. She found it both liberating and scary, especially the exclusionary politics. As the mother of sons, Frances felt conflicted by the apparent abhorrence of men, who were barred from attending.

Around this time, Frances bought a house in Brooklyn, took up with a much younger woman, Wellington lawyer, Barbara Buckett, and threw herself wholeheartedly into the lesbian world. Cross pollination with Paekākāriki continued – close friends and family still lived there - but the village now felt much too small for her.

Frances & Barbara Buckett, mid-1980s.

Lesbian politics and homosexual law reform became a big part of Frances's life. Along with her lesbian and gay friends, she celebrated the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Act in 1986. During the 1980s, footloose and fancy-free, Frances caught the travel bug. First, there was a trip to the USA with friend Miriam Saphira; then a Victoria University led group tour to India, Nepal and Burma; and an expenses-paid visit to Europe with an old family friend, which, sadly, saw the ending of that friendship. But at least she could say she was there when the Berlin Wall came down.

In India, 1985.

This period of Frances's life, just over a decade, is best told in her close-to-the-bone novel *Dancing with strings,* published in 1989. Described as 'the first lesbian novel published in New Zealand'[35], its back cover reads: 'Embarrassed daughter of 'Commie' parents in 1950s Wellington, bride of a deceptively engaging Aussie in the 60s, suburban mum in the 70s ... Katherine's still trying to sort out her life in the 80s, coming to terms with what she wants in a close relationship, afraid of committing herself to someone new.'[36]

Paekākāriki round two: late-life adventures

By the start of the 1990s, finding herself single again after an exciting, tumultuous, and writing-filled decade, Frances was restless. The Paekākāriki magic was once more at work. In 1991, in the grip of intense nostalgia, she visited a friend there, 'It was a beautiful day and I thought I just have to live there again.'[37]

It took a while to find something, but in May that year she bought 51 The Parade, a small villa one house back from the beach up a long driveway.

‘It was a pink and grey house, not very exciting from the outside but easy to maintain.’[38] Having bought the house from an old woman in her nineties, Frances cross-leased it and sold the back part of the long section.

The Widowhood of Jacki Bates - mostly written in Shannon while living in Janet Frame’s cottage - was published in 1991, the year Frances moved back to Paekākāriki. This book explores emotions and behaviour both in and after a relationship ends: themes close to her heart following the death of Bob and the end of her other significant relationship with Barbara Buckett.

By the time of this move back to the wild sea and looming hills of Paekākāriki – the home of her mother, her sister and close friends - Frances was in her mid-fifties.

> I loved the anonymity of Wellington but after a while I missed the very thing I thought I hated about Paekākāriki. It’s nice that people know who you are. It’s a special place, it gets in your blood, no matter how far away you go. When my last child left home in 1990 I came back to the peace, spirituality and the beautiful sunsets, and felt like I was coming home.[39]

The sea still sparkled or roared depending on its mood, but Paekākāriki’s social landscape was now different from her early family phase. The village was rich in lesbian life, drama and literature. Alison Laurie, an old Wellington East Girls’ College friend and her partner, Linda Evans, lived close by on The Parade. Alison had written a history of lesbianism in New Zealand and, along with journalist Julie Glamuzina, co-authored a lesbian take on the notorious Parker-Hulme matricide, the ‘brick in a stocking’ murder of Honorah Rieper by her daughter and her daughter’s friend in Christchurch in the 1950s.[40]

Then, in 1994, Peter Jackson’s film ‘Heavenly Creatures’ based on

the ‘gymslip murder’ was released. Shortly after the film’s release, Paekākāriki-based journalist, Lin Ferguson, unmasked the United Kingdom-based crime writer, Anne Perry, as the rich-girl killer, Juliet Hulme. Frances alleged the tipoff came from her own conversation with Lin, a near neighbour on the Sand Track. With an eye to the story’s Shakespearian dimensions, Frances later expressed mixed feelings about her disclosure, fearing the publicity that such exposure would inevitably attract while simultaneously regretting not being acknowledged as the source. Various stories exist about the origin of the clue to Juliet Hulme’s new identity. Lin Ferguson claims she uncovered Anne Perry’s identity by doing ‘research in the local library and in a who’s who of authors and found the gossip to be true’.[41] Peter Jackson reportedly begged Lin not to ‘out’ Anne Perry, but his plea was disregarded in the interest of such a juicy scoop. Perry herself later claimed that this disclosure was ‘the best thing that could have happened because now I feel free.’[42]

