

LONGING FOR CHILDHOOD TIMES  
IN THE NEW ZEALAND BUSH:  
NOSTALGIA, ANTIMODERNISM, AND THE DEFORESTED  
LANDSCAPE IN THE WRITING OF ELSIE K. MORTON

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ABSTRACT

*This paper draws on articles published in the New Zealand Herald between 1914 and 1933 by the writer and journalist Elsie K. Morton to demonstrate how nostalgia for childhood experiences in the forest, or the bush, as it is labelled colloquially, have acted as an antimodern response to and critique of deforestation in New Zealand. Morton's articles are situated within the wider body of cultural antimodernism in New Zealand, locating them after the antimodern literature of Maoriland in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, but before the antimodern writing of several prominent authors who published their works in the 1930s and 1940s. The author makes the argument that the bush landscape is central to the expression of antimodernism as a response to the modernisation of New Zealand.*

*Keywords:* nostalgia; antimodernism; elsie k. Morton; deforestation; bush

INTRODUCTION

James Smithies (2006, 171) notes that in New Zealand there is 'a deeply felt anti-modern vision that many writers and artists have either grappled with directly, or, more usually, ignored but nonetheless reflected in their work.' This antimodernism of the 1930s and 1940s has been located in the writing of Monte Holcroft by Smithies (2006), in the work of Frank Sargeson by Stuart Murray (1998), and in the texts of D'Arcy Cresswell and John Mulgan by Mike Grimshaw (2012a and 2012b). However, Jane Stafford and Mark Williams (2006) recognise an earlier antimodernism of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century New Zealand in Maoriland literature. This essay explores the idea that nostalgia, specifically what Svetlana Boym (2001, 41) calls 'reflective nostalgia,'

can be seen as an expression of what Arthur Versluis (2006, 99) terms 'soft antimodernism'. I argue that the articles of journalist and writer Elsie K. Morton, published in the *New Zealand Herald* between 1914 and 1933, exemplify the reflective nostalgia of soft antimodernism. In these articles Morton conveys nostalgia for her childhood experiences in the indigenous forests of the Auckland area and she mourns over the deforestation of the bush, as she calls it. At the same time Morton provides a critique of deforestation as a form of destructive modernisation and calls for increased conservation. Furthermore, I claim that this writing of Morton's is an important addition to the body of literary antimodernism in New Zealand, for her articles begin historically at the end of Maoriland and go through to the time the prominent writers mentioned above began publishing their works. The overall contribution of this article is to the understanding of the role of the bush landscape and its deforestation in the expression of antimodernism in New Zealand.

In the first section I give a brief personal account of nostalgia for times of youth spent in the bush and demonstrate the significance of this kind of expression within the context of New Zealand's deforestation. I then examine the terms nostalgia and antimodernism, showing that reflective nostalgia is an expression of soft antimodernism. Revealing the relationship between enthusiasm for nature and the antimodern critique of deforestation, I explain how my story shows that reflective nostalgia for childhood experiences in wilderness can be seen as a type of soft antimodernism. In the second section I suggest that antimodern, reflective nostalgia for youth and nature is a sentiment located historically in Romanticism. I then claim that this expression was first conveyed in New Zealand through the Maoriland literature of the late-colonial period, when it arose as a response by second-generation settlers to the deforestation of the bush, and I offer William Pember Reeves' (1898) poem, *The Passing of the Forest: A Lament for the Children of Tané*, as an example of this. In the third section I analyse how, in the selected articles by Morton, she expresses the reflective nostalgia of soft antimodernism by reminiscing upon childhood times spent in the bush around Auckland. Here I also show how Morton provides an antimodern critique of deforestation. Lastly, in the conclusion I summarise the major points of this paper and then situate Morton's work in relation to the wider body of antimodern writing in New Zealand. While suggesting Morton's writing is crucial to this body, I argue that it is problematic given its lack of reference to Māori. This absence of Māori presence in Morton's representation of the bush reflects the fact that the historic removal of Māori from New Zealand's forests made the kind of Romanticism Morton espoused possible.

