

The reflecting archive

Francis Pound

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast airshafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors.

— Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*

Undisclosed

What I want to do here is to take out and open, as it were, a few of the shelved books of the Frederick Butler Archive so eloquently photographed by Ann Shelton. In so doing, I hope to do what she does with the video and video stills made at the same time – to disclose a few glimpses of what the photographs leave hidden. For, whereas twenty-five of the twenty six exhibited photographs¹ show the abundantly various spines of shelved books in so strictly frontal a view that their covers and contents are invisible, the stills restore what is denied us in the photographs, revealing, for instance, a front cover, or two pages held open by the innocuous cords known as ‘snakes’. Sometimes, by means of a particularly extended series of stills, many pages of a given volume are rendered visible.

Self-portraiture

Any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical.

— Paul de Man,

The Rhetoric of Romanticism There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography

— Paul Valéry

Only a few biographical particles have adhered to the name of Frederick Butler. These include his birth in Auckland in 1903, and his family's move shortly after to New Plymouth, so affording him that small provincial city as the site and subject of his life's work. Heir to an ice cream factory with the beautiful name of Aurora, it seems it was his enviable fortune not to be much troubled by money. Nor was he much pressed by rents or mortgages, since he lived a large part of his life in the parental home. Though he worked variously for his father, for a book seller and as a photographer, it was perhaps these conveniences that granted him the necessary time – a life time – for compiling his archive, as well as for writing (*Early days, Taranaki*, 1942)², painting (a still life of conventional pansies survives), and photography.

Just as when writing the life of a figurative painter, the good biographer turns first to that painter's self-portraits, to learn how she has constructed *herself* for the world's eye, so, before sketching the life of the compiler of a vast, indexed archive, one checks to see if the indexer has indexed himself. As it happens, there *are* index cards for Frederick B. Butler among the archive's some 80,000 cards.³ That the volumes they direct us to are not to be found with the others in Puke Ariki, the New Plymouth museum

and library that houses the archive, somehow seems fitting, even expected.⁴ Of course, it may be that their absence was contrived by the indexer himself for reasons of privacy or of modesty. Allow me to venture an alternative explanation: that Butler believed his life's work should be sufficiently strong to be able to stand on its own, without the crutch of a supporting authorial presence. We might suppose that, as Jacques Derrida has said, the works that are most singular are those that are least in need of a signature.⁵

Another mode of self-presentation here is the family tree. Of the ten numbered volumes labelled 'Family Trees', one includes Butler's own family tree. Equally self-depictive is the presentation of Butler as book collector in a volume of bookplates containing several of Butler's own plates. This volume is further distinguished by the presence of the archivist's signature, and by a date in his hand, 23 May 1934. It is as if he were signing a painting – or an archive.

The archive also allows us a pasted advertisement for Aurora Ice Cream – 'The Popular Ice Cream' – where a dancing polar bear, an iceberg and an ice cream cone share a delightfully frozen world, accompanied by the proprietorial text: 'Manufactured in New Plymouth by F. S. Butler'.

Needlework too gets a volume. This might seem rather surprising for a male archivist of those times (the archive was begun in 1926)⁶ if one did not know that Butler was himself a quilter and rug maker, whose works decorated the forty⁷ rooms of his house-museum, and were once exhibited by the Govett- Brewster Gallery, the director of which considered their bright triangulations 'Op'.⁸ Nor, once we know that Butler was himself a collector and occasional dealer of antiques, will we be puzzled at the presence

of three volumes titled 'Antiques', one titled 'Curios', and another titled 'Maori Curios'.

There are also some volumes indicating a kind of *spread* of the signature. Indeed, these might well make us wonder if the archive is not *all* signature – a kind of 'immense autograph'.⁹ Consider, for instance, the volumes bearing the titles 'Nude' and 'Nudists', with their clippings collected January 1938 – December 1954, and April 1969 – November 1969. 'Nude', of course, is a painterly word, redolent of a particular genre of art, meaning something quite different in its luxuriousness from the unpainterly and miserably shivering 'naked'. However, a reading of the 'Nude' volume reveals that 'nude' was once the standard newspaper euphemism for 'naked' – a word thought not fit to print.