In her diary written at the time of the murder, Frances records that the Parker-Hulme killing was particularly shocking, because it was committed by schoolgirls ‘the same age as me’ who ‘even when they were caught, [they] didn’t seem to care’.[43] Drolly, Frances later claimed that the killing of the poor mother, Honora Parker, who ran a Christchurch fish and chip shop, demonstrated Juliet Hulme’s ‘rich-girl sense of entitlement’ and that it would have been much fairer to do away with *both* mothers!

Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme leave Christchurch magistrate's court in 1954.

Another lesbian friend, Victoria University economist, Prue Hyman, and her partner, Pat Rosier (ex-editor of the feminist mag *Broadsheet*), lived nearby at 66 Ames Street in poet Denis Glover's old house. Later, the subject of the late Denis Glover became vexatious for Frances, with Denis displaying, even in death, a propensity to provoke shenanigans.

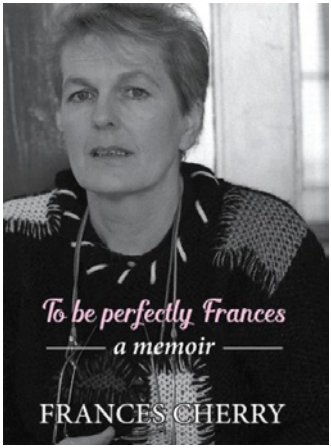
The 1990s proved to be a productive but tough decade for Frances. She now refused to be pigeonholed or defined by any sexual orientation, although she suspected that some of her lesbian friends saw this as a sellout. She told friends she just wanted to be herself, unapologetically and frankly Frances. She was keeping all options open so she could be free to choose her own destiny.

Short stories were pouring out of her. Various anthologies, including New Women's Fiction (1998); In Deadly Earnest (1989); Subversive Acts (1991); Erotic Writing (1992); and 100 New Zealand Short Stories (1997), contain many of her stories from this time.

Frances now dedicated herself to her writing, in addition to her family, friends and animals. Too often romantic relationships, with all their difficulties and drama, had proved disappointing. With a renewed sense

of discipline she adopted a rigid routine which allowed her to spend the best part of the day writing: ‘At 6.45 every morning I went for a walk with my poodle Dragon Lady. We went along the beach and through Queen Elizabeth Park towards Raumati South.’[44]

Frances’s energy levels may have dimmed, but she was now free to do as she liked. Her children were grown and self-sufficient and Paekākāriki friends, both old and new, surrounded her. There was her good friend, Judith Exley, in Paneta Street and later Annabel Fagan, a friend from her Brooklyn days, in Horomona Road. Frances and Annabel co-authored a book of short stories *Double Act,* which was published in 2010. Always ready to initiate social activities and make new friends, Frances also started a book club, which is still running.



In 1994, her mother died in Wellington Hospital following a short illness. The funeral was held at St Peter’s Hall, Paekākāriki on 13 May 1994. A photo of the procession carrying Connie’s white coffin down Wellington Road to St Peter’s Hall appeared in the Dominion newspaper the following day. Frances found it all deeply moving.

Connie and Frances, June 1986.

A seat dedicated to the Birchfields sits on the high point of the Sand Track, outside what was once their home. The inscription - an abridged version of the 1917 epitaph 'Mourn Not the Dead' – reads:

> Mourn not the dead that in the cool earth lie —
> Dust unto dust —
> The calm sweet earth that mothers all who die
> As all men must;
> But rather mourn the apathetic throng —
> The cowed and the meek —
> Who see the world's great anguish and its wrong
> And dare not speak!

