

LITERACY WARRIOR DUFF HONOURED FOR AN UNCOMPROMISING VISION

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Author, commentator, and philanthropist Alan Duff is the ninth National Business Review **New Zealander of the Year**.

The honour will surprise some who can't think of Duff without tagging annoying adjectives such as controversial and outspoken to his name.

It will raise the eyebrows of those irate letter writers who have cast him as a one-dimensional crusader against political correctness and those of the arty crowd who equate Duff with Jake the Muss, Hollywood attention and help to rehabilitate sufferers of cultural cringe.

But the NBR **New Zealander of the Year** honour will come as no surprise to those who know Duff personally or those who have worked with him on his Books In Homes project.

"What he is doing in Books In Homes may well see a significant shift in the educational attainment of thousands of kids," Mainfreight managing director Bruce Plested said.

The many businesspeople who have supported the scheme and the educationalists who have evaluated it praise Duff's clarity of purpose and sheer Nike-style "Just do it" grunt in making the scheme happen.

While the government and the Maori community talk, talk, talk about the gap in achievement between Maori and Pakeha, Duff dared to pursue his own realistic philosophy of "doies not huis."

"He saw the lack of books contributed enormously to the poverty trap and the continuation of it and devised a scheme to get books into the hands of poor kids," Plested said.

But Duff deserves this honour not just for leading the nation's disadvantaged children Pied Piper-like into the rewarding and exciting world of literature.

With his robust syndicated column he has been a courageous voice prepared to front up to his own people and allcomers with his own take on a "tough love" message: rewards are there for the taking if people face up to reality and do the day-to-day slog that leads to self-determination and independence.

Duff has refused to be captured or bullied by those who don't like to be reminded the way forward for Maori is not through government handouts but instead through educating Maori doctors, engineers and nuclear scientists.

"He has alienated a number of Maori but they tended to be those who ... have good intentions but really are just feeding out of the bureaucratic trough. Alan keeps reminding them that is not the way forward," Plested said.

Many who claim to be committed to closing the poverty gap shun progress, entrepreneurship and business but not Duff, who is respected by the business community for his integrity and creativity. "He has tons of business nous," Plested said.

As his enemies, and there are a few, will be quick to point out, Duff is no angel. The former prison inmate can be bad-tempered. He was downright grumpy last year when his \$6 million public offering to make a feature film from *One Night Out Stealing* wouldn't fly. Duff doesn't suffer fools at all, let alone gladly.

"Sometimes it's a pity that he doesn't," Plested said, not entirely jokingly.

Duff will admit his scratchiness and his own shortcomings.

"I sometimes get into situations where I feel I don't belong. I feel deeply insecure. Yet I so much want to be part of everything and I'm really greedy to participate and contribute," he told NBR in an interview last year.

Yet despite admitting vulnerability Duff can be unflatteringly arrogant and not afraid to use his acid pen when angered, such as the occasion last year when NBR columnist Tom Frewen criticised his memoir, *Out of the Mist and Steam*.

But even his critics can't deny the success of the Books In Homes scheme.

Emeritus professor of education Warwick Elley found a 35% increase in reading skills in children who had been in the programme for only a year. He also saw an important attitude change.

"We have an increased number of parents coming to assemblies and reading to their kids at home. It is all so positive," wrote retiring Books In Homes co-founder Christine Fernyhough in December when she gave up her unpaid work as executive trustee of the programme.

In August Books In Homes and its supporters had a celebration to mark putting one million brand new books into the homes of disadvantaged young New Zealanders in just four years.

"A group of young Maori children from Northland entertain us with an extraordinary performance of haka and dance and poi action songs, showing the guests that Maori can be excellent and inspiring too," Duff writes in the introduction to his autobiography.

Duff does not shy away from challenges in his personal life. He has learned to fly a helicopter, is a boxing fan and has more challenges ahead in the movie world.

Friends are keen to set the record straight; although he threatened to leave the country if a left-leaning government was elected he has not gone to live fulltime in Australia.

Duff has taken his *One Night Out Stealing* film project across the Tasman after he couldn't raise the money here but will remain based in this country at his Havelock North home.

"Some people are guilty of doing nowhere near their best. It's a waste of a life. And that's their right, if they want to be tired asses. But don't waste your child's life - don't set a bad example," the **New Zealander of the Year** said.

* Alan Duff, MBE

* Born October 26, 1950, in Rotorua

* Tribal affiliations: Ngati Rangitahi and Tuwharetoa

* Married with six children and seven grandchildren

1990 Once Were Warriors (Tandem Press) published

Best-ever sales for New Zealand novel

Winner of the Pen First Book Award

1991 Winner Frank Sargeson Fellowship 1991

1992 Warriors is runner up in the Goodman Fielder Wattie Book Awards

One Night Out Stealing (Tandem Press) published

1993 Maori: The crisis and the challenge published

1994 Once Were Warriors (Communicado) feature film, released September

Award-winning movie is the most successful local film ever

State Ward published

1995 Alan Duff Charitable Foundation's Books In Homes scheme established

1996 What Becomes of the Broken Hearted? (Random House) published

1997 What Becomes of the Broken Hearted? wins the Montana Book Award for fiction

1998 Both Sides of the Moon (Random House) published

1999 What Becomes of the Broken Hearted? feature film opens to critical acclaim and box office success

Two children's books, Duffy's Once Were Worriers and Duffy's Search for the Pohutakawa (Random House), published

Out of the Mist and Steam (Tandem Press), first volume of Alan Duff's autobiography, published

Working on a new book, Alan Duff's Maori Heroes, due to be published by Random House in June

Books In Homes celebrates putting a million brand new books into the homes of disadvantaged New Zealanders in just four years. The programme operates in 284 schools and has reached over 63,000 low-income homes.

Past winners

Alan Duff is NBR's ninth **New Zealander of the Year**. He joins

* educationalist Judith Aitken (for 1998)

- * industrialist Hugh Fletcher (for 1997)
- * All Blacks rugby coach John Hart (for 1996)
- * campaigning lawyer **Grant Cameron** (for 1995)
- * National Bank chief executive Sir John Anderson (for 1994)
- * foreign affairs and trade secretary Richard Nottage (for 1993)
- * Maori leader Sir Tipene O'Regan (for 1992)
- * businessman Charles Bidwill (for 1991)

The award recognises someone who has made an outstanding contribution to the country's wellbeing. NBR readers were given the opportunity to nominate an exceptional individual as part of the award process.

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