

**ONCE A BRETHERN BOY:
THE PORTRAIT OF BRETHERN
IN THE WRITINGS OF NOEL VIRTUE.
A REVIEW ARTICLE**

David Brady

Works by Noel Virtue discussed:

The Redemption of Elsdon Bird (New York: Grove Press, 1987).
Then upon the Evil Season (London: Peter Owen, 1988).
Among the Animals: a Zookeeper's Story (London: Peter Owen, 1988).
In the Country of Salvation (London: Hutchinson, 1990).
Always the Islands of Memory (London: Hutchinson, 1991).
The Eye of the Everlasting Angel (London & Chester Springs PA: Peter Owen, 1992).
Sandspit Crossing (London & Chester Springs PA: Peter Owen, 1993).
Once a Brethren Boy (Auckland: Vintage, 1995).
The Transfiguration of Martha Friend (Auckland: Vintage, 1996).

There are explicit references to Brethren in Virtue's first novel, *The Redemption of Elsdon Bird* (1987), which was shortlisted for three important book awards and immediately optioned for a major film (which was never made). Virtue tells us,

I agonised over writing about the religious sect I'd been unfortunate enough to have been brought up in and fretted about the morality of setting it in real places. Yet any writer who is serious about their work should be prepared to use anything at hand from experience, to enhance, enlighten and to challenge (*Brethren Boy*, p.157).

It should be noted, to begin with, in respect of *The Redemption of Elsdon Bird*, that it is difficult to determine exactly how authentic the picture is intended to be and what kind of Brethren might have been

in Virtue's mind or experience. Thus, Elsdon Bird's father is an elder (p.75) in a Brethren meeting in a Gospel Hall (p.14) and frequently goes to prayer meetings (p.13). The Brethren engage in tent evangelism and Elsdon's father is repeatedly sacked for trying to save the people he works with (p.14). In the Brethren's opinion, wearing stockings and lipstick, going to the cinema, and smoking are all accounted worldly (pp.48, 78), but listening to the radio seems to be permitted. Virtue refers to meetings of Brethren in Wellington and Masterton (p.16), but there are some peculiarities about the conduct of meetings that many acquainted with Brethren may not recognize. Thus, the men sit on one side and the women on the other side of the Gospel Hall (p.14), Sunday school takes place before the morning meeting—a standard practice in all New Zealand churches (p.40)—and only *sometimes* is the morning meeting a communion meeting, when it seems to become an extended meeting (p.15).¹ Raspberry juice is used as a substitute for the more usual wine (p.15). Despite the Brethren's holding a Sunday school, unaccountably Elsdon was told he was too young to be saved (p.41), though this may just be an example of the quiriness of the particular family to which he is attached. Indeed, his mother rebukes him for simply speaking the name Jesus!

Virtue's autobiographical account, *Once a Brethren Boy* (1995), makes the picture a little clearer for us. In this book Virtue relates his early life, from his birth in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1947 down to the time of his publishing this memoir. The title of the book could be understood in at least three different ways, all depending on an ellipsis: (1) 'Once a Brethren boy did such and such...', i.e. 'once' being intended in the sense 'at an unspecified time in the past'; (2) 'I once was a Brethren boy (but am so no longer)', in other words, this autobiography gives a glimpse of my past which is now behind me; and (3) 'Once a Brethren boy, always a Brethren boy', in other words,

1. Peter Lineham notes: 'There were a few precedents for this in New Zealand country districts when they had meetings in succession, but I think they would always have had communion', private communication, 18 November 2009.

the narrative explains how I never could expunge my early Brethren conditioning from my life and underlying set of values. While Virtue may have intended something of all three of these meanings, it is probable that the last predominates, since *Once a Brethren Boy* is a confession of how the author, throughout his life, even long after having left Brethren, is nevertheless haunted by his Brethren past that for or many years continued to arouse in him disturbing nightmares (see particularly pages 198 and 216).