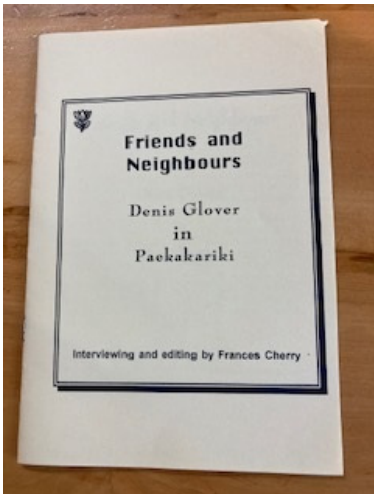
Exacerbating her sense of loss, Frances was at the hospital visiting her dying mother when a car hit Dragon Lady near the Sand Track. Dragon used to escape sometimes and visit her original owner, Alison Laurie, at 28 The Parade. Frances kept the dog's body at home for a day so people could visit. After that, Alison gave her another poodle, Chloe, her loyal companion for many years.

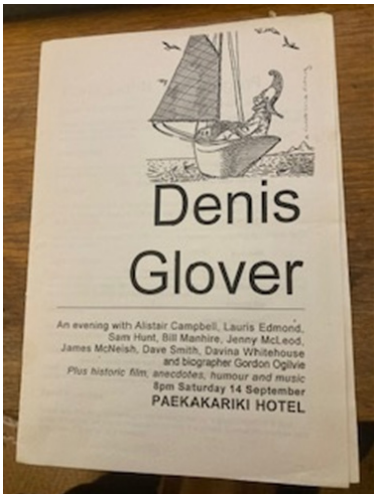
Paekākāriki controversies

A fallout over Denis Glover

In the mid-1990s, controversy over a celebration to honour the legendary poet, Denis Glover, a past resident of Paekākāriki, rocked Paekākāriki's creative community. Frances found herself in the thick of the action.[45]

In 1996, sixteen years after Glover's death, the Paekākāriki Community Arts Trust, of which Frances was a former member, organised an event at the Paekākāriki Hotel to celebrate the poet's life and works. An impressive line-up of poets, writers, musicians, old friends and neighbours, as well as Denis's biographer, Gordon Ogilvy, came together to read poems both by and about Glover.





In anticipation of this occasion, Frances interviewed Paekākāriki locals who had known Denis for a booklet entitled *Friends and Neighbours: Denis Glover in Paekākāriki*.[46]

Friends and Neighbours contains a mix of tales. Some show Glover's kindly aspect - always ready for a chat, dishing out gardening tips, helping lift the heavy lid off the playcentre sandpit - while others emphasise his darker side, such as that of a drunken Denis lying unconscious in the gutter in Ames Street. But, as the event came closer, the committee and others in the community disagreed over the portrayal of the brilliant, but hell-raising, Glover. Not everyone was happy for the stories gathered by Frances to be recounted, especially those tales highlighting the inebriated mischief, misdemeanours and misogyny for which Glover was notorious. This included his often bad behaviour towards his deceased, and herself often incendiary, partner, Khura Skelton.

There was concern that a focus on Denis's less savoury side – a side which seemed to intensify in his later years - would detract from his significant achievements. Most damning were the accounts of Denis's rollicking and hijinks around the time of Khura's death. According to an Ames Street neighbour, 'The day after Khura died I remember Sam Hunt coming out and they had her fur coat on the line and Denis was running around shouting 'Hello Mother, hello Mother' to the fur coat, and Sam Hunt came out wearing Khura's very tight purple, you know, those drainpipes, and of course he was so tall they came about halfway up his legs. He was backwards and forwards wearing them while he helped Denis.'[47]

Feelings ran high over the booklet, but Frances maintained that any attempt to whitewash Denis - who never hesitated to tramp where angels feared to tread – was wrongheaded. For was not Denis and Khura's relationship notoriously fractious and would not Denis – who was only too well aware of his own deep flaws and compulsion to shock - approve of, even desire, a realistic depiction of himself?

