

**White Gold: The Business of Milk**  
**Teresa O'Connor floortalk**  
**15 February 2 pm**

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

Caed mile failte.

What a truly remarkable sight: organza cows; semen straws, cowshed detritus: a milk cup chandelier, here at what once was the epitome of Nelson class. But as Sally said at the opening of White Gold: The Business of Milk, on Friday night, only a public gallery would host such an exhibition as the commercial imperative would not allow for such an “indulgence” as she referred to this magnificently creative, quirky, inspirational and slightly ironic take on dairying.

So thank you Sally for your creativity, your sense of history, your pastoral sensitivity and for presenting an installation that makes those who view it think of cows and dairying and their meanings in a different way. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to reflect on the land, the family and the way of life that provided, for me, a great childhood and a very strong sense of identity.

I would like to dedicate this floor talk to my father Roderick John O'Connor, known as Roddy, to my mother, Teresa, who endured both the joys and the heartaches that are an inevitable part of farming, and lastly to Sally's partner David Morley, who was not only a great dairy man himself, a very loyal and hard worker but also a great friend and confidante of my father's.

Any reflection on my family history, necessarily revolves around Dad. But a little background to get to that point. My great grandfather John O'Connor left an Ireland ravaged by the famine in 1852, aged 20, to join his brother Patrick and sister-in-law Ann in Appleby, who had arrived five years previously. He subsequently married Ann's sister Bridget and in aged 20 took up the land that is still in the ownership of their descendants. John died aged 50 in 1882, leaving his widow pregnant with their 12<sup>th</sup> child. Hard to imagine just how hard that would have been. But we do know that their neighbours, the Hammonds, dug up their seed potatoes to feed the large fatherless O'Connor brood. And we were always taught to honour that act of great kindness.

The first cows to come onto the land were brought there from Braeburn, up the Tutaki Valley, by my grandfather Roderick O'Connor in 1917. They were a mix 'n' match crew, all with some Shorthorn in them, the first dairy cattle to be brought in to New Zealand. Some direct descendents of those original stock are still being milked today, and my Uncle John, a dairy farmer from Westport, maintains he could pick them out in the herd of 2009.

The cows were milked by hand and my great grandmother Bridget who, after being widowed young, had managed to retain the land and support her children. She died, aged 90, in 1919, while milking a cow. My father, aged 4, saw her fall from the stool.

In 1924 the family installed the first milking machine and the milk was taken by horse and cart to the local cheese factory situated on the corner of the Appleby Straight and McShane's Rd.

Of the six girls and six boys in the family, the task of farming the land in Appleby fell to Rod and Jim. Rod was a dairying activist, constantly encouraging amalgamation of the small dairy factories on the Waimea Plains. He was a director of the Waimea Dairy Co-op, and played a full role in dairying and community, school and church affairs. Jim was more of an equine specialist, in fact he was the country's first registered veterinarian. He was also rather too fond of the jar, as they say in Ireland. But nothing could blunt the quickness of his wit. A story often told in our family is of the time he went to a horse fair in Brightwater. In his distinct Irish accent – even tho' born in New Zealand he still spoke in the manner of his parents, who had spoken Irish in the home – he asked the young auctioneer, the breeding of the horse under the hammer. The auctioneer, seeing the oddly clad man and hearing his accent, replied: "It's a cross between an Irishman and a donkey." "In that case", Jim responded, "related to both of us."

Rod O'Connor, senior, died in 1948, the year the farm received the town milk supply contract, ie they became one of only a handful of dairy farms in the district to supply the milk treatment station rather than the dairy factory. This was twice-a-day, seven-days-a-week, 365 days a year dairying. And it was that relentlessness that shaped my childhood. And literally shaped the birth of my sister Julia. Mum, heavily pregnant, had been in town and returned home and lay down on the sofa. When she went to get up, she couldn't. So she asked her mother, who had come from Wellington to be with her for the birth of the second child, to go down to the cowshed to fetch Dad. But he had to finish milking. By the time milking was completed, Mum was in the second stage of labour. A series of frantic phone calls located Dr Paterson who came and Julia was duly born safely. When the doctor asked if there was anything with which to tie the umbilical cord, Dad produced some binder twine from the pocket of his parmenap trousers.

