



## Dr Ian Prior – a very public physician, activist, humanitarian and supporter of the arts

**PETER ISAAC** recounts the life and achievements  
of a very special New Zealander.

Dr Ian Prior, who died at 85 in Wellington in February 2009 was for 50 years a public figure in a variety of quite different spheres: public health, art, music, environment and humanitarian causes. He joined the National Press Club 20 years ago in the Newsmaker category. He was a founding advisory board member of *The Pacific Ecologist* magazine and helped it with funds for publications costs through the family's Willi Fels Memorial Trust and also funded work on the first PIRM website.

Qualifying as a doctor in 1945, his studies at Otago merged with his discovery of his wife, Elespie Forsyth there on a fated tram ride. Elespie Forsyth was heiress to the Hallenstein family interests, a substantial pool of old money which had its beginnings in the gold mining era. Prior was a quick study, athletic, and good looking and the ensuing marriage was to empower him with an enhanced sense of destiny and, felicitously, also with the material resources he needed to accomplish what he felt he needed to achieve as someone who could improve the lot of mankind.

It was this vision of his purpose that became evident in the early 1960s when, instead of specializing in cardiology, he started doing fieldwork on the causes of obesity-related ailments such as heart disease and diabetes. Though such research is commonplace nowadays, it was pioneering work then. Prior decided to start his field work amid the more remote Maori communities. He had an inquiring solicitous manner which never changed, regardless of the station of the person he was talking to. It was not long before he began to build up a cadre of loyal friends in rural Maori communities.

After this he decisively branched out and converted this early field work into a full-fledged epidemiological survey throughout Oceania, notably in the Tokelau Islands. This work was more widely recognized at first in the Northern Hemisphere than in New Zealand, a not uncommon occurrence in scientific matters. In

his research he included a wider swathe of people than his predecessors, including women. He identified the connection between heart disease and salt uptake, and mapped the link between obesity and modern diets.

He began to attract backing from the World Health Organisation, among other international sources and Prior's name and work started bouncing back from Europe where it was taken seriously. A minimalist by nature and oblivious to many material comforts which his professional station, not to say his wife's money, might have bought him, Prior was a natural field worker. The more he blended in the better, as he saw it. With his professional reputation firmly established, he and Elespie began their joint careers as philanthropists which saw them directing their own cash, and encouraging others to do so as well, largely to those in the artistic world they believed to be deserving of support.

Many ascribed Dr Prior's strongly altruistic nature to his Methodist upbringing, and especially to the influence of his doctor father, Norman. This came from the duty doctrine that those to whom much has been given, much was expected. It was a recurring element in his everyday conversation. Those who were privileged by birth or even by their own efforts were required to behave with responsibility to others. For Prior, though, it was not enough. He revealed in his engaging adventure into autobiography *Elespie & Ian Memoir of a Marriage* (Steele Roberts 2006) that approaching his middle years he began to be plagued with feelings of inadequacy and depression about the tasks he had set himself and that he was fraudulent in accepting accolades for his activities.

No matter how hard Prior strived, he believed he could never meet the other side of the equation. Still, he learnt to thread his life through this ailment, and especially so in using the energy in his upbeat periods to support his causes and interests.

One project that was to make him a national figure presented itself to him in the late 1960s and was formalized in 1970 when he became the very public

chairman of the Save Manapouri Campaign. In a matter of months this became the nation's first major environmental battle, and laid the ground for much that was to follow. This campaign became the first public contest in New Zealand between the forces of middle class liberalism and big business, in this case the Comalco smelting company. The original committee went through many transformations, eventually becoming a coalition of groups, and so laying the foundation for the present Green Party. Prior was always quick to remind anyone who enquired that others had done the original spadework, and that he for some reason had inadvertently become the public face.

Prior's manner with the media greatly assisted the causes he embraced. Professorial in demeanour with a candid bedside manner that became increasingly avuncular as the years passed over him, he spoke in measured, factual words in reply to questions, and encapsulated his point of view in a few considered sentences we would now describe as sound bites.

His next big environmental role had many of the same characteristics of the first, the Manapouri campaign, as he became the focal point for a broad-based movement. This was to become the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) which went truly international with its links with clinicians in the USA and then the USSR. As with the Manapouri campaign which midwifed environmentalism into main stream life, so did IPPNW presage

another seismic shift, providing the foundation for the powerful movement, Nuclear Free New Zealand.

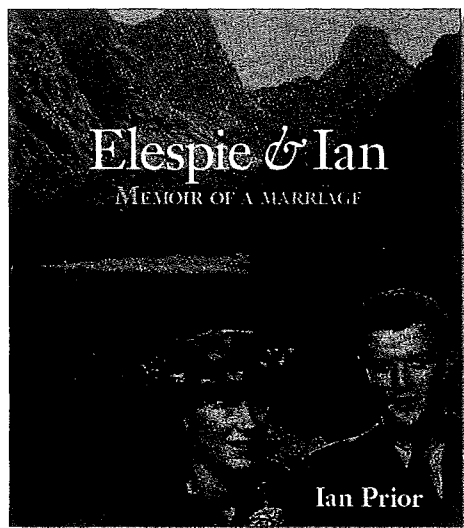
As life progressed, Ian and Elespie became a unit (instead of combined effort) joining together in a variety of concerns. The immigration issue was centred on the 'overstayer' era when Polynesians were forcibly repatriated to their Pacific Islands and a more recent example was his quixotic campaign as many saw it, of keeping the trouble-prone Air New Zealand in local hands. He started prison visiting, becoming an active advocate especially for Polynesians whom he believed should be given a second chance, allowing them to redeem themselves.

His beloved Elespie died ahead of him by seven years, so Prior carried on alone using their rambling residence in Wadestown where they lived for many years as a meeting house for anyone who believed they were deserving of support for a liberal cause or an artistic talent. Prior had been in faltering health for some years, yet insisted on carrying on his work and journeying regularly from No 26 Wade Street to his town base, and a parking lot, at the Wellington Club.

From such starchy surroundings he would cross Lambton Quay, shuffling across, with his emblematic mane of hair, now white, flowing about him. In his last years his default destination was the office floor above Kirkcaldies & Stains department store where his literary collaborator Roger Steele worked. This area also housed the Wellington Sculpture Trust which he helped found many years before. Prior would wander amiably around the atelier acknowledging individual members of Steele's coterie as he passed by their desks, softly enquiring of their current concerns.

It was here his final months slipped by. Several weeks before his death someone suggested he should cease adopting new causes and instead focus his waning strength on getting his affairs in order, while awaiting the inevitable. "I can't go yet," he replied, "I've got things to do." He was determined to see it through. The funeral was a radiant, well planned, event, such as Prior enjoyed so much in life, full of music, poetry, Maori haka, humour, sadness, reminiscences, and love for a life lived so well. He is survived by his three daughters, several grandchildren and his many, many friends. *END*

Peter Isaac is president of the National Press Club.



### DONATIONS AND BEQUESTS

We are very grateful for the bequest from Peter Haig, Hobart, Tasmania, formerly of Wellington, and others who have made donations. Subscriptions and sales cover only 40% of the cost of *Pacific Ecologist* and the PIRM office so we are extremely grateful to those who provide additional support.