Frances's correspondence from this period holds several testy letters between herself and other members of the organising committee regarding the Denis Glover Paekākāriki retrospective. The following letter

(dated 21 October 1996) to a friend highlights her feelings at this time:

> I hope you enjoy the little booklet. It actually caused quite a controversy in our community…He [Denis] had a passionate relationship with Khura and I feel that many of the things he did after she died were because of grief and denial that she was dead. The booklet was printed to be sold at the evening but at the last minute I wasn't allowed to do that. I also discovered that sanitised excerpts were not to be read out at the evening, as I expected, and only discovered this when I arrived at the pub…[She concludes] 'Paekākāriki is a wonderful place in many ways, though with all the trouble I have had over these anecdotes I began to think it was too isolated and thought of leaving. I have got over that now...[48]

Writing in 'Paekākāriki Xpressed' (the local rag) in 2006, a decade later, the late Caryl Hamer, publisher of *Friends and Neighbours*, noted that the decision to print the booklet was controversial. But, in the end, they backed Frances's view that it was important to have the story of a 'warts and all poet'.

Despite remaining staunch about the booklet's representation of Glover, Frances was hurt at being misunderstood and sad to lose some close friendships through this process.

The Glover hullabaloo shows that Frances, was not scared of controversy. But while in this instance it was the depiction of Glover under fire, Frances did not shy away from writing about her own less-than-noble inclinations. In her memoir, she described her 'fantasy' of murdering her husband by 'tying cotton (because it wouldn't be easily seen) across our verandah steps so [Bob] would trip and fall down to the creek.'[49] Although she explained that she did not really wish this to happen, she instinctively recognised the cathartic and humorous nature of such an admission.

Meanwhile, in *The Gift of a Son* Frances describes the desperation of

a mother whose infant would not stop crying.[50] Although this particular story was fictionalised, in her memoir she writes, 'In reality I had an almost overwhelming desire to pick him [her infant son] up by his feet and throw him through the window. One, two, three, whoosh.'[51] And spelling out the bleakness of postpartum depression is her account of sitting in Wellington's Pigeon Park with her first baby and her mother: 'What now? I'd married the handsome prince and had a baby. The future seemed like no future. Also, the thing that hit me was that I couldn't change my mind. For the first time in my life I couldn't change my mind.'[52]

Frances's writing tended to be affirming and normalising. Her acknowledgement that being human necessitates the juggling of often contradictory emotions, including or especially towards loved ones, was one of her greatest strengths. It was this, as much as her authorial advice, which drew people – some who never left - to her writing workshops. For many aspiring writers, these workshops doubled as therapy.

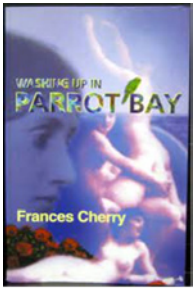
On 25 November 1977, Frances turned sixty. Photographed on the back of a friend's motorbike, she set out to show that she did not intend to slow down with age. She felt young at heart and as keen to keep writing as ever.

Frances's 60th birthday party.
Riding pillion on a friend's motorbike.

Family & other frictions: Washing up in Parrot Bay

All families have frictions and fissures and Frances's family was no exception. Her third and last adult novel *Washing up in Parrot Bay*, published in 1999, became a source of sorrow as it affected her relationship with her older daughter.

Described as a 'provocative and engaging black tragicomedy' featuring 'lesbians, witches and man-free conception rituals',[53] *Parrot Bay* is a quintessentially Paekākāriki novel.



The many evocative images of *Parrot Bay* describe Paekākāriki and its multiple moods:

> He was in Parrot Bay before he realised it, turning across the railway line and driving through the village where familiar people wandered. The sea sparkled as he drove over the rise and down on to the esplanade. A few figures were strolling on the beach. Seagulls dived at the water, and surfboard riders floated like black dots, waiting for waves…[He] looked at the island, silent and full of secrets.[54]

And, in an allusion to the legendary Rumbling Tum Hot Bread Shop (of the 1990s) in Holtom's Building next to the railway tracks, 'Adele sat on the high stool in the Gurgling Belly takeaway shop, watching trucks and cars pass by over the railway line…It was a blustery grey day with a threat of rain, depressing after all the sunshine they'd had.'[55]

But *Washing up in Parrot Bay* also reflected Frances's ambivalent feelings about Paekākāriki, including its insularity and, sometimes, inward-looking bent.