But what does this have to do with Butler's biography? The answer is that the clippings of these two volumes would have had a particularly personal relevance for Butler, if, as seems to be the case, he was himself a nudist. Certainly, he practiced nudism on occasion, for, in 1977 while he was living in the Tauranga Museum Village as a kind of live-in historical actor, it seems there were complaints from scandalised visitors who had discovered him sunbathing naked on his veranda – not the expected picture of colonial life.¹⁰ Perhaps these episodes of undress played apart in Butler's departure from Tauranga, taking with him the collections he had promised its museum. It is likely, in any case, that the volumes concerning nakedness stem from the archivist's personal philosophy. Presumably, the two volumes entitled 'Radiant Living' may be subsumed with 'Nude' and 'Nudists' into the same utopian category: that of the *Naturist*.

House and contents

A photograph in the *Taranaki Herald* 8 May 1972 shows Butler standing before what the *Herald* says is ‘the upper floor store of books’ in his Sentry Hill private museum and house. That description, in suggesting that there *is* a floor, gives a rather misleading assurance of solidity: in fact, the photo shows the archivist standing before a row of head-high bookshelves on a floor scarcely wider than a scaffold plank. This truncated floor – *ledge* would be a more accurate word – vertiginously gives to a floor far below. What, if anything, supports the ledge supporting the archivist is unclear. It seems he has simply cut away a floor between two stories, leaving a rim of 500 mm. or so of planks jutting from the base of his shelves.

High above are the wooden diagonals and verticals of rafters and joists. Were it not for this emphatic terminus, we might have thought we were seeing an interminable library such as Borges imagined in our first epigraph, with an infinite number of floors. Borges neglects to tell us the material of his library – marble, most likely. Butler’s library-house, on the other hand, far from being built of the heroic stone of the European Grand Tradition, is an assemblage of corrugated iron, timbers and fittings saved from the demolition of various colonial buildings – a four-metre high set of doors, for instance, from New Plymouth’s old Bank of New Zealand.¹¹ For Butler, this was not simply a matter of using what was cheaply to hand: it was a solitary, perhaps desperate, attempt at preservation and memorialisation.

We may say the same of his antique collection. The finest books are displayed in glass fronted cabinets; there are antique pianos; a

silver tea service; curios; the letters, diaries and journals of local early settlers; colonial paintings and furniture; military uniforms; lanterns; muskets; 19th century negatives; local historical documents; a plate from a dinner set brought to New Zealand in 1841 by the surveyor Frederick Carrington; the sword of one of the officers aboard H.M.S. Niger when the first shot of the Taranaki wars was fired.¹² Butler's house, his antique collection, his archive, and his library of some 50,000 volumes,¹³ are as one in that they each reveal the ruling impulse of his life. Underlying them is what Walter Benjamin has called 'an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to redeem them for eternity ...'¹⁴ And is Shelton so different? Her impulse too is to order and to still for a moment the perpetual rush of everything into oblivion.

The archive

My account of the Butler archive can only be partial, or rather, radically incomplete. I dare not try to list the contents of all of its some 3,500 volumes, since even the simplest of catalogues would devour the pages at my disposal. The listings compiled by William Howard of Puke Ariki, are sufficient deterrent: despite the admirable brevity of their individual entries, they occupy forty-four A4 sheets. Instead of seeking the kind of completeness the archive itself aims for, I must content myself with a sampling, in the hope – necessarily vain – that the part might sufficiently stand for the whole.

There is one volume on doctors (medical). The subject of crime occupies ninety-seven volumes; education one hundred and four. The art-world will be pleased to hear that there is a volume devoted to Don Driver, another to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery,

and one simply titled 'Art'. Those for whom art is a genteel hobby for the over forty are recognized by the volume titled 'Taranaki Society of Arts'. There are volumes of New Plymouth Methodist and Primitive Church marriages. There are New Plymouth Wesleyan baptisms, from 1841 to 1896. There are twenty-five volumes of births, deaths, marriages without division by Christian sect. I must stop. There are 380 volumes of births minus marriage and death. (Butler himself never married.) I must not go on. The forty-six volumes of Second World War casualties, with their photographs of the dead, provide the archive's most touching pages.