REMEMBERING NATURE AND CHILDHOOD: SOFT ANTIMODERNISM AND REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA

One childhood summer, when the fruit on the three plum trees in the backyard was ripe, a bird gained the attention of my mother and I. I remember the noise of the large kererū (New Zealand Pigeon) which sounded like a small helicopter as it flew onto the property one afternoon, landing on one of the plum trees to gorge itself on the sweet fruit, scaring off smaller birds in the process. My mother excitedly bent down next to me and pointed to the bird as it sat in the tree, explaining that it is not only recognisable for its size and for the noise it makes, but for its white breast, which provides a sharp contrast to the dark green of the feathers on its head and back. We watched the bird patiently as it ate before taking flight once again, leaving our backyard and slowly drifting out of our view as it flew further and further away. To me, the kererū was not valuable for any other reason than its beauty and size, but my mother taught me that we were lucky to have seen it because it was a native bird, which meant that it was unique, found only in New Zealand. She explained to me that like many of the country's indigenous bird species, its numbers were declining, to such an extent, in fact, that only a few were left at all. Naturally I asked why.

My mother paused for a moment to think before responding, and she then proceeded to explain to me that the kererū comes from the bush that once covered much of New Zealand, but which was now, in Canterbury specifically, largely confined to the foothills of the high country, at the base of the Southern Alps. She went on to tell me that when she was a child there were many more native birds because there was much more bush, and that their numbers had since declined as the forest was slowly wiped away by industry. This then led her to express anger over the process of deforestation, which she said was undertaken by corporations who are relentlessly destructive in their drive to make profits at the expense of nature. At the same time, she conveyed nostalgia for the bird song that she knew from her childhood trips away camping with my grandparents. She recalled numerous summer holidays spent staying outdoors where she would swim in lakes and walk in the bush, and she told me that one day I would miss my own experiences of enjoying nature as a child, but that if I was lucky, the forest spots from my youth would still be there when I was older. As my mother reminisced, I became aware of her deep feelings of loss and nostalgia for the indigenous forest and its creatures, and how she saw their death as tragically irreversible.

Stories like this one that express longing for something are commonplace, but nostalgia is nevertheless a complex emotion and concept with a long his-

tory. For Sigmund Freud (1917), individuals who fail to successfully mourn something that has been lost become melancholic and never manage to move on from its passing. In its original formation, melancholy was understood as wistfulness, from the old English word *wist*, meaning the feeling of vague or regretful longing (Scull 2014). The melancholy of nostalgia is a specific kind of melancholy that refers to the way individuals yearn for that which has been lost by dwelling over its existence, or even willing it to return (Boym 2001). But for Boym (2001), mourning and nostalgia are not independent, for nostalgia can be a process of mourning. The term nostalgia was first coined by the Swiss physician Johannes Hoffer in the seventeenth century, when he used it to refer to the homesickness felt by Swiss soldiers exiled from their homeland during war (Fritzche 2001). The word nostalgia comes from the Greek *nostos*, meaning to come home, and *algia*, which denotes longing (Boym 2001). However, by the nineteenth century nostalgia stopped being an illness used to diagnose melancholics and began to take on a different meaning, referring to a more general, collective yearning (Boym 2001). There are numerous examples of this wistful mode of memory in the culture of Western society, but perhaps one of the best documented is *ostalgie*, nostalgia for East Germany (Winkler 2011).

Nostalgia is a type of antimodernism. According to Versluis (2006, 96), 'modern industrial society in its very nature calls forth antimodernism'. Boym (2001, 19) expands on this point when she writes, 'there is a codependency between the modern ideas of progress and newness and antimodern claims' that call for exactly the opposite. On the one hand, moderns optimistically and liberally look forward to the future, embracing change and improvement. While on the other, antimoderns pessimistically and conservatively retreat from or seek recourse to the familiar as a precaution, reaction, or regression against the new, for it is unknown and therefore potentially dangerous or threatening to the established order. As Bruno Latour (1991, 72) notes, 'antimoderns... accept modern temporality but reverse its direction...in order to wipe out progress, often to nostalgically 'return toward the past'. But to what extent does the nostalgic antimodern undertake this action? For Versluis (2006, 99), 'soft antimodernism' only aims to criticise modernity, while 'hard antimodernism' tries to do away with it altogether. Similarly, for Boym (2001, 41), 'reflective nostalgia' is a form of memory that 'dwells in *algia*', that is yearning and loss, while 'restorative nostalgia' attempts to remake the past at the expense of the present through *nos*, meaning to return. Therefore, while reflective nostalgia is a form of soft antimodernism, restorative nostalgia is a variety of hard antimodernism.