> She was normal at one time', he said. 'What went wrong?' 'Dunno… It's probably living here. This place would send anyone crazy.'…'I mean the whole place. Parrot Bay. It's so insular. I couldn't bear it.'…'There are some very interesting people living here. Writers, artists, all sorts.' So there, he thought. 'Each to their own. [56]

Also, the sea – still the source of so much pleasure – now seemed more threatening. 'Along the beachfront the wind blew their hair back from their faces. They looked down at the waves crashing and booming on the sea wall. The sea was supposed to be rising with the greenhouse effect. It was all quite worrying…'[57]

In 2002, these mixed feelings would drive her away from Paekākāriki once again, first to Waikanae, then to Petone for three years, and finally back to Kilbirnie in 2006. 'The taxi dropped her in the middle of the city. She stood, dazed, as the lunchtime throng jostled around her. Nothing mattered any more.'[58]

Regrettably, in the publication process of *Washing up in Parrot Bay* Frances fell out for a time with her daughter. Originally conceived as a co-authored effort with the inventive Jane – who developed the spiritualist, witchcraft and turkey-basting components that lends the novel its contemporary edge – *Parrot Bay* was eventually published under Frances's name alone. Jane's extensive contribution is acknowledged at the front of *Parrot Bay*, but Frances was clearly conflicted. In her memoir published almost two decades after *Parrot Bay*, Frances ruminates, 'When [Parrot Bay] was ready to go to print, I told Roger [Roger Steele, the publisher] that I wanted Jane's name on the cover as well, but he felt that it would be too hard to market a novel with two authors, and to my great

regret I gave in. I do not blame him; I only blame myself and am deeply sorry. I should have insisted.'[59] As for Roger, who had originally envisaged a 'new-age lesbian Shortland Street' emerging from the colourful and edgy narrative, the time between *Parrot Bay's* inception and completion meant that it 'may have been regarded by potential film-makers as passé' when it was eventually published.[60] A review in the *Sunday Star Times* at the time describes *Parrot Bay* as 'provocative and engaging', noting '[It] would be a shame for it to be pushed into a pigeon-hole labelled lesbian-only lit. For the broad-minded looking for an energetic and interesting read, there is plenty to enjoy.'[61]

Much later, in 2018, Roger and Frances collaborated again, this time on the publication of her memoir, *To be perfectly Frances*. Although Frances intended this to be a mostly positive summing up of her life and contribution to writing, she experienced huge angst in the publication process, a kind of rerun of the *Parrot Bay* experience. Family members and friends warned her that her portrayal of certain events and people might not be fully appreciated by the living but Frances decided to proceed anyway. Bob was dead so could not be defamed, but significant others from Frances's past were alive and kicking. As the memoir came closer to completion, Roger informed her that it would be wise to run certain sections past some key potentially recognisable individuals so they could be modified, if necessary. On Roger's advice, she had already made significant changes to certain characters to make them unidentifiable; in one instance, changing one person's age, hair colour and pet. One of the characters she wrote about sought advice from a barrister specialising in media law, who claimed that to publish Frances would have to expurgate sections of text because of what his client saw as unduly negative or false representations of themselves. The lawyer asserted that, regardless of all the changes Frances had made to his client, everyone who knew Frances knew who she was writing about and therefore it was defamatory, in his opinion. Moreover, contended the legal eagle, writer and publisher had

committed, even if unwittingly, a ‘breach of privacy’ by previously giving the manuscript to reviewers, who were acknowledged at the front. Roger and Frances chose to comply with these requests and no further action was taken. (They may have been able to assert their version of events if Frances had been up to the near impossible task of proving events had occurred as she had described. Even so, the breach or invasion of privacy charge, unlike defamation, can still be made even where events are undeniably true).[62]

For Frances, herself a teacher of memoir writing, this process threw into question the nature of memoir, autobiography and biography, especially whether they can be meaningful once key identifiers have been altered to such an extent that an account becomes, in effect, a work of fiction.[63] The genre of autofiction involving the deliberate amalgamation of non-fiction and fiction in a memoir was then in its infancy and perhaps also ran counter to Frances’s penchant for authorial directness and honesty, at least as she saw it. For Frances, this painful process confirmed, for once and for all, that her interpretation of reality could never again be approached as the only legitimate viewpoint.

