

WITH Alan Duff, Author and Social Activist for Maori advancement



Alan Duff, an award-winning novelist, film-maker and social activist, has garnered international attention for his message of aboriginal empowerment. The film version of *Once Were Warriors* remains New Zealand's biggest ever box-office draw. Among his best-selling books is *Maori Heroes*, distributed through Duff's "Books in Homes" program to 500 schools there. The school program now includes more than 100 remote aboriginal communities in Australia and a pilot project of three schools in the United States. A passionate critic of self-serving aboriginal leaders, Duff has delivered hundreds of speeches around the world. Formerly a syndicated newspaper columnist, he was made a Member of the British Empire in 1995. He was interviewed following several Winnipeg appearances for the Frontier Centre on May 3, 2007.

Frontier Centre: The experiences of New Zealand's Maori, Australia's aborigines and North America's Indians demonstrate remarkable similarities – European conquest, the withdrawal into protected and impoverished redoubts and subsequent cultural decline. Was tragedy an inevitable result of that civilizational conflict? Could it have happened differently?

Alan Duff: Well, of course, it could have happened differently and it has happened differently for most of the Maoris in New Zealand. They didn't quite go into that decline. Despite all of the statistical figures, they are no longer in that state of decline.

FC: Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand have all become multicultural melting pots in which different ethnic and linguistic groups have pooled their identities. Yet minorities have still retained a large measure of their individual identities. Would integration of indigenous peoples into the eventually dominant culture have served their interests better than separation?

AD: Yes, I do believe that integration would have served us better. I think this obsession with being separate because we have lost our identity has become an excuse. It's a deeply engrained excuse and we should stop using it.

FC: Much of the despair that afflicts Canada's native communities is expressed in a collectivist framework that overplays the importance of cultural integrity and deemphasizes individual decision-making. Can you state your position on the relationship of individuals to their surrounding culture?

AD: On a personal basis, I believe in individualism and generally I'm not much in favour of the collective model. But I'm not such a purist that I think everything about the individualist concept can never be challenged. I think there are good sides to both.

FC: Your position on affirmative action is cutting: "They've even set up a separate Maori writers' art council organization," you said. "That's so stupid – they may as well set up a separate grouping for red-headed writers or writers who are five foot two." Can you expand on that?

AD: I've since extended that to 1/64th Maori children and to people with one leg shorter than the other, and people with faces that are not quite straight, that veer to the left or the right. It's all a lot of nonsense, and say no more.

FC: Your writing and its offshoots have done a powerful job of educating Kiwis about the extent of the crisis facing Maori families. The response to such candour is often to "shoot the messenger." Did you have to field a lot of flak?

What was most intense, the reaction from Maori or non-Maori?

AD: Quite frankly, I find it boring to talk about the flak that I got for standing up for my views. If you can't stand up to it, then you shouldn't express your views. So I've got nothing to say on that whatsoever. I'm just happy to keep expressing my views.

FC: Why do people so easily stereotype the symptoms of poverty and alienation and show little ability to distinguish them from causes? It doesn't seem that difficult a distinction.

AD: I think the academics, especially white liberals, bear the most responsibility for this use of the word, "poverty." It's gone so far as to mean, if you don't have a color television and a 42"-wide plasma screen, and your neighbour does, and therefore you feel poor, you must be poor. If you are a poor person, you are poverty-stricken. It's a load of nonsense.

FC: Are levels of racism Down Under oppressive, as many claim? How many other Maori have, like yourself and Henare O'Keefe, made successes of their lives? If some can do it, why haven't more?

AD: Almost every Maori I know has achieved a degree of success ranging from moderate to high. I've always believed that it's an issue of attitude and influence. It's not so much poverty of the pocket as poverty of the spirit and poverty of attitude.

FC: Can you describe the scope and meaning of your literacy programs?

AD: The fundamental issue for us was that the world operates on the written word. If you don't have books in your home as a child from a young age, then you are already behind the eight-ball and God help your chances in life. That's the fundamentals of it. From a truck driver who has to deliver something somewhere to the taxi driver to the computer engineer – all the way up the scale, you have to have written words in your life because they are the basic code for the modern world.

FC: Are you able as yet to measure results? Is it working?

AD: At first we had children at schools that would never produce a university graduate. Now, after we've been around for 13 years, we've got children from those schools that are at universities and teachers training colleges, that are entrepreneurs and going on to do good things. We're not saying it's a raving success, but we've certainly got remarkable results from the programme. Government research is being done on measuring the children. As to their improvement in reading and writing, the outcome has overwhelmingly given us affirmation that the program is working.