Memories of childhood times spent in New Zealand's bush are conveyed through the reflective nostalgia of soft antimodernism. In my example my

mother did not wish to recreate some past historical period, rather she dwelled on and regretted the passing of both her youth and the bush. Similarly, in the literature discussed in this essay the bush and childhood converge in memory into one sole thing to be recalled through reflective nostalgia. Furthermore, my mother's expression of anger over the chopping down of the bush is reflected in the examples used in this essay, for they too critique the idea that deforestation equals progress. As Versluis (2006, 97) writes, 'antimodernism is a realization that "progress" has an underbelly', for it shows that 'industrial development has destructive consequences'. Along with culture and religion, Versluis (2006) claims that antimoderns see the worst harm of modernity being inflicted upon nature. Latour (1991, 9) humorously writes, 'we must no longer try to dominate nature', 'let us be resolutely antimodern'. For Versluis (2006), environmentalists who spread terror in an attempt to end modernity and return to a supposedly natural way of life are hard antimoderns, while nature writers like Henry David Thoreau, who merely critique the destruction of the environment and retreat from modernity into nature, are soft antimoderns. Moreover, Versluis (2006, 100) uses the term 'cultural antimodernism' to refer to writing like Thoreau's that articulates soft antimodernism. I argue that both the Maoriland literature and the writing of Elsie K. Morton that I examine in this essay are forms of cultural antimodernism. For these works critique deforestation, but also in them, the reflective nostalgia for childhood times in the bush, and the forest itself as it is constructed in these memories, provides an escape from modernity.

#### YEARNING FOR OLD NEW ZEALAND: THE ROMANTIC RESPONSE TO DEFORESTATION IN MAORILAND

Historically it is through Romanticism that nostalgia was first taken beyond its origin as a medical condition and developed into a cultural emotion by poets and novelists. Although Romantics may not have identified their writings as nostalgic, today much of their works are certainly recognised as being largely constituted by expressions of the feeling of longing, albeit in a variety of different ways. However, Romantic nostalgia was manifest in two particular themes that stand out as the exemplary forms through which the emotion was implicitly conveyed within the literature of the period: childhood and nature. It is commonly argued that 'longing for childhood' is the 'most romantic desire' (Austin 2003, 75). In the English language this desire was first taken up by Wordsworth through his development of the figure of the child of nature (Austin 2003). Within such descriptions nature referred to human nature in its truest form, which was defined by the qualities of innocence and purity. These characteristics were seen to be most evident in children because they were

perceived to be unspoilt by things like greed and money which were thought to corrupt adults. Therefore, the figure of the child of nature was an image memorialised by adults who yearned for the simpler times of youth that could not be returned to. Furthermore, through their foregrounding of this experience of reflective nostalgia over and against the Enlightenment ideal of rationality, the Romantics were antimoderns, for their literature forms a specific body of cultural antimodernism.

Besides the concept of human nature, the idea of nature as a place also played an important part in the expression of reflective nostalgia within Romanticism. Romantic writers were central to the development of the concept of nature as a place or landscape (Williams 1976). Moreover, they perceived places of nature to be characterised by a kind of primordality that signified an unattainable past to be longed for. As Paul DeMan (1984, 6) puts it, Romanticism was ‘inspired by nostalgia for the natural object, expanding to become nostalgia for the origin of this object.’ In this way, natural landscapes like the sublime or the picturesque and the natural objects that compose them like flowers or rivers evoked awe because of their grandeur, beauty, and power, but also because of their temporal distance. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (1988, 4) suggest, ‘romantic – especially in its English provenance – is the landscape before which one feels the sentiment of nature, or the epic grandeur of the past, or a mixture of both’. Therefore, for Romantics nature signifies a long lost, distant past that cannot be recovered through the restorative nostalgia of hard antimodernism, but which can be recalled in memory through the reflective nostalgia of soft antimodernism, that ‘foggy nostalgia for the far away’ (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1988, 1).