The bossy older sister

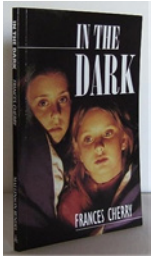
Back in Paekākāriki, Frances was living close not only to her parents, but also, later, to her younger sister, Maureen. Both sisters were talented writers – Maureen of non-fiction and Frances of fiction - but were very different in temperament and appearance. When young, they did everything together, but sibling tension is apparent in Maureen’s short story ‘Let’s talk about Me!’, which won the Friends of Kāpiti Libraries Festival Creative Writing competition in 2013, and was then published in the Kāpiti Observer. For this is a tale seemingly based in fact: the ‘bossy older sister’ has ‘Marilyn Monroe blonde hair and generous curves’, five

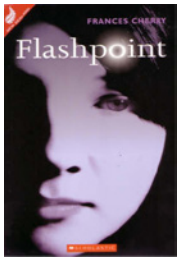
children and ‘several live in partners of both genders’. In this story, Maisy, the protagonist airs her main beef: ‘I never got much of a chance to talk about me. That’s because I had a bossy, older sister who always wanted to talk about herself. She always butted in if I started talking about me.’[64]

Writing for young people

Around this time, Frances morphed into a junior fiction writer. As with her adult novels, Frances’s stories for young readers address big themes, such as parental separation and custody, moving to a new place, death of a grandparent, and issues of betrayal and trust. Similarly, they resonate with emotional honesty.

The first of these *In the Dark*, published in 1999, examines a family custody dispute from the child’s perspective. Two Paekākāriki girls, Michaela Barr and Hester Callister, feature on the front cover. The following year *Leon* was published and, in 2001, shortlisted in the New Zealand Post Children’s Book Awards. In 2006 Paekākāriki’s Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop (run by Michael O’Leary) published *Gate Crasher and Other Stories*. *Flashpoint* also appeared that year, followed by *Kyla* in 2009 and *Pay Back* in 2017.





Frances: animal lover, activist, teacher & friend

Alive to the wonders of the natural world, including the animal kingdom, it did not take long for Frances's conversation to turn to her pets. In Paekākāriki, these included her cats Brian and Gloria and the poodles, Dragon Lady and then Chloe. Each pet was heavily anthropomorphised, especially the Kilbirnie-based Ray: a grey-striped feline with what Frances described as 'a devil-may-care attitude'. Based on her phone's final voice message, a caller could be forgiven for mistaking Ray for an errant husband, coming and going as he pleased, rather than a mere cat. Ray was Frances's last pet even accompanying her into the Rita Angus Retirement Village, although never really adapting to the confines of life indoors in an upstairs room.

An activist to her core, Frances became involved with local issues wherever she happened to be living. In Paekākāriki, she organised public meetings to protest Telecom upping its charging prices and became involved in a schooling debate; later, while living in Petone, she formed a local group to oppose a battery recycling plant operated by Exide.

Alison Laurie, Frances, Prue Hyman, Frances's 70th Birthday, Crossroads, Mt Victoria, 2007.

Frances possessed a gift for friendship. Like most talents, it was facilitated by her own actions, her ability to take the social initiative. Several book clubs, including one in Paekākāriki, owe their origins to Frances. As with her writing groups, these served as hunting grounds for new friends. She sometimes claimed that shyness was a form of selfishness, describing how she grew out of being a shy child into a teenage clown through realising the power of making people laugh.

Frances set an example of how to live life. Although conscious of others' perceptions of her, she knew she had to be true to herself, a lesson burnt in on the ending of her marriage. Often, she said things others might be thinking: an 'emperor has no clothes' response to the world that usually worked for her. But Frances was not everyone's cup of tea. Yet her propensity towards expressing some of her shadowy imaginings gave others the licence to express their own less charitable sides. This facility made Frances funny too, as in her imaginary tale of doing away with her husband. Aside from the expendable spouse - and perhaps his offspring and friends - who could resist laughing at such an impossible fantasy expressed aloud?