My father, Roddy, had wanted to be a teacher but the Depression put paid to that with the closure of training colleges. So in the early 1930s, he joined his father on the farm, a reluctant farmer but an expert in the dynamics of dairy breeding and a pioneering member of the Livestock Improvement Association.

My memories are from the 60s and 70s and are of a childhood dictated by the rhythms of twice-daily milking, 365 days a year; and of the demands of growing, cultivating and harvesting the feed – grass, hay silage, at times turnips, required to feed an expanding herd to support two expanding families. Dad had been joined on the farm by his brother Fergus.

To be of Irish descent, Catholic, Clydesdale-using and Labour-voting marked our family as different among the farming families of the Waimea Plains. Surely we were the only dairy farm in New Zealand to have cows named after the 1935 Labour Government Cabinet. Dad used to tell us with pride of Savage, who was born on the day of the historic Labour victory, and who went out of production when that Government fell in 1949.

And, later, I remember Nordmeyer, a large, lumbering, almost totally brown cow, just one of the cows named after the Nash Cabinet of 1957-60. But we never had a Holyoake or a Marshall. But in my teenage years, one particularly nasty heifer, who always had to be leg-roped because of her propensity to kick, was named Muldoon. The cowshed as political classroom.

My introduction to American States and Irish counties and place names was in their bovine manifestations of my childhood. Once when I was four or five, my oldest sister and I were walking through a paddock, unaware that a recently calved cow, notorious for her bad temper, named Kildare, was in the paddock. Suddenly she was charging at us and in our haste to clamber through the barbed-wire fence to the next paddock, I gashed my leg. As I was telling my other two sisters about the drama, they laughed. I was indignant and referring to two of my favourite cows, I cried that Oregon and Daisy wouldn't laugh.

I can still remember the quirks and traits of many of the cows of my childhood: Clare was almost all white and never had to be encouraged in to the bail – she was always waiting right there to wander in once the previous occupant exited; Kilkenny, a descendant of the founding stock, had a kink in her tail; Belfast, a small, compact cow, but a mighty producer, had a two-tone udder and was a great favourite of Dad's; Ballymena, nearly all black with an odd stunted horn, she always favoured the last bail on the right of the shed; Roscommon an award-winning calf who matured into a great producer; Inishhowen, another descendant of the original stock, with a very low-slung udder. I could go on . . .

International cricket teams also provided a source of names but I can now only remember the great West Indian cricketer, Gary Sobers, a big boned cow.

And Kinross, Stirling and Lanark came from the farm at Ngawhatu and were named after some of the villas at there. They were Ayrshire cows, rust red and white, and not nearly as amenable as the Friesians which made up the vast bulk of our herd.

The eclectic range of bovine nomenclature was always a source of amusement and delight to the herd testers, who stayed overnight once a month and who, with their brown overalls and little glass bottles with odd smelling liquids and rubber bungs were always slightly mysterious. We knew that sometimes they married farmers.

The cowshed was a very familiar place to us as kids. We spent a great deal of time there, among the cows or in the dairy watching the cans fill, watching Dad with his practiced skill, wheel out a full can and replace it with an empty one. Later, we watched with wonder at the installation of a large vat that could hold the milk from two milkings.

One evening when I was four, Mum sent our oldest sister Mary Ellen down to the cowshed to fetch me. But I wasn't there and thus began a frantic search of ditches and troughs and creeks – an OSH nightmare, I'm sure.. Dad had left the milking to start the search. The farm worker was left to continue the milking and as the milking drew to an end, I was discovered: lying on my back under Daisy (the only cow with a name reflecting absolutely no imagination, clearly not named by my father) squirting milk directly from her tits into my mouth.

Another pre-school memory is of one of the herd's top producers, Ackerman (named after a South African cricketer if my memory serves me correctly) being given to the nuns at the Sunnybank Orphanage (now Garindale in Atawhai). I loved that cow and was very upset by her departure. Trying to console me Dad said she was only on loan. One time a couple of years after her departure, we were driving past Sunnybank and I asked: "When are those buggery nuns going to give Ackerman back?"