In *Once a Brethren Boy* we learn that the family of Virtue's father came to New Zealand from Newcastle-upon-Tyne and that while his father's sister was a member of an Exclusive (probably a Kelly-Lowe or Reading)² Brethren meeting in Wellington (p.13) and his father's brother was a member of an Exclusive meeting in Masterton, in the Wairarapa, Wellington Region (p.7), and his father belonged to the Open Brethren assembly in Naenae, a suburb of Lower Hutt, north east of Wellington. In the Open Brethren assembly, stockings, lipstick, high heels, dancing, alcohol, and the cinema were indeed held to be worldly, while the radio was merely held in suspicion (although banned by the Exclusives (p.8)). With regard to peculiarities even among Brethren, Virtue tells us that men and women were indeed segregated on each side of the hall (p.9) and raspberry juice was used in communion in place of wine (p.9). With regard to these points, Peter Lineham, the author of *There we Found Brethren* which is the most comprehensive history of Brethren in New Zealand, affirms that among Open Brethren the situation was that there was absolutely no separation between men and women in seating at the Lord's supper and that he knows of only one assembly in the whole of New Zealand in which wine was not used for the Lord's supper.³ In his autobiography Virtue adds that he 'was not even allowed to say 'Jesus' in a respectful manner' (p.3) but nevertheless allows that Sunday school was in fact held *in the afternoon* (p.9). There was, according to Virtue, a great deal of hell-fire preaching (p.10) and, as he claims, he was saved numerous times

2. Peter Lineham, private communication, 18 November 2009.

3. Peter Lineham, private communication, 13 October 2000.

before he reached the age of fifteen (p.11). It seems that in his childhood he experienced a genuine desire for Christian devotion and wanted at times to become a missionary (p.1). The Brethren, particularly his father, were extremely anti-Catholic and he was all but congratulated as a child for shouting ‘Penguins!’ after a group of nuns (p.5). Virtue describes the total effect of his Brethren upbringing as a form of brainwashing (a term no doubt loosely employed) and it is perhaps in this that the full horror of the title *Once a Brethren Boy* is felt:

Being pushed along that strict Brethren pathway for all my early life was a form of brainwashing. All the gruesome threats that were held over my head by Brethren preachers have never completely dissipated, despite common sense. I still retain the sense of humiliating unworthiness, fear of heavenly punishment [*sic*] and the idea of the hot burning coals of hell searing into my flesh should I fail to keep strictly to the narrow path. So well were all these implanted at a young, vulnerable age (p.4).

There are further comments on childhood brainwashing in *The Eye of the Everlasting Angel* (1992), put into the mouth of the elderly mother-substitute figure, Alicia Wickham:

one cannot simply ignore background. We are each brainwashed at an early age, to do what our parents do, believe what they believe. It is almost impossible to break from one’s past, from how one has been taught to behave (p.100).

Virtue candidly relates how, to aggravate unhealthy early conditioning, he also suffered sexual abuse as a child (*Brethren Boy*, p.11f.), was confronted by the psychological problems of relatives and neighbours (p.14f.), and the suicide of an uncle (who is reflected in one of the characters in *Elsdon Bird*) whom he loved more than his own parents (p.14), who gradually hardened in their hatred of each other. His mother eventually removed herself and her children from Brethren, leaving her husband there, and joined the Baptists.

...my father, having bought himself a moped... took off, alone, on a holiday. Riding all the way down country to stay with his sister in Lower Hutt, he preached at various Brethren venues there and along the way. I remember standing at the front window with my mother

watching him leave. 'There he goes,' she said quietly, 'off to convert the rest of the country because he failed with us' (p.40).

This itinerant preacher casts his shadow in *Then Upon the Evil Season* (1988) in the form of the hero's father, Adin, roving up and down New Zealand on a tandem to preach hell-fire sermons, with his wife Effie on the back seat and their adopted son Lubin in a basket on the front. Adin is, however, far from a moral exemplar. Not only does he lack money ethics, leaving unpaid rents and hiding money collected, but also engages in secret adultery. While Virtue tells us he did know some 'solid and adjusted' Brethren (one of whose sons was called Elsdon; *Brethren Boy*, p.34), their example seems to have been outweighed by far too much on the darker side of religious devotion. Thus, Virtue informs us that in the early 1960s, he knew of a young man nearby from an Exclusive family living in New Zealand's Waikato Region, who shot his two younger siblings because he did not want them to be reared in the same religion as he had been (*Brethren Boy*, p.22). Whether this is fact or invention is, however, debatable. I have sought information from a number of people better acquainted than I am with Brethren in New Zealand and discovered nobody who has ever heard of such an event, which is surprising given its magnitude, especially as it could not have failed to imprint itself in the memory of anyone concerned with or merely interested in Brethren at that time. Peter Lineham states his opinion that, while among Exclusive Brethren there have been any number of cases of heartless separation of families and possibly suicides, he has never heard of any case like that which Virtue describes.⁴ In addition, the former Exclusive member and author of *Behind Closed Doors* (2004), Ngaire Thomas, who has made a particular study of Virtue's *Brethren Boy* in part fulfilment of the requirements of a New Zealand university degree, reports as follows:

I was married in 1962, so was old enough to be aware of local news.

I lived near the Waikato region and would have known if this had actually happened. Earlier this year [2000] when I was studying

4. *Ibid.*

Virtue's autobiography, I made extensive inquiries both from ex-EBs and from OBs in the Waikato area. No one had ever heard of it.⁵ She charitably adds, that this does not rule it out altogether as it may have occurred among a breakaway group, and yet Virtue's statement that the boy's father followed up the dreadful incident by touring around speaking publicly on the event is so typically uncharacteristic of Exclusive Brethren behaviour that, once again, we are compelled to refrain from a willing suspension of disbelief. In fact, since, if this event had indeed occurred, it must have become public knowledge and it is therefore very strange that news of it never reached those with a special interest in Brethren in New Zealand. We cannot avoid asking what conclusions are to be drawn from this. Has Virtue resorted to untruth in a deliberate attempt to vilify Brethren? Furthermore, what reliance, if any, can readers place on the factuality of the rest of what he writes in an autobiographical mode? The evidence does not look good, but should Virtue himself be able to provide the missing evidence, the editor of this *Review* will surely be only too willing to make it known and publish a correction. For the moment, however, a large question mark remains.

After eventually leaving the Baptists, for a time Virtue attended a spiritualist church (*Brethren Boy*, p.62), but fairly soon became disenchanted with what he found there. Nevertheless, he made use of what he discovered there in shaping the character of Alicia Wickham in *Eye of the Everlasting Angel*, who, though herself disappointed with spiritualist meetings (pp.63, 68), is attended by her spirit guide, a young Maori girl bearing the name Erihapeti (p.62 f.).

In *Once a Brethren Boy* Virtue tells us that he wrote stories when he was at school, but kept them secret (p.1), although one was actually printed in the school magazine (p.37). His teacher at Epuni Primary School was, in fact, the New Zealand poet James Keir Baxter (p.3). Virtue was later to read and admire such New Zealand writers as Ian Cross, Katherine Mansfield (p.37), Ronald Hugh Morrieson (p.159), and Maurice Gee (p.206). It is well worth comparing

5. Ngaire Thomas, private communication, 22 October 2000.

Virtue's handling of the theme of a homosexual in a devout Christian family with Maurice Gee's trilogy, *Plumb*, *Meg*, and *Sole Survivor* (published 1978-83), where again the religious condemnation of homosexuality is far too overpowering even for the extreme liberal theologian and humanist, the Presbyterian minister, George Plumb. Another New Zealand writer admired by Virtue was Dan Davin (p.37), whose daughter he was later to meet in Dillons bookshop in London, where he worked for quite a long time (p.129f.). Yet another New Zealand writer, also a homosexual, who was later to be admired by Virtue, was Frank Sargeson (p.202). Other literary precursors whom Virtue admired included the French writer Jean Genet and the Americans Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, and James Purdy, the last of whom was to help Virtue in the publication of his first novel, *The Redemption of Elsdon Bird* (p.159). Virtue's personal taste in literature was, as he confesses, for horror novels and lurid thrillers, especially Robert Bloch's juicy sense of black humour, and in the cinema also he seems to have had a preference for horror, especially Hitchcock's *Psycho* (pp.59, 61). We may perhaps see this as another product of his early conditioning, forcing him to contemplate the outcasts of society, the sort of people that are normally turned away from in horror. His later novels are rich in such characters, but usually, it should be said, made acceptable through their patience, kindness, and genuine love. This is in fact Virtue's saving grace.