When considering Frances's legacy, descriptions of her 'undeviating honesty' and 'sense of wonder' recur. Good friends, such as the author Marilyn Duckworth and therapist Ronda Bungay, attribute these particular qualities with keeping her stories young and fresh. Frances's fiction has an undeniable immediacy and vibrancy. She was a prolific author, publishing over 15 books and short stories (see Bibliography). Roger Steele, who published *Washing up in Parrot Bay* and her memoir, notes that Frances had 'a particular gift for making dialogue come alive', speculating that her early training in writing workshops with established authors and ongoing engagement with other writers and her own students probably facilitated this.'[65]

Even at eighty, Frances was still attracting newcomers and oldcomers,

drawn by her charisma and zest for life, to her writing groups. Dot Dyett was one of them. Dot, who was 100 years old when I talked with her in September 2023, attended Frances's Sunday writing workshops for five years. For the first four years, Dot eagerly anticipated these monthly workshops, finding Frances direct, helpful and very funny. As part of an exercise set by Frances to write about their first love, Dot described the time in England during the war when she met a young Jewish man who had escaped Nazi-infested Europe; how they had cycled to a field where they lay together hand-in-hand, only to be savaged by ants because they had mistakenly spread their rug on an anthill. Frances apparently became impatient with what she saw as her students' 'mealy mouthed accounts', suggesting they describe something more attention grabbing such as '****ing in the back of a car'. Not everyone could get away with saying such things.

But, in Frances's final year of taking classes, her feedback and attentiveness to her students no longer seemed as insightful or helpful as before. Dot later wondered if this ostensible change in Frances's temperament and effectiveness was due to the Parkinson's disease that, unknown to her then, was starting to ravage her system.

Dot Dyett at her 100th birthday party, 14 November 2022.

Informed by her love of reading and acute observation of life, Frances's curiosity about the world made her a great companion with whom to discuss books and unpick the small events of life, the interactions, the upsets, and inevitable argy bargy of human encounter. The gospel according to Frances went something like this: the most confident-seeming people usually have deep insecurities; everyone wants to be loved, no matter how off-putting they might seem; discipline is important; and dreams must be pursued. She did not just send a manuscript to a publisher but would doggedly pursue the poor, beleaguered soul to check on its progress. Frances's luck simply may have been that she left little to chance.

But this is about Paekākāriki, a place close to Frances's heart. Even in her last days at Kilbirnie's Rita Angus Retirement Village, she sometimes yearned for her Paekākāriki days. The village exerted a push-pull effect on her, much like the tides of the beach she once walked each morning. When she needed freedom from the village's confines she migrated south to the relative obscurity of the city; when she felt lonely and lost in the universe, missing Paekākāriki's landscape and characters, she came back.

This was one of Frances's many contradictions, like the two sides of her personality: the hidden-away author fiercely guarding her writing time, and the gregarious, social animal who liked nothing better than an evening spent with friends, chewing the fat on any topic under the sun.

Later in life, Frances ruefully reflected on the many changes to Paekākāriki. Recalling its past as a railway town with its own special sense of community, she felt that Paekākāriki had since become more like a satellite suburb of Wellington.

Throughout life, Frances found all sorts of people who met her great need for friends. I was fortunate to be one of them. Recently, I was struck by a

piece written about female friendship which seems to echo Frances's later thinking:

> The problem with sisterhood - the idea of a sunny alliance on the basis of a shared feminine fate - has always been that it deprives women of all individual taste, history, and temperament. In short, it can insist that women not be human beings. And …if you like to write and argue and criticize, the only basis for the importance of your general claims - those beyond your particular experience - is the fact that you are human, like everybody else. And humans need friends to act as sounding boards for ideas as much as for gossip. The trick… is simply finding the right person for it.[66]

On 24 April 2022, aged 84 years, Frances died peacefully at Rita Angus Retirement Village, surrounded by her loved ones. Her obituary perhaps describes Frances best: 'A unique, passionate and fiercely loving woman who was ahead of her time'.[67]

Frances Cherry, 2012.

Acknowledgments: The publication of this booklet was supported by a grant from the Paekākāriki Community Board. I wish to thank Jane Cherry for sharing her mother's correspondence and photographs with me. (All photographs, unless otherwise labelled, are from Jane's collection). I also wish to thank Roger Steele, who published some of Frances's later work, for his generous and freely given feedback, and Sylvia Bagnall for editorial assistance. Finally, thanks go to Dave Johnson, Chair of the Paekākāriki Station Museum Trust, for his ongoing help and support.

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