

## History drawn in laugh lines

Few people like to expose themselves completely. I'm not talking about revelation of the indecent kind, but the way those who write autobiographies open up their lives for our (and their) gratification.

We can't be sure Tom Scott's recent memoir, *Drawn Out*, has told us every little thing about his existence, but if anything was left out it would have been inconsequential. I doubt anyone has ever revealed so much visceral detail, and few have done it in such a funny way.

Be warned. This is not a book that should be read in the company of someone who isn't reading it at the same time, because much of what he writes is so hilarious it can't be experienced in silence. I LOL'd my way through the whole thing, to such an extent Lin was willing me to finish it while I was willing it never to end.

It did, of course, and I was left in a state of enervation, sadness, and admiration for a man I rate our greatest-ever comic-cum-political commentator-cum cartoonist-cum historian of an age during which New Zealand followed the rest of the Western world as it morphed from a prim, post-war, passionless state of inertia, into what can be described as the post-Beatles age. That's what Tom would say, although in a comedic tone.

Cartoonists get away with a lot when it comes to critiquing society and its prominent players. Whereas writers have to mind their Ps and Qs for fear of being on the end of a libel suit from some thin-skinned public figure, those relying on the clever strokes of a HB pencil seem invulnerable.

In New Zealand, that partly stemmed from a failed defamation action brought by a politician against a newspaper cartoonist early last century. It's also partly to do with people being aware that taking yourself too seriously in this country is a mortal sin. And it's partly to do with ego; at first, Scott was surprised by how swiftly politicians got in touch to ask for the originals of cartoons that lampooned them mercilessly. Some have large collections.

Like many of us who lurked within the ranks of mainstream news media during Scott's earlier days, he still bears the scars of Prime Minister Rob Muldoon's retributions. Cartoonists of those times were simultaneously grateful and hateful of the man's penchant for viciousness, because his large head and prominent dimple made him a caricaturist's dream.

Muldoon banned Scott from his press conferences, because unlike most cartoonists, as well as conveying his observations of politics in cutting drawings, Scott wrote about them on wonderfully disrespectful columns in *The Listener*. Muldoon wasn't hard to offend. The PM's modus operandi was to channel the views of the common Kiwi man, many of whom showed their gratitude through the ballot box, and he felt empowered to destroy any commentator who disagreed with his perception of the so-called majority view.

When the usually compliant denizens of the press gallery rose to defend Scott after the PM's trespass notice, the cartoonist was equally empowered. It became a running battle, which I confess to exploiting after Muldoon lost the 1984 snap election and we hired him as a guest columnist for the *Auckland Star*. We ran his and Tom Scott's outpourings on the same page – with a strip of barbed wire drawn between them. I suspect Muldoon liked that, although he never said so. He asked later if he could use those columns in his memoirs.

When Muldoon finally quit the political limelight in the mid-80s, cartoonists everywhere mourned what for them was a monumental loss. The dimpled scowl had been a regular feature of their armouries for so long they found it frightening to contemplate a future without it.

The *Star*'s daily cartoonist, the brilliant Peter Bromhead, was discombobulated for a while as he struggled to find some feature of new Prime Minister David Lange's physiognomy that would resonate. Unlike Scott's detailed depictions, Bromhead's were rendered with a bare minimum of pen strokes, a technique that could encapsulate an idea with devastating effect. The dimple became the whole man.

JT column for Mar 31 2018 – Tom Scott

For decades, both cartoonists dominated the line honours in annual media awards, with more or less even results. Both have produced memoirs over the last year or so. They are compelling accounts of our political history from observers with acute perceptions of what went on in the back corridors. I recommend their books...but for your household's sake, read them alone.