Approaching the age of puberty, he moved with his family to the town of Morrinsville in the Waikato Region of New Zealand's North Island, where his father was to become manager of a Holeproof factory making swimsuits (p.19). In his family and the wider circle of Brethren, Virtue claims that he met with a totally negative response to his discovery of his own homosexuality. It has to be remembered that the blank disapproval Virtue encountered with regard to his homosexuality was not simply a case of evangelical Christian condemnation, but rather a reflection of the whole of New Zealand society at that time. While homosexuality became legally acceptable in Australia in 1966 and similarly so in Britain in 1968-9, it was not until 1986 that the Homosexual Law Reform Bill was passed in New

Zealand. Virtue had the misfortune of finding himself in an exceptionally conservative society, so much so that, one day, he felt driven to cut his wrist in an apparent attempted suicide (p.43). He was committed to Kingseat Mental Hospital in Karaka, south of Auckland, and given a course of ECT in what was to prove a failed attempt to ‘cure’ him of his homosexuality (p.44) and the hellish treatment he received at this time was to be the source of nightmares for many years in his later life. According to Ngaire Thomas, whose own sister suffered the abuses of ECT in Kingseat Mental Hospital during those same years, ECT has been used in New Zealand institutions, most notoriously with teenagers at Lake Alice Hospital, near Bulls in Rangitikei District, to correct not schizophrenia or bipolar disorders, but simply unacceptable behaviour patterns—a form of torture to enforce social norms—and this has led to serious legal charges being brought against practitioners in later years.⁶ But reforms did not come early enough for Virtue. In May 1966, he left New Zealand for Australia, where he found a new liberation. He later moved to Britain, where again he enjoyed the much more tolerant attitude to people of different sexual orientations. While living in London, he tried to bury the past by engaging in male prostitution, an experience which provided a good deal of the material used in the later chapters of *Eye of the Everlasting Angel*, in particular the description of the transvestite party in St. John’s Wood. In later life he several times tried to return to New Zealand but, each time, failed to find acceptance with his family and loneliness inevitably compelled him to return to friends in the United Kingdom.

Virtue’s sense of loneliness may, in some part, have been a cause of his love of animals, with whom he found it easier to relate than to many humans, a feature which is reflected in the fictional character Saul Smith in *Then upon the Evil Season*. First, while still in New Zealand, Virtue obtained work caring for animals used in medical experiments, a business which he later loathed (*Brethren Boy*, p.52). He left New Zealand for England at the end of 1967 and, after three

6. Ngaire Thomas, private communications, 22 October and 8 December 2000.

years' work in London Zoo, gained a diploma in zoo animal management. Then, in one of his attempts to return home, he worked for a while in Auckland Zoo Park (p.110, see also p.39). While still in New Zealand, he swam with dolphins (p.112), a theme which plays a large part in *Then upon the Evil Season*, where the human-loving dolphin Opo graces his admirers with a quasi-religious experience and even seems to have the power to heal. The theme was, no doubt, suggested by the actual occurrence in 1955-6 of a friendly dolphin's frequenting the waters of the tiny New Zealand coastal settlement of Opononi, Northland Region, much like that of the friendly dolphin off Ireland's Dingle peninsula in more recent years. When Virtue returned to England, he worked in Marwell Zoo Park in Hampshire, after which he was employed, and later became head keeper, in the Welsh Mountain Zoo above Colwyn Bay in North Wales (p.112). He gained additional zoo experience in Blackpool Zoo, where however he suffered from antagonistic human attitudes (p.119f.). Virtue's deep love of animals is most poignantly related in the chapter of *Once a Brethren Boy* that he devotes to his Yorkshire terrier Bessie Todd. Todd is used as the surname of his hero in *Eye of the Everlasting Angel*, where also another of his loved dogs, Bella (*Brethren Boy*, p.200), appears in another canine shape (*Everlasting Angel*, p.55).