Sally, in the profile of her installation in the Nelson Mail, said that we all needed milk to kick start us. And after breast milk, we began on cow's milk and cream. I well remember Dad coming up from the cowshed each morning with a jar of cream for our porridge. And while that milk was our lifeblood in many ways, it could also be a source of disease. Tuberculosis was always a threat and each time the herd was tested and cleared, there was great relief.

One Saturday afternoon in 1962, there was great excitement in our house as we were putting on a Christmas concert for friends and family to raise money for the Maori Education Foundation. We duly did our items – I was Balthazar, one of the three Kings, and had my face blackened with burnt cork. Afterwards I felt sick. Mum said it was just the fact that I'd eaten too much but I was not convinced and clambered up to the bathroom cupboard to fetch the thermometer. I was triumphant when the mercury soared to 105. I showed Mum, saying "See, I really am sick". I was duly put to bed, with what Mum thought might be the mumps. On the Monday I was not better and the doctor called. Remember doctors' house calls? They certainly bespeak another era. Dr O'Brien was originally from Cork, Ireland, but had worked in the factories of northern England before coming to general practice in Richmond. He told Mum that if he were still in the north of England he would say I had TB but as I was in Nelson NZ, which hadn't had an outbreak of Tb since 1948, he was unsure. I was admitted to Nelson Hospital with a provisional diagnosis of Tb, which apparently was scoffed at by the medical establishment at the time. Tests confirmed I did, indeed, have bovine Tb, infected from drinking unpasteurised milk. I was a rarity and many health professionals traipsed down to

the children's ward to visit the child with a disease that hadn't been seen for a very long time. Thus ensued the odd situation of a dairy farming family drinking bottled milk. Three months after my diagnosis, we lost half the herd to Tb – introduced to the previously disease-free herd by a cow, supposedly Tb free, purchased down the West Coast in the previous year.

It is only as an adult that I can comprehend the devastation, for my parents, firstly of my diagnosis, necessitating many hospitalisations and four operations over 18 months, and then the implications of the loss of so many cows.

At this time of high drama around Tb, our youngest sister Gabrielle was 3 and as children do, she picked up on all that was going on around her. Thus visitors were constantly leg roped to chairs; we all had to join in her Tb testing game: she would decide which ones of us would become Tb reactors and would attach red pegs to the ears of the reactors, ie those with Tb and destined for the freezing works; or green pegs to those of us who were Tb free.

My memories are from an earlier time, a simpler time undoubtedly, in terms of dairy farming. But Dad was, like his father before him, a dairying activist: a founding member of the Milk Producers' Association; a director of the Livestock Improvement Association, a founding member of the Boys and Girls Agricultural Clubs; a director of the Friesian Breeders' Club, along with all his school, church, community and, of course, Labour Party involvement.

The issues which now confront the industry, which has expanded way beyond his imagining, I'm sure, were not of the same magnitude or urgency back then. And certainly there was no real environmental consciousness.

So what are the issues now confronting today's dairy industry. And how does this installation reflect them?

This is an important exhibition, not just on an artistic or local level. Having the imagination to dream up the concept and the ability to express those imaginings through this installation is hugely creative. That it has been done by a local artist and features a local family is also an important statement. But the most important aspect of this installation, I believe, is that it forces viewers to reflect on both the centrality of dairying to New Zealand's economic well-being – it earns 20 percent of our overseas earnings and why else would the level of the milk solids payout be analysed endlessly in our media? – and of the absolute necessity to ponder the environmental costs and sustainability of the country's largest export earner.

The installation is not polemical but by its very nature – a “sculpture” of cowshed detritus and a large darkly forbidding painting representing the river of waste generated through the production of milk from grass – it forces us, as good art should, to ponder the deeper meanings of the taken-for-granted. And milk has surely been that in our national consciousness for a very long time. Few consumers

would have given a second thought to how the milk, cheese or butter reached the supermarket. And they would have cared less about those involved in every step of its production. It was only as world commodity prices soared and the milk solids payout reached \$7 a kilogram, forcing the price of milk, butter and cheese skywards, that everyday consumers were forced to understand that Fonterra's reach in the global marketplace had powerful economic implications for New Zealand family budgets.