If the collection is disparate in its subject matter, so too are some of its volumes internally disparate. One contains entries as if for a biographical dictionary of local personages, but also includes a sketched map of Devon Street, New Plymouth, indicating the location of its pedestrian crossings and bicycle racks. One might imagine the latter item as a study towards a map for some inscrutable purpose of the city council. However, Butler also specifies the order in which the white lines on the footpaths were painted, by means of a system of inscribed numbers, and the time in the morning that their painting began (5 am. – a 'flying start'). There is here and throughout the archive a persistent slide, or at least the constant threat of a slide, towards the kind of descriptive mania we expect from a novel – particularly if we are readers of the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet or Georges Perec.

The volumes of the archive are for the most part scrapbooks of newspaper cuttings, assembled according to all but invariable protocols. Butler begins with a second-hand book, chosen with blithe indifference to its genre. Presumably, reasons of economy

dictate the use of second-hand books rather than the new, blankpaged, scrap or sketchbooks that might seem the obvious choice. Generally, these books are upside down in relation to the cuttings glued into them – no doubt to reduce the potential distraction of using a previous text as a ground.¹⁵ If the reduction of distraction was indeed the motive for turning books upside down, it is an effect more desired than achieved, since glimpses of the parts of pictures and texts left visible between the cuttings constantly tempt one to rotate the volume to focus on them alone. Then, what was ground becomes figure, the irrelevant becomes relevant, and mere chance rises to defeat the deliberately placed. Finally, the books are covered with off-cuts of wallpaper, a method commonly used by school children for their school exercise books in those frugal days, and a handwritten label is added to the spine, identifying the subject and period covered.

I have said that the genre of a book is irrelevant in choosing it as a ground. Sometimes, however, meanings arise out of the random juxtapositions of cuttings and books. Then it is as if meaning itself were an effect of chance. The volume labelled 'Homosexuality', for instance, has for its ground Enid Blyton's *Five Go To Mystery Moor*, a children's story from a series – much read in its day – about the adventures of some spoilers of the plots of coloured and working class villains, a prattish little band of upper middle class brats. Only one of these concerns us: a cross-dressing girl who refuses to answer to any name but George. Is it chance alone that smiles up at us from the 'Homosexuality' volume, or is it Butler himself?

There is much local history. One volume lists the names of the settlers who arrived in New Plymouth on the ship William Bryan in

1841. But we get more than bald lists. An accompanying verbal description is awarded some settlers, and a few are further privileged by means of thumbnail portraits in pen and ink. Presumably these likenesses are based on 19th century depictions. The whole tone of Butler's entries, with their incessant particulars, makes it unlikely that his portraits are invented – that they are merely the irresponsible marginalia of an archivist pausing from an arduous page to doodle and dream.

Assuming they *do* represent their settlers with some accuracy, what purpose might these drawings and descriptions serve? Are they meant to provide detail for a description by some properly professional historian to come, who will complete, and in a sense justify, Butler's life-work? Are they, on the contrary, an *aide de memoire* for the archivist himself? Or do they – despite my contrary argument above – imply no more than a moment of relaxation from the task that justifies and devours his life? In fact, it seems that Butler *did* intend his archive and collection to be of use to others, since he twice attempted to place them in established museums, with the proviso, always, that they be kept together as a permanent entity. As it happens, it was not this perfectly standard request that was the sticking point, but Butler's insistence that he should continue as their chief curator even after they were in the museum's hands. (Finally, as we know, his archive *did* find a museum's shelter and care.)

It would seem, then, that Butler regarded his archive as a unified and indivisible entity, and that he wanted to ensure that it would remain so after his death. Yet, quite often when reading in the archive, or even in reading its list of contents, one is overcome by a sense of the arbitrary. Why has he chosen this rather than that to

record? The 1882 New Zealand series, for instance, consists of fourteen volumes of clippings from New Zealand newspapers of that year. Where a paper was unavailable for clipping, or was available only in part, or where a clipping was damaged, it is transcribed by hand. From a certain viewpoint, all this is well and good. But why *that* year? Why not, say, 1883 or 81? Was it chosen as a doctor might take a sample vial of a patient's blood, as sufficient to stand for the whole? But, if so, for what whole could the year 1882 be meant to stand? After all, the years are not bounded as the body is in an encasement in skin – they stretch endlessly away. Or had the archivist simply stumbled on a full run of papers from 1882 alone? Or was it merely a lack of time that prevented a continuation to each side of the chosen year?