The world of Virtue's personal experience is a harsh and frightening one and, as we have noted, elements in it naturally find their way into Virtue's fictional writing. Thus, despite the fact that Virtue claims that *The Redemption of Elsdon Bird* is not autobiographical (*Brethren Boy*, p.162), the picture of his parents sketched in *Once a Brethren Boy* corresponds fairly closely with the father figure in *The Redemption of Elsdon Bird* and Effie in *Then upon the evil season*. There are other characters in Virtue's fiction the mad neighbour woman who kept footballs and wore rugby jerseys, a Chinese man across the road, and the man from Mars—who seem to be based on real persons described in *Once a Brethren Boy*. In *The Redemption of Elsdon Bird*, Elsdon's parents and other adults never seem to have any time for Elsdon, the archetypal deprived, and indeed abused, child, and so he consoles himself by attempting to befriend various animals. Indeed, Wellington Zoo is a place that

Elsdon decides he would rather live than with his mad mother (p.113). Virtue's later career as a writer may also be intimated in Elsdon's discovery that he could write stories admired by teachers at school and read out to his class. "Perhaps I'll be "a writer when I grow up," he says (p.88, cf. also pp.98, 99 f.)

In reading *The Redemption of Elsdon Bird*, we cannot help being reminded of fellow-New Zealand writer Janet Frame's depiction of the child's eye view of a peculiar adult world borne with great patience. In Virtue's novel, we meet the corpse of a dead child kept in an attic (the notable opening sentence of the novel is, 'The day Elsdon Bird found the dead baby began no differently from any other'), sudden death, murder, suicide, madness, physical brutality, and 'sexual perversion' (for that is how homosexuality was looked upon in general in the time of Elsdon's childhood). Virtue paints one of the blackest pictures of Brethren parents (outdoing such precursors as Edmund Gosse and Charles Gidley), whose humanity and indeed sanity are seriously called into question, yet the child hero Elsdon somehow takes refuge in talking to Jesus on his own in his loneliness, where he hears a still small voice inside himself (p.57). It is in the desertion by his father and the death of his mother that Elsdon ultimately finds redemption. His resilience enables him to turn his back on a childhood that is little more than a hell on earth and to go, 'marching down along the middle of the road, swinging his arms, his eyes brightening with the new day... towards the awakening city below' (p.122).

Critics have sometimes remarked on Virtue's realism and Virtue himself refers to one reader who wrote to him to tell him how totally real he had found his characters (*Brethren Boy*, p.214). That is not, however, an aspect of the fiction which, at first, struck the present reviewer; in fact, I found the opposite to be the case in meeting with hardly believable, quirky, freakish, and indeed grotesque characters in seemingly surreal circumstances, but I admit this may well be because of my own very different experience in life. Admittedly, however, the further I read in *Then upon the Evil Season*, the more the characters seemed to assume real shape and I began to take a curious interest in

their lives. While Adin and Effie first look like modern counterparts of the idyllic Adam and Eve, in time their human foibles begin to stand out and we recognize in them characteristics of people we may have known. Yet, for me, this was all spoilt by the less than believable ending in a fairy-tale scene on a bank beside a road on which are set a short-legged man (the chief character, Lubin Croft), a Maori boy dressed in women's attire, a female dwarf, and a dancing emu named Dorothy, all listening to a gramophone playing Gracie Fields' rendition of 'Sing as we go'. This said, however, a comparison of many of the details in Virtue's novels with data supplied in his autobiographical *Once a Brethren Boy* and *Among the Animals* (1988) indicates that much of his fiction is quite closely taken from his own life experiences. He even reveals, for example, that he knew of a family Bird and a Plymouth Brother by the name of Elsdon. (A 'religious nutter' by the name of Bird, who hanged himself reappears in *In the Country of Salvation*, p.77.) Of course, all autobiography, on account of its selectivity and possible exaggeration, needs to be approached with a degree of suspicion, which makes it that much harder for the reader to arrive at the actual facts that might be agreed on by all sides involved in the wide picture, but at least we feel that there is indeed an underlying reality behind Virtue's fiction. Why then does it strike this reader as conveying an air of surrealism? It is, quite possibly, on account of Virtue's own acknowledged penchant for lurid thrillers, horror, and the gothic. If this has coloured his fiction, then we may well begin to understand why his father objected so strongly to the publication of *The Redemption of Elsdon Bird* (see *Brethren Boy*, p.23). It is always a perilous business to involve living people in one's fictional writing (even though you may have left them far away on the opposite side of the globe) and to invest them with exaggerated characteristics.