The reflective nostalgia of antimodernism was first imported to New Zealand by Maoriland writers who were informed by the Romantic expression of this kind of longing. According to Stafford and Williams (2006), Maoriland writing occurred in New Zealand between 1872 and 1914. Although Maoriland writing was typically Victorian in that it moved towards and hinted at the coming style of Modernism, its outlook was equally informed by looking back to Romanticism and drawing heavily on its themes (Stafford and Williams 2006). In this late-colonial writing, ‘the early days of settlement’ were romanticised ‘as exaggeratedly distant and as a cause for nostalgia’ (Stafford and Williams 2006, 212). Between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century when New Zealand was commonly known as Maoriland, this yearful mode of memory was particularly evident in settlers’ recollections of days of youth spent in the country’s natural landscapes. Indeed, within this context, the remembrance of ‘childish memories of rambles in bush and over hill and plain,’

as one settler (1897, 43) reminisced, became highly popular among ‘locally born settlers’ and those that had come to the country at a young enough age to have had such experiences while in their youth (Gibbons 2002, 8). As nature writer James Drummond (1907, 6) suggested, when a New Zealander hears ‘the bell-bird’s song,’ ‘childhood’s days come crowding in upon the memory, and there arise visions of stately trees, drooping ferns, mossy dells, and all the magnificent beauty of the New Zealand bush.’

The reflective nostalgia of soft antimodernism did not just appear in Maoriland writing as an attempt by authors to incorporate the wistful sentiment of Romanticism into their works, for it was also contextualised by the ongoing deforestation of the bush in New Zealand. Settlers’ yearnful memories of childhood experiences in the forest from this time were intensified by the fact that many of the areas of bush they recalled had since been cut down or burnt off later in their life. For even by ‘the drawing of the twentieth-century,’ New Zealanders ‘lived as people still very much engaged in the rapid transformation of the environment’ (Lochhead and Star 2013, 141). Earlier deforestation that took place in New Zealand was met with little opposition except by a few pioneers of nature preservation, such as Reeves. At the time, the transformation of indigenous landscapes into farmlands, or neo-Europes as Alfred Crosby (1972) put it, was largely seen as a sign of progress in the colony. In contrast, many children of early-settlers did not ‘feel so obsessively impelled to transform the “wilderness”’ (Gibbons 2002, 8). This was because a significant number of these New Zealanders identified with the country’s indigenous nature and saw it as having intrinsic value rather than just utilitarian potential. Native flora and fauna thus became a source of patriotism within an emerging national identity (Lochhead and Star 2013).

Within Maoriland literature that responded to deforestation, the reflective nostalgia of soft antimodernism is best demonstrated in the work of Reeves, who romantically expressed longing for childhood times spent in the bush. Reeves was born in New Zealand as the son of early-settlers and he identified as a New Zealander (Sinclair 2014). Reeves (1898, 37), a supporter of nature preservation, claimed that New Zealand’s native flora and fauna were ‘neglected by the first generation’ of Europeans to come to the country, but were ‘better appreciated by their children,’ ‘themselves natives of the soil’. As one of these indigenes who appreciated New Zealand’s nature, Reeves (1898, 380) expressed melancholy over the destruction of the bush in his poem *The Passing of the Forest: A Lament for the Children of Tané*, which was written as a mournful tangi or eulogy: ‘ancient of days in green old age they stand, though lost the beauty that became man’s prey when from their flanks he stripped the woods away’. Reeves (1898,

381) mourning also involved reminiscing about childhood times spent in the bush, for he recalled ‘the forest tracks where oft we rode, under the silvery fern fronds, climbing slow, through long green tunnels, while hot noontide glowed, and glittered on the tree-tops far below’. Therefore, here the bush under the threat of impending demise and the carefreeness of the experience of the forest in youth are ‘nostalgicised’ together, merging into a single object of loss.