Even the larger groupings may provoke such questions. Consider the twenty-two volumes of Port Taranaki shipping items from the year 1852, all of them transcribed from the *Taranaki Herald*. This time, the treated year *does* open to the following years in subsequent volumes, from 1852 through to 1876. Thus, sparse though the individual entries are, consisting as they do of no more than the ship's name and the date of its arrival, as a whole, the account they give may seem satisfyingly full. An historian of shipping in New Zealand could use it, though he or she – somehow I think it would be a he – would probably rather trust the newspapers themselves rather than Butler's transcriptions. In the face of so vast a labour, one doesn't want to carp. But just the same, why end on *this* year and not some other? And why begin in 1852 and not, say, 1841?

Signatures of place

I need only, to make them reappear, pronounce the names Balbac, Venice, Florence, within whose syllables had gradually accumulated the longing inspired in me by the places for which they stood.

— Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

One of Butler's volumes encloses 'The Place Names of Egmont', a series of articles in the *Taranaki Herald*. There are also five volumes labelled 'Mt. Egmont'. All in all, 189 volumes of the archive are accorded place-name titles. There are, for instance, fifteen volumes titled *Opunake*; fourteen titled *Patea*; eighty-eight titled *Stratford*; twenty-nine titled *Waitara* ... I see I am falling once more into that very vertigo of cataloguing that in my opening sentences I so confidently resolved to avoid.

Again we might speak of the spread of the signature, since this kind of titling is the inscription at once of the archivist's biographical signature, and of the signatures of local places intimately known to him. As Brenda Richardson once said of the place-name titles of the Black Paintings of the American painter Frank Stella: 'In no case ... did a title lack personal associations or some direct relationship to the artist.'¹⁶ In this sense: 'The titles ... are not *about* the paintings as much as they are about the painter who made them ... In effect, the titles reflect the psycho-sociology' of the artist,¹⁷ while maintaining, at another, more public level, a reference to place. Likewise, Butler's numerous place-name titles concerning New Plymouth and its environs are at once artefacts outside himself and yet peculiarly *his*, 'the deictic markers of the subject's own being, the evidentiary signposts that appear to him

the indices of his own history, his own identity, the touchstones of his most intimate connections to the real'.¹⁸

The Butler archive, very much like contemporaneous New Zealand painting, constantly poses place-name titles. We might call it properly *regionalist* in this. A more perfect answer may hardly be imagined to the then widespread belief of New Zealand painters and poets that 'the signature of a region, like that of a witness written below the poet's, can attest value in the work'.¹⁹ For, by means of titles lettered on the spines of its books, a kind of epigrammatic literature, consisting of place-names and the names of geographical features, is made endlessly to play across the archive's surface.

Similarly, the forty-seven volumes of the New Plymouth street series with their sketch maps of streets, with the names and positions of businesses carefully marked, may remind us of Gordon Walters' Koru Series, for which, famously, the Maori titles are taken from Wellington street names – the names of streets the artist had known as a child, places, so he said, with 'a strong emotional significance' for him.²⁰ One could surely risk saying the same of Butler's intimately detailed streets.

The American literary theorist J. Hillis Miller once remarked: 'Place-names have a temporal as well as spatial dimension. They contain much encrypted history.'²¹ Take, for instance, Parihaka, the subject of one of Butler's placenamed volumes, with its bitter history of passive Maori resistance to state violence and state appropriation of land and property, and echoing still with the voices of its Maori prophets.

Local place-names also have an audience-gathering aspect. Since they are especially legible for locals, they may be used to justify a specifically local attention. With its density of local place-names, and its detailed accounts of place, Butler's archive asserts itself not only to be *of* New Plymouth, but also to be *for* New Plymouthites – if that is the word – for whom alone its place-names can be a fully 'potent legend'.²²

To entitle an archive's books with place-names is thus to grant something more than distinguishing appellations – mere labels. It is also to proffer an entitlement in a further sense of the word. It is to entitle the archive to a local audience, and to entitle that audience to a particularly intimate relation to it. Given that the real Mt. Taranaki Mt. Egmont) looms above their city as it does, the title 'Mt. Egmont' acts as a kind of title-deed to New Plymouth users of the archive, the proof of a just and recognised claim to their attention. It increases the archive's 'value', in both the metaphorical and material senses of the word. The archive's 'local and special'²³ quality is also, therefore, a sort of special pleading, powerful stratagem for gaining local audience. It is an excellent marketing strategy, a fine piece of public relations, and the finest title there is to posterity's esteem.