Virtue's third novel, *In the Country of Salvation* (1990), goes over almost identical ground to the subject matter of his earlier books, specifically the trials of a homosexual boy in a family ruled by a narrowly blinkered evangelical father. This time, however, he seems deliberately to have avoided specific reference to the Brethren, instead substituting the general term 'church' for the gathering place

frequented by the father, Restel Bevan, and his co-religionists. It is evident, however, that Virtue still has the Brethren in view. Perhaps having learnt something of the harm that might have been done by too obvious references to family and Brethren associations, in this novel, unlike those which preceded it, he adds the prefatory note stating, 'All the characters in this novel are entirely fictitious. No resemblance to any persons living or dead has been intended, nor should any be inferred.' The comment is in fact quite fatuous, as, again, the lead characters are all too obviously based on his own family members. The claim that all characters are entirely fictitious breaks down most patently in the appearance as guest speaker at a missionary meeting of the well-known evangelical personality Corrie Ten Boom (p.37). The most obvious similarities between the 'fictional' Bevan family in *In the Country of Salvation* and the real Virtue family described in *Once a Brethren Boy* are as follows. Billy Bevan is born Rhesus negative and his mother assures him that he was spared for some special purpose (*Country of Salvation*, pp.5, 7). The family live in Upper Hutt (p.6), a satellite town of Wellington, and Billy has two brothers. Billy's father's hobby is photography and his uncle Radley is a problem homosexual (p.8). Billy shouts 'Penguins!' after a group of nuns (p.26). The family move from Upper Hutt to Te Aroha in the Waikato District (p.4) and later live in Morrinsville (p.51). Billy has some poems published in the school magazine (p.99). James K. Baxter (to whom *In the Country of Salvation* is dedicated) taught Billy in primary school. Billy is forced by his father to leave school and get 'a manly job', despite the protests of his English master (p.134 f.). He slashes his wrists (p.175), after which, like Virtue, he is sent to Kingseat mental hospital for ECT treatment (p.182). Restel Bevan goes off evangelizing on a moped, hated by his wife Cushla. The words describing this incident in *In the Country of Salvation* are almost identical to those previously quoted from *Once a Brethren Boy* describing the real-life situation of Virtue: 'Having failed with them [his family]... he was out to save the rest of the country' (p.197).

There is little relief from misery and human depravity in Virtue's next novel, *Always the Islands of Memory* (1991). As one reviewer, Tom Aitken, described it,

The first forty-five pages... encompass the death of a beloved pet dog, fears of madness and senility, incestuous rape, alcoholism, murder, financial failure, parental rejection, double suicide, catatonia, amputation, a major earthquake, and a number of finely graded shades of loneliness and guilt. Things scarcely improve thereafter.⁷

No, this is definitely not the stuff of Sunday reading for edification. Yet, as Aitken points out, Virtue 'has moved on, no longer relying on evangelical religion as the principal, even sole source of harshness and isolation', although it has to be said that in the book he does still permit himself an occasional swipe at Christianity. While this novel does contain a good deal of new material, certain familiar themes still reappear, not least the familiar place names of Morrinsville, Wellington, Upper Hutt, and Te Aroha in the Waikato District. In addition, believe it or not, we meet another Yorkshire terrier by the name of Bessie. Certain details remain as landmarks in Virtue's writing.

In 1993, Virtue published his sixth novel, *Sandspit Crossing*. While this is clearly an attempt to go beyond previous material, adventuring further than previously into a world of Rabelaisian burlesque, the shadows of the past are nevertheless not completely dispelled. Thus, once again, the chief character is a boy, Athol Buck, but this time an only son, who becomes virtually abandoned by his parents, who go to live in Lower Hutt (*Sandspit Crossing*, p.69) and later in Hollywood, California (p.154), and is cared for by an eccentric spinster, Miss Magdalen Maidstone, who turns out to be another rugby enthusiast (p.39). It is hard to take seriously a narrative of such humorous intent, obsessed once again with a rather juvenile attitude to sex and basic bodily functions and it is not surprising that various forms of religion are made the butt of Virtue's lampoon. Thus, in addition to references to Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, the weird version of Catholicism promoted by Ursula Maidstone, and

7. *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 May 1991, p.20.