As a form of soft antimodernism, yearning for childhood times in the bush takes the shape of reflective nostalgia. In Maoriland, ‘New Zealand is already the modern world, in which the old settler world is now observed from a distance’ (Stafford and Williams 2006, 19). As William Cronon (1995, 73) writes of the American context, ‘nostalgia for a passing frontier way of life inevitably implied ambivalence, if not downright hostility, toward modernity and all that it represented’. ‘Frontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of antimodernism’ (Cronon 1995, 73). In New Zealand, this antimodern ‘nostalgia for the pre-modern world of the colony’ often manifest as ‘a continual recourse to the archaic’ (Stafford and Williams 2006, p 19). The bush is one form of the archaic in Maoriland, because like Māori, it represented a pre-modern world that was rapidly disappearing. Deforestation in colonial New Zealand transformed the forest landscape of the past – which served no practical purpose in its natural form – into material resources required for the development of the new world. In this way, the bush and modernity could not coexist in the colony; they were opposed to one another. Maoriland authors rejected this view by espousing the importance of the bush and expressing longing for times they spent in the forest, often during childhood. In this way, Maoriland literature is an example of soft antimodernism, because it does not ‘seek to leave modernity behind or to overthrow it’ (Versluis 2006, 99). Rather, as a body of cultural antimodernism, Maoriland writing critiques modernity and partially escapes from it through contemplative memory. Thus, Maoriland authors recollect childhood times in the bush via reflective nostalgia, for instead of recreating bygone, they dwell on the ‘irrevocability of the past’ (Boym 2001, 49).

#### LONGING FOR A YOUTH SPENT IN THE BUSH: THE WRITING OF ELSIE K. MORTON

Here I want to argue that the reflective nostalgia expressed for childhood times spent in the bush persisted in New Zealand after the Maoriland period and into the 1920s and the 1930s, because even then this soft antimodern longing continued to be expressed as a collective, cultural response to deforestation by nature enthusiasts. There are numerous letters from members of the public

published in both national and local New Zealand newspapers during these two decades that attest to the pervasiveness of this mode of memory.<sup>2</sup> However, for the sake of brevity and clarity I will focus on a selection of articles published by Elsie K. Morton in the *New Zealand Herald* during the early twentieth century. These are suitable because they begin in 1914, the year that Stafford and Williams (2006) close their book on Maoriland literature, and they continue through to the early 1930s. In these articles Morton reminisces about childhood times spent in various areas of bush around Auckland, and she expresses the sadness she felt after they had been burnt or felled later in her life. Morton's yearning for the bush couples with her longing for the early years of her life and the two become one expression of the same vanished past. Furthermore, Morton expresses these autobiographical narratives infused with the reflective nostalgia of soft antimodernism alongside passionate pleas made to the government and to the public to slow the rate of deforestation.

Born as Katherine Elizabeth Morton in Auckland in 1885, Elsie K. Morton was the journalist and writer's pen name (McCallum 2015). Morton's extensive and diverse body of writing ranged from children's stories to travel literature, and was published both as books, such as *Joy of the Road* (1929), *Crusoes of Sunday Island* (1957), and *Fun in Fiordland* (1950), and as articles in the *New Zealand Herald*. The newspaper employed Morton in 1912 and she became the first woman to be on its news team (Boddy and Matthews 1991). Out of the women writers in New Zealand during the 1930's, Jane Mander and Ursula Bethell are moderns. [While] Jessie Mackay, Isabel M. Cluett, [and] Elsie K. Morton are of the old school' (Boddy and Matthews 1991, 207). This was manifest in Morton's writing stylistically in her romantic yearning, but also in her soft antimodern outlook, evident in her critique of the destructive nature of industries like forestry. Morton was one of the only women journalists of her time in New Zealand with left-wing ideas (Boddy and Matthews 1991). Moreover, she expressed support for various social causes, including nature conservation (McCallum 2015). When she was not putting pen to paper Morton would 'saddle up a horse and go riding into the backcountry' in order to find 'fresh material' to write about (Boddy and Matthews 1991).

Earlier on in her time working for the *New Zealand Herald*, Morton (1914) demonstrated her soft antimodern nature writing about New Zealand's bush in an article titled *Places we don't Forget*. It is in this article that Morton (1914) first makes the connection between reflective nostalgia, childhood, and landscape within the context of deforestation, which would later come to define many of the articles she wrote for the newspaper. Morton (1914, 1) romanticised the mind as a 'storehouse' of 'odd fragments of memory that are in themselves veri-

table treasures'. For her, memory was most powerful when it conjured places remembered from a young age: 'Maybe half a century has passed, but you still recall one little spot of childhood' (Morton 1914, 1). Reminiscing about one such site from her youth, Morton (1914, 1) wrote:

'a tiny shanty marked the brow of my hill, one of those shingle places built by the brave hands of our fathers, little resting-places in the wilderness, homes in the wild that testified to the courage and strong faith of the pioneer builders.'