Self-mirroring

Faced by the uneasy magic of Butler's archive, Shelton has responded with the equally magical device of granting the archive a discarnate life, photographically mirroring it in twenty-six marvellously detailed photographs, in which its shelves and books are reflected life-size.

With the inner contents of those books forever hidden from us in the unremitting frontality of Shelton's photographs, the archive might seem to reflect on itself, and only itself, as if its life were entirely internalised, with no access to any world other than its own, wholly self-sufficient and self absorbed. It is as if with closed eyes – sign of death, sleep, bliss, or inward vision – it were endlessly contemplating its records of human disorder and fallibility, eternally considering the inhuman perfection of its own self-ordering. I think again of the Library of Borges' melancholy imagining, enduring when all humans have vanished from the world; and of the marvellously piled adjectives Borges uses to picture it: 'illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret.'²⁴

Of course, an internal mirroring or doubling has been a habitual magic in Shelton's work. It has estranged the depicted thing from the world, and placed it in the luminous realm of the aesthetic, while at the same time reflecting her own mirroring medium. In her depictions of the Butler archive, however, she has abandoned such literal doublings. Here, instead, she seems to have had no choice but to revive and to reanimate within the spaces of her own work the archive's never satisfied hunger for completeness, its endless rage to reflect everything. There is an archival mania at work, at once in the archive itself and in Shelton's depiction of it. It is as if the archive bears within itself an inescapable contagion, in which the obsessiveness or manic profusion that Shelton had meant merely to depict has infected her very depiction.

Nor has the writer of the present essay escaped. I might have wished with my words to master the archive, to sum up, in some adamant and irrefutable order, all of its inner life, to uncover,

with splendour and precision, every law of its operation. But, I too have suffered its insatiable contagion.

1 The exception shows an empty metal bookshelf, also in strictly frontal view, of the kind that in the other photographs is packed with scrapbooks. Here Shelton makes her own Donald Judd as it were.

2 Fred. B. Butler, *Early days, Taranaki*, 1942, printed for the author by *Taranaki Herald*, New Plymouth.

3 Estimates vary as to the number. One gives 48,000. The Puke Ariki Archives Transcript *Frederick Burdett Butler 1904-1982* gives 80,000. Shelton's estimate is some 35,000.

4 This volume is almost certainly with the some 100 volumes retained by relatives.

5 Jacques Derrida, *Signsponge*, transl. Richard Rand, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, p. 34.

6 The Puke Ariki Archives Transcript *Frederick Burdett Butler 1904-1982*.

7 *Truth*, 11 July 1978.

8 'Gallery Exhibit', *Taranaki Herald*, 23 December 1975.

9 Derrida, *Signsponge*, p. 34.

10 Russell Standish in Sorrel Hoskin, 'Fred Butler — Eccentric Man of Mystery', *Puke Ariki*, p. 1, <http://www.pukeariki.com/en/stories/entertainmentandleisure/butler.asp>.

11 *Ibid*

12 *Taranaki Herald*, 23 December 1971.

13 *Truth*, 11 July 1978. The *Taranaki Herald*, 8 May 1972, gives a figure of 40,000 books.

14 Quoted Richard Walin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 71.

15 In the case of commercial diaries, the book is left the right way up in relation to the cuttings, and the dates are simply scored through.

16 Brenda Richardson with assistance from Mary Martha Ward, *Frank Stella: The Black Paintings*, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 1976, p. 4.

17 Richardson, *Frank Stella*, p. 3.

18 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The OpticalUnconscious*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 71.

19 Allen Curnow, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1960, p. 51. Curnow follows his own recommendation, in signing the essay in which he gives it: 'ALLEN CURNOW Auckland June 1960'.

20 Gordon Walters, quoted Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters*, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1983, p. 125.

21 J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1995, p. 260.

22 Allen Curnow, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, p. 55.

23 'Reality must be local and special at the point where we pick up the traces: as manifold as the signs we follow and the routes we take', so Curnow says in a famous passage. (*Ibid.*, p. 17.)

24 Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Library of Babel', *Labyrinths*, p. 85.