Reginald Wallace Ritter's aberrant Chapel of Enduring Masculinity, Plymouth Brethren are mentioned specifically and the Exclusive Brethren also appear. On this occasion, the last mentioned seem to be one of the saner parties. It is with an Exclusive Brethren sister in Cashmere that Mr. and Mrs. Scudder go to stay (p.118) and where Mrs. Scudder and her daughter Raewyn undergo evangelical conversion (p.132). The most heterodox form of religion promoted by any character in the novel is that of the Rev. Fulk and his Gospel Crusade of Hope, a form of evangelicalism that is later given up for a claim to be the 'New Jehovah' with a mission to build a Bethlehem Temple in Sandspit Crossing. *Vis-à-vis* the Rev. Fulk, the Exclusive Brethren stand on much saner ground and are said to have taken him to court on a charge of fraud (p.173). As in other examples of Virtue's fictional writing, the characters in *Sandspit Crossing* have a distinctly two-dimensional form and the reader never seems able to get inside their thoughts. They remain typically comic-strip personages in what, on this occasion, seems like a series of loosely-linked short stories full of black humour.

Contempt of religion and semi-autobiographical material are not completely banished from Virtue's later novel, *The Transfiguration of Martha Friend* (1996), in which, among other trials, the New Zealand widow of the title has to come to terms with her estranged transsexual son Laurence/Letitia living away in England. The butt of Virtue's religious distaste is the neighbouring Mr. and Mrs. Delaney, retired Strict Baptist missionaries, accused of 'forcing their religion down the throats of those whose culture had been terminated or controlled by arrogance' (p.86). Virtue himself makes an Alfred Hitchcock-like appearance in his own fiction as the guest on a New Zealand radio talkback programme. He is depicted as a New Zealand writer 'with a silly sounding name' who has just published a book about 'a fundamentalist religious sect' which he claimed had damaged his early life. Other details bring the correspondence close to Virtue himself except that the fictitious author is a writer of science fiction (p.22).

What is the reader to make of this dark picture, obsessively repeated in Virtue's writings? First of all, a great many people not yet rendered insensitive by the modern *Zeitgeist*, will find these books not just hard, but distinctly distasteful, reading. Why then persist? Not least, to see ourselves as (some) others know us and to ask where we might have gone wrong. Restel Bevan, who escapes from his family into his hobby of photography may be seen as symbolic of one sort of obscurantist Christianity: 'Restel had shut himself into his darkroom out the back' (*Country of Salvation*, p.196). While the statement may be taken at face value, it may, for the perceptive reader, carry other overtones, for Restel Bevan epitomizes the kind of Pharisaic spiritual blindness that Virtue felt characterized his own father. It is a blindness springing from self-willed religious correctness. The ninth chapter of John's Gospel contrasts two claims to see: 'All I know is this: once I was blind, now I can see' (v.25) and '...because you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains' (v.41). The former seeing is based on direct, subjective, personal experience; the latter seeing is merely a self-willed orthodoxy borrowed from the purveyors of tradition. One does not need to over-elaborate.

The story of *In the Country of Salvation* ends with a reconciliation of family members, which however lacks conviction as it is not apparently true of Virtue's own experience. It is, nevertheless, an end he wistfully desires, but one which eludes him. The central character of all Virtue's novels so far is 'the little boy', at least one who, if not so young in years, is nevertheless a sort of Peter Pan in an adult world. Virtue admits to being a little boy inside. One wonders if 'arrested development' is a term that might be used to describe his fascination with the child's eye-view, or is it perhaps desire for a return to a childlike innocence? 'Unless you become as little children...' If there is a saving grace about the writings of Noel Virtue, it is the patient suffering and unquenched love of the little boy, forever seeking love and hope in dark places. There is something essentially Christian about this emphasis on love as covering a multitude of sins and the quest for understanding and reconciliation is one that can only be fully satisfied in a heartfelt apprehension of the mission and redeeming love of Jesus Christ.