Here Morton's testament to the toughness of the early-settlers is indicative of the antimodern nostalgia for old New Zealand that appears in Maori-land writing. However, her yearning for the colony was not so much about the European migrants who came to New Zealand, but about the landscapes from that time of arrival which have now been lost: 'Bush fires have swept the hillside time and time again. I have seen it all drear and desolately black, a waste of charred stumps and smouldering mould, and I have mourned for the places I love best' (Morton 1914, 1). Therefore, Morton's longing for childhood times in the bush arises alongside her despair for the destroyed forest, as a process of mourning.

A decade later in her article *Modernising Auckland: Changes in the Domain*, Morton (1925) criticised the development of the park in a soft antimodern vein. Morton (1925, 1) wrote that out of the changes to have occurred in the city after the turn of the twentieth century, 'so far one of her special and unique attractions has survived the march of progress – the Auckland Domain'. She claimed 'it is a place of pleasant memories...to the younger folk who spent their childhood within easy reach of...the paths of enchantment that used to wander through the bush' (Morton 1925, 1). Through reflective nostalgia, Morton (1925, 1) recalled her own experiences of visiting the forest in the domain as a child: 'the memory of the dear childhood days still lingers strongly'. Criticising the attempt by the domain's management to clear away forest undergrowth and make the thick bush more suitable to the park environment, Morton (1925, 1) said, 'it was wild, it was untidy, it was "nature unadorned", and so it had to go'. She continued:

The whole scheme of adornment of this modern band-in-the-park area is completed by a hideous rusty gun and a penny-in-the-slot weighing machine that shouts to Heaven of Monday's blue bag... Thoroughly up-to-date, thoroughly commonplace; all that is wanted now to complete the scheme of "modernisation" is a telephone box

and a peanut stall, painted blue to match the weighing machine.  
(Morton 1925, 1)

Therefore, as a soft antimodern, Morton is angered by the attempt to bring civility to the wild landscape of the forest in the domain. Furthermore, by way of her reflective nostalgia, Morton idealises her childhood in memory as a time when unordered nature was acceptable.

Morton's memories of her childhood days in the bush often centred on holidays, when school would be closed and she would meet other children in some picturesque forested landscape. In an article titled *The Old Prospector: A Memory of Childhood*, Morton (1929, 1) reminisced about one particular experience like this at Pukekiwiriki in Manukau Harbour, which was 'only a stone's throw from [her] home on the hill':

They don't call it the Michaelmas holidays nowadays, of course, but that was the name always given to the springtide holiday when we children went to school a generation ago. And what a holiday it was! I doubt if even the long days of the Christmas holidays held the charm of those two weeks in early spring. The creek still ran high after winter's floods, and our old summer tracks through the forest were overgrown with ferns, and the litter of fallen branches.

Returning to the same spot, Morton (1929, 1) melancholically depicts the sight of the landscape as it appears to her at the time of writing this article in the twenties: 'the bush is all felled now; green pastures slope down the sunny hillside'. Here Morton's soft antimodernism is expressed as both general melancholy for the present and reflective nostalgia for the past. For she contrasts her memory of her carefree vacation in the bush with the feeling of sorrow that she now feels for the forest as she revisits it only to find that it is gone.

Morton often expressed her reflective nostalgia as bittersweet. In her article *Forgotten Tracks*, Morton (1932, 25) recalled an experience of finding a bush track from her childhood in an undisclosed location: 'how beautiful, I thought, to find the old track, and stand once again on that picnicking ground of childhood days!'; 'how sharp and sweet the memory as I stood there among the ferns and thought of the little girl who had brought her dolls and played with them in that bush-garden almost half a lifetime ago!' Morton (1932, 25) then tried to find another spot in the forest that she remembered from childhood, 'but I climbed in vain', she wrote, 'I had forgotten the great fire. It had swept through this portion of the bush'. She continued: 'the whole world had changed since

last my feet had wandered down the old, forgotten tracks; nothing would ever be the same again' (Morton 1932, 25). Here Morton's (1932) memory was, as she stated, both sharp and sweet. For her there is sweetness in recalling the past and reminiscing upon memories of it, but for the soft antimodern bitterness comes in realising that the world has permanently and irreversibly changed. Therefore, memories are a means through which to relive the past in thought, but at the same time the act of remembering reminds us that all we are left with are recollections.