The installation also, in a gentle way, calls us to ponder the corporatisation of dairying. Dairying is this country's major export earner, with Fonterra, a co-operative of around 11,000 dairy farmers, generating revenue of \$19.5 billion annually. Dairying was founded on, and has continued to flourish, because of its co-operative structure. But even that is under threat. In November 2007 the Fonterra board recommended that the assets, liabilities and operations (what else is there?) be split from the co-operative and be listed on the New Zealand Stock Exchange. The co-operative would retain two thirds of the company; farmers could purchase 15 percent and the remaining 20 percent would be traded freely. A final decision on future structure will not be made until next year.

Perhaps the Sanlu melamine scandal, which somehow epitomises the dark forces of corporatisation – Fonterra owned 43 percent of Sanlu – and the international financial crisis, will force a re-think and a re-commitment to a fully co-operative structure. Such a structure has served dairying well and proved that a model not predicated entirely on the commercial imperative, can work.

Fonterra, formed through the amalgamation of the country's two largest dairy co-operatives, Kiwi and New Zealand Dairy Group and the New Zealand Dairy Board, is the world's sixth largest dairy company, annually exporting 95 percent of its production.

While the number of sheep vis-à-vis the number of people in New Zealand has long been a source of jocularly, the number of dairy cows – four million according to Dairy New Zealand statistics for the 2007/2008 season – now equals our population. The number of dairy cows has doubled in the last 30 years, with the major growth occurring in the last decade or so.

As the dairy payout crept inexorably - it seemed back then - higher, the rate of dairy conversions soared, as did the problems associated with dairying on a massive scale: water consumption and competition for water; waste production, both animal and artificial; the disposal of that waste; the pollution of waterways; and the absolute unsuitability of some parts of New Zealand for dairying.

The corporatisation of dairying is reflected in the relentless trend from fewer cows and more farmers; to far more cows and fewer farmers. In the 1974/75 season, according to Dairy New Zealand, there were 18,540 herds, two million cows and the average herd size was 112. In the 2007/2008 season the number of herds had

plummeted to 11,436; cow numbers had hit four million and the average herd size was 351.

Parallelling these seismic shifts has been the move from personalised, family-centred farming, to a larger-scale, agri-business model, where cows are seen not as individual bovine personalities with particular character traits, each worthy of its own name, but rather just as numbered milk production units. This model is supposedly more efficient, tho' the production per cow statistics do not necessarily bear this out. And, interestingly, recent research out of England, shows that named cows give more milk per annum than those which are simply a number.

Such profound changes in our rural environment do not come without considerable social and community costs.

Many New Zealanders will have never been inside a cowshed; will never have experienced its strangely compelling combination of rhythms, smells and warmth, described thus by Ruth Dallas in *Milking before Dawn*:

*In the drifting rain the cows in the yard are black  
And wet and shiny as rocks in an ebbing tide;  
But they smell of the soil, as leaves lying under trees  
Smell of the soil, damp and steaming, warm.  
The shed is an island of light and warmth, the night  
Was water-cold and starless out in the paddock.*

But all of us need to think long and hard about the cultural, social, environmental, and financial impacts of our largest export earner and whether dairying on a mega-scale is good for our communities, good for our cows, and good for our country. Financial rewards must never be the only benchmark.

Dad, the reluctant dairy farmer, was also a great lover of poetry. I first heard Grey's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard and Hiawatha*, in the cowshed – cowshed as English classroom. So it is perhaps fitting to draw this talk to a close with a quote from one of Dad's most loved poems.

A quote, it seems to me, to be particularly apt for all dairy farmers, all Fonterra directors, and all those interested in the sustainability of dairying in New Zealand.

Here are the prescient words –written in 1770 – of Irish poet, Oliver Goldsmith, in his pastoral epic, *The Deserted Village*:

*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates and men decay:  
Princes and lords may flourish and may fade;  
A breath can make them, as a breath has made;  
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,*

*When once destroyed, can never be supplied.*

**Floor talk delivered at the Suter Art Gallery, Nelson, on Sunday, February 15, 2009 as an adjunct to Sally Burton's installation: *White Gold: The Business of Milk*.**