

# Native Wit

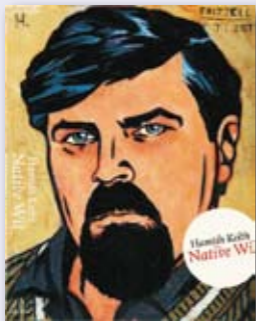
Hamish Keith

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It takes a sense of self-importance, I thought before reading *Native Wit*, to write a memoir. Now I realise that thought said more about my own, very Kiwi, suspicion of the “tall poppy”.



Hamish Keith has had a remarkably interesting life – he has mixed with artists and cultural ground-breakers since the word “go”. More importantly, Keith has the ability to turn a phrase that is needed to render his own life in an engaging, informative and often hilarious memoir.

He tells of his epiphany in front of McCahon’s *The Marys at the Tomb* in his early teens. It led to him wanting to be an artist but, in the end more significantly, it started the conversation Keith’s life has really been about – with art that is about being in New Zealand and nowhere else. He has stayed true to that calling by working in, and commenting on, the arts scene for his entire life, rather than heading overseas as so many of his peers did.

Keith was, for many years, chair of the Arts Council and evidently did some good work. One of his passionate messages was that Maori were constantly, post colonisation, producing lively and diverse art that engaged in a meaningful way with the changes they were experiencing. Keith was on yet another unpopular mission to rescue Maori art from the arguably reductive collections of ethnologists, so it could be seen in the context of art. Throughout the book Keith’s strong opinions on art, culture and arts management come through.

After a period in the wilderness, with his marriage ending along with his Arts Council work finishing, Keith has a happy ending with a second marriage and the making of *The Big Picture*, a TV show which was not only planned, but also funded, produced and aired (unlike many he had been involved in before), and which brings together so much of his life’s work. I found myself watching again *The Big Picture* on DVD. It is a story about art and a story about us – a perfect epitaph to Keith’s memoir. Not that the story is over yet, I hope to enjoy plenty more of Keith’s “native wit”. JY