In one of her more poetic articles titled *Trees or Timber: Our Vanishing Forests*, Morton wrote about childhood times she spent in the wilderness just south of Auckland, where she was traumatised by the sight of a bush fire. Morton (1933, 1) remembered 'the forest of Hunua', a 'happy haunt of childhood', and 'the pitiful remnants' of it that remained after it had been scorched. She recalled:

Twenty-five years ago the road through Hunua Gorge was a narrow bridle track, winding in and out beneath steep cliffs clothed with forest growth. Then, a few years later, we saw the whole of the Hunua hills crowned with leaping flame, watched the forest burn day by day, heard the scream of frightened bush birds, and saw the sun as a dim moon of blood in a smoke-darkened sky. The fire burned for nearly a week, and when the last spark was extinguished the beauty of Hunua Gorge was gone forever'. (Morton 1933, 1)

Morton's account takes the reader from a nostalgic depiction of the forest as it was in her childhood, then through the process of burning, and finally to the scorched landscape left after the fire was over. Flame transforms the forest into a charred remnant, but in the process of doing so it creates an atmosphere that is both literally and figuratively blackened. For in her memory, the burning forest is a landscape represented by the darkened sky and melancholic mood.

Over the course of her life, Morton saw the rapid transformation of natural landscapes in much of the Auckland area, including the removal of forest on the West Coast Road between Glen Eden and Piha. In the same article on Hunua, Morton (1933, 1) changed tack and wrote the following wistful account about the importance of this roadside area of bush to her:

I remember as a child riding on a timber wagon through the dim sweetness of the Mamuka bush one early summer morning long ago. The great rimus and ratas towered like kings above us; the tuis sang overhead; and the place seemed to me a paradise of beauty.

We had no “huts”, no leader; we wore sandshoes as a rule, and took our time. On Monday mornings we rose at four o’clock, took a few biscuits, did our seventeen miles, caught the nine o’clock train back to town, and settled down to a good day’s work, refreshed body and soul by our sojourn in the western hills and by the ocean. Many and many a year passed before I saw the Mamuka bush again, cut by a dusty road thronged with motor-cars, only a scant fringe of trees left where once there had been a bushland wilderness’.

Here Morton draws the common contrast made between wilderness and industrialised society. Through reminiscence an organic or natural condition is attributed to the children, who are given respite from the urban environment via their relaxing experience in this paradisaical landscape. Just as the bush is inevitably lost through the modernising transformation that turns it into road, in this expression Morton’s reflective nostalgia for her childhood times spent in the forest gives way to her sadness over its now dwindled state.

After her remarks about Hunua and the West Coast Road, Morton (1933) finished her article by making an emotional plea for increased conservation. Morton (1933, 1) asked her readers: ‘are we going to argue thus until the last remnants of our forests are gone?’ She suggested that there was a need ‘to show something of a national spirit at long last [and] revive public interest in a sound afforestation policy’ (Morton 1993, 1). The aim of this was to ‘see to it that before further spoliation of the Urewera or any other forest takes place the whole question [of deforestation] shall be reviewed by a council of men and women qualified to sanction or condemn’ (Morton 1933, 1). Here Morton shows that she is very much a soft antimodern rather than a hard antimodern. Morton does not call for the cessation of forestry altogether, instead she provides a critique of progress that aims to point out that the negative consequences of modernisation on the environment, namely the destruction of the bush, may in fact outweigh the economic revenue it generates as an industry. Furthermore, through her expression of reflective nostalgia for childhood times spent in the bush, Morton attempts to show that the forest not only has utilitarian worth, but is also equally if not more valuable as a place in which to experience nature.

## CONCLUSION

Morton’s expression of longing for days of youth spent in the bush is underpinned by Romanticism in multiple ways. As Bell (1996, 39) writes: ‘memories of idealised previous times and childhood behaviour in the outdoors (a place

in which to create an exaggerated mythical version of nature, or a “hyper-nature”) continue to validate retrospectively the nature myth.’ Thus in these recollections, ‘nostalgia for the past and the romanticisation of nature entwine’ (Bell 1996, 39). In Morton’s case, the Romantic nature myth combines with soft antimodernism to represent the bush as a place that can be visited in order to escape from modernity. Furthermore, Morton’s writing is also Romantic in that it seeks authenticity in personal experience. Much like the nature writing of authors like Thoreau, Morton’s work is informed by her reflections on her own time spent in the wilderness when she was young and her response to the destruction of the forest later in her life. Therefore rather than taking a more rational approach, as a soft antimodern Morton dwells on the intricacies of her encounters with the bush and the impression they have on her, which is conveyed as a mixture of mourning and reflective nostalgia.