FC: Can you summarize the effect of your book, *Maori Heroes*, on the lives of children who read it? What sort of feedback are you getting? Why are heroes important?

AD: The feedback from *Maori Heroes* has been marvelous. It's now in almost every library and school library in New Zealand. We gave out 70,000 copies free to households that have been in our programme. Why do we need heroes? We need someone to look up to. Especially when you're young, you get lost and the world looks dark sometimes, and lonely and confusing. If you've got someone to look up to that you can identify with, then that will inspire you to go on and make the best of things.

FC: The Frontier Centre's links the economic disaster in most of our First Nations to the totalitarian powers held by native political leaders. Do you agree? If so, what strategies do you recommend to reverse it?

AD: No, I disagree vehemently with that. I know the Chiefs do have a lot of power, but I don't think that you can blame that for the problems. It's easy to shift the blame from stupid white governments with their stupid policies and their ridiculous handouts of money onto corrupt leaders. I think it's too easy a target. I certainly don't buy into it.

FC: What did you mean when you said, "Many of our elders are part of the problem – they want to take us back to the last century"? In what sense?

AD: Yes, and I meant that. Our elders often suggest we go back to how things were. They are obviously living in the past when they say that and they have no notion or concept of what the modern world is about, nor of what young peoples' aspirations are. Therefore I obviously oppose that call on their part.

FC: Soon we will host speeches by a Canadian aboriginal, Calvin Helin, who describes reservation cultures as divided into people trapped by handouts and people trapped by power. Can you respond to that description?

AD: I agree with Calvin Helin on all of those aspects, I've been saying those things for years and years. But let me tell you, there is an entire nation of 60 million people in France who also depend on their government. They want the government to look after them in every possible way. So whenever we level criticism, we should be reminded to point the finger at ourselves.

FC: Do you see excessive government as a problem?

AD: Now you're talking. Excessive government has no role in any of our lives. I think the advocates of big government are the most culpable of all. It is awful to think that an individual, in his own quest for power, could see the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of people go down the toilet to serve their own political ends. That's one of the deep dangers we should watch out for.

FC: What is the role of government?

AD: I think they're a bit like ugly people. They do exist and we all live in the village and therefore we have to try and find room

for them. But I don't think governments fix anything or solve anything. The only thing they do is create problems. Of course, whenever they're there, even for the short term, they walk away with a whole lot of money and leave behind a whole trail of destruction.

FC: About half of Canada's natives have fled our reservations and headed to cities, where they have much more personal freedom. Did many Maori make the same choice?

AD: Well Maoris don't live on reservations. They did struggle when they came to the cities, but now they are starting to cope with their city lives. After my experience here in Canada, I am more convinced that the Maori have got huge hopes and prospects. I would love to be able to get a liaison going between the two peoples so that we might be able to inspire and assist our fellow indigenous people in Canada to move forward.

FC: What is the difference between the Maori and the aboriginals in Canada?

AD: The differences in their situations are quite profound. In New Zealand, we are not in the same dire straits. We are in trouble but I think we can get ourselves out of it. Canada's indigenous people are in worse trouble, from what I am able to understand, and I hope like hell they can get out of it. But when you start, it's the old critical-mass theory. When you get too many numbers of people in too much trouble, they drag the rest of the mass down with them.

FC: Is the answer billions of dollars more for the present leadership?

AD: No. The answer is not billions of more dollars for either the present leadership or even giving it directly to the people. The answer is putting a few hundred million in the right programmes, such as our literacy programme in New Zealand. Give it to some good people here in Canada and let them put it into action. Keep their salaries and their payments down to a modest level, and recruit people who have got integrity and who want to keep the dream alive.

FC: What do you think of the idea of paying individuals directly?

AD: I love the idea, partly because the old hand-wringers are going to say, "Oh no, but they'll go and spend it." Well, so what? Let them go and spend it. The same thing happens when you pay somebody a wage or salary. That's their prerogative. I think that should be applied, not only to indigenous people but to all.

FC: "Life's big fallacy is security," you say. Describe how the welfare-state mentality has undercut your people.

AD: The Maori people have got the highest proportion of welfare recipients. We've got the highest number of criminals, and every other bad statistic. I lay the blame squarely at the feet of the drug dealers in government who hand out welfare payments to keep our people addicted.