This Romantic longing for childhood and nature is problematic given the colonial history of New Zealand. As David Young (2004) points out, during the nineteenth century, the creation of the first scenic reserves by settlers sometimes involved the removal of Māori settlements to make these areas of bush conform to the Romantic ideals of the picturesque and the sublime. The bourgeois form of reflective nostalgia and mourning for the bush expressed by Morton does not recognise this history. For second-generation settlers like Morton, their childhood experiences of the bush they recall so dearly were in fact made possible by the erasure of Māori from New Zealand’s forests. Indeed, the creation of supposedly empty forests allowed settlers to use these spaces for leisure. Through Romanticism, the bush around the Auckland region takes on a sense of timelessness in Morton’s writing, because for her it is and always will be an ahistorical place of childhood, representing purity, innocence, and rejuvenation. While Morton provides a soft antimodernist critique of the way the bush is modernised when it is thinned out or cut back, she fails to recognise that the forest was already made modern when settlers appropriated it from Māori for recreational use.

Morton’s writing is nevertheless crucial to understanding the development of cultural antimodernism in New Zealand. Morton’s soft antimodernism – evident in her reflective nostalgia and critique of the impact of modernization on the environment – arises out of Maoriland in the earlier twentieth century and continues through to the 1930s. Emerging at this time, Morton’s antimodernism comes about before New Zealand’s prominent authors were writing but nevertheless lays the groundwork for the later antimodernism of many of them in certain ways: for instance, Sargeson’s antimodern idealisation of an ‘agrarian communal existence’ that Murray (1998, 155) identifies; or Grimshaw’s

(2012b) view of Mulgan's writing as an expression of an antimodern vision of New Zealand, in which the country is pictured as a farmland suited to hard-working, European peasants. There is also Grimshaw's (2012b) representations of Cresswell as an antimodern figure who wanders the backroads of rural New Zealand. And finally, Smithies' (2006) take on Holcroft as an antimodern writer is important here as well. All of these writers share in common with Morton the idea that nature is the cure to modernity, for it has therapeutic and sentimental value which the towns and cities do not. However while it is the rural landscape for Sargeson, Mulgan, and Cresswell, for Morton it is the bush that must be escaped to.

There are specific reasons why the bush became a driving force behind antimodernism in New Zealand. Smithies (2006, 174) writes, 'New Zealanders were not spared the negative side of modernity', and as examples he lists 'labour unrest amongst miners at Waihi in 1912' and 'the nationwide watersiders strike of 1913', which 'culminated in the election of the first Labour government in 1935'. Responding to this at a more cultural level, 'New Zealanders appear to have been quick to pick up leisure practices that aimed to offset the negative influences of modernity' (Smithies 2006, 174). The wilderness experience is certainly one of these activities. At their very core, camping and tramping are antimodern because one of their key purposes is to alleviate the stress of modern life, just as Morton suggested they did. Furthermore, for Grimshaw (2012a, 148), 'it is not surprising that antimodernism took hold as a defining characteristic of New Zealand. For this was, and still strongly images itself, a society that exists amidst, and because of, rapid changes to nature'. One part of this was deforestation, which was quicker and more widespread in New Zealand than almost anywhere else in the world (Lochhead and Star 2013). Considering this historical reality and the fact that nature recreation has been popular in the New Zealand for a long time, it makes sense that for New Zealanders, the forest became a potent example of traditional things being destroyed at the expense of the country's modernisation.

#### NOTES

- 1 Cameron recently completed his MA in sociology at the University of Canterbury on landscape and culture in New Zealand and is currently a research assistant in the School of Landscape Architecture at Lincoln University.  
Email: cameronjohnboyle@gmail.com
- 2 For example: M. North (1931, 4) 'remembered the happy days of childhood' when 'many happy hours' were spent in 'a piece of native bush' in Ohaupo.

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