

group who get little space in this book and provided another important context for the intellectual jostling of the period were the left-wing writers who congregated around the progressive bookshops and *Tomorrow* magazine. This has been well documented by Rachel Barrowman. Her book, *Popular Vision*, is ignored. The great value of *The Bookmen's Dominion* is its rich sense of the infrastructure of intellectual life in the 1930s. If so, then completeness is the reader's natural expectation, and it is not always satisfied in this otherwise stimulating book.

JOCK PHILLIPS

Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Wellington

Douglas Lilburn: His Life and Music. By Philip Norman. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2005. 468 pp. NZ price: \$55.00. ISBN 1-877257-17-6.

DOUGLAS GORDON LILBURN (1915–2001) is New Zealand's best known composer, his works embracing orchestral, chamber, piano, vocal and electro-acoustic music. His fame has probably increased since his death with new CD releases of his compositions, a ten-part Radio New Zealand documentary of his life and music, the 50-minute radio feature *Douglas Lilburn — Man Alone* (2004), and now a biography. The reclusive Lilburn would not have welcomed this biography, or any biography, during his lifetime; he described biographers as 'maggots on the meat of reputation' (pp.7, 358). Without carrying the imagery further, it seems that Lilburn has no cause for complaint. He often enough felt that he was getting insufficient recognition, but this major biography is evidence enough that his stature and reputation are assured, at least in the circles within which I move.

All the same, it was a struggle to get where he did. 'Out of nowhere', writes Philip Norman, 'and against considerable opposition — some deliberate, some unintentional — he forged a composing career notable for its lack of artistic compromise' (p.8). Lilburn did not get off to a flying start. Brought up on a farm in the Rangitikei, he only took up music at the age of 14 as a boarder at Waitaki Boys' High School, which he hated with a passion, learning the piano and completing his first composition two years later. Juvenilia or not, 'it does contain some relatively adventurous harmonic progressions', says his biographer. There was always the feeling of disadvantage on Lilburn's part that he came too late to music, but he won the Percy Grainger Prize in 1936 with the tone poem *Forest*. Although his father gave him an allowance to study composition at the Royal College of Music in London, the family did not think much of his musical endeavours until decades later, and this despite Lilburn winning prizes and scholarships at the Royal College as well as his compositions winning two first prizes and a second placing in New Zealand's National Centennial Celebrations Competition in 1940. Later that year he was recalled to New Zealand to help with the farm and from there he returned to Christchurch to embark on the precarious life of a freelance musician. It was a wretched way to make a living and in 1947 he took what he later described as his 'bow to necessity' (p.205) with a teaching appointment at Victoria University College. A wider recognition for his work gradually came to the fore, culminating in being a recipient in 1988 of New Zealand's highest honour, the Order of New Zealand. Even so, lurking not far beneath the surface were insecurities — those perennial 'doubts and disabilities and confusions', as he termed them, with 'the same old D.L. looking for some reason for existence' (p.321). Strangely, while Lilburn craved the reassurance of recognition, he was uncomfortable when it came his way. Equally, while embracing New Zealand as his country, he was at constant war with its more philistine aspects.

The perplexing mix of accomplishment, ambivalence, discouragement, scaled-down opportunity and ultimate recognition, not to mention volatile personal relationships, places

demands on the biographer. Norman lends credence to my conviction that biographers are born rather than made. Historians do not necessarily pass muster as biographers, just as non-historians may well have biographical aptitude. Norman himself is a musicologist and composer, but he has not written the typical account of a composer that is passed off as biography but in fact is an analysis of the composer's oeuvre. Norman did the latter in his 1983 PhD thesis on the development of Lilburn's music. In the present instance, there are appendices on the three stages of Lilburn's musical style and compositional craft and only occasionally does technical analysis stray into the body of the text (for example, p.197).

The Lilburn Papers at the Alexander Turnbull Library are a rich and voluminous source. Norman also interviewed a great many of Lilburn's friends and associates. The result is a deeply researched book that illuminates both Lilburn's life and the artistic milieu in which he moved. An impressive feature is that Norman is on top of the detail rather than allowing the reader to get submerged in it, whilst the numerous quotations from Lilburn's letters serve to convey a keen intelligence and a way with words. Norman has also gone beyond the stereotyped depiction of the somewhat withdrawn Lilburn as being 'Doleful Douglas, Gloomy Gordon, Lugubrious Lilburn' (pp.198, 358) to show the contrasting sides of his character and, by extension, the quality of his personal and professional relationships. Lilburn's encounters with his fellow beings are graphically outlined in the chapter 'Hell is other people', which makes uncomfortable reading. If there were the endless struggles to be recognized, there were also the endless fights with friend and foe alike. The sniping and head-banging between Lilburn and fellow composer Edwin Carr was downright childish. His mean-mindedness toward Owen Jensen, a great servant of music in New Zealand, was churlish. Even deep friendships were fraught and a perceived slight could spark a tirade and a lengthy estrangement. Often alcohol fuelled, these outbursts had a corrosive effect and some longstanding friendships never quite recovered.

I know something of it. Lilburn was a family friend and during a 1950s childhood my brother and I would occasionally drop in on Lilburn to cadge a Coke. In the early 1970s I tried to renew the acquaintance, only to endure awkward silences and strained conversation. It was a bewildering experience — such a contrast to the nice man I knew as a child. I could not handle it and quickly gave up on him. This was the time when Lilburn's drinking was barely under control and I was not alone in my discomfort in his presence. The interplay between a touchy, perhaps an essentially insecure, personality and the struggle for recognition gave rise to seething resentments that spilt over into the realm of personal relationships. It is a notable achievement that Norman deals so fair-mindedly with these issues and strikes exactly the right 'tone', not least in his discussion of Lilburn's homosexuality.

Norman rightly stresses the other side to Lilburn, the personal warmth and generosity. I know something about that too. He not only composed music for my musician parents (for example, *Three Songs for Baritone and Viola*, in 1958) but loaned his car and gave my father much-needed moral support when he was starting up the New Zealand Opera Company. Lilburn did not particularly care for opera but recognized the sacrifices involved 'in creating something out of nothing'. He also made possible a family holiday by giving us the use of his bach at Paekakariki, and when my mother gave birth to a very sickly third son, Lilburn wrote the most moving and comforting of letters, as only he could. The deep vein of generosity is also evident in Lilburn's anxiety that his estate be so organized to benefit New Zealand music and to give people opportunities that he went without.

Douglas Lilburn harboured the seemingly absurd ambition to be a composer in an uncongenial environment and Philip Norman has written an excellent — and lavishly illustrated — biography of that decent and awkward man to whom New Zealand cultural

life owes so much. But it remains an uphill battle: it is sad to note Norman's observation 'that, despite the proliferation of well-paid arts administrators in recent decades, the fundamental problems facing artists have remained essentially unchanged since Lilburn began composing 70 years ago' (p.8).

DOUG MUNRO

Victoria University of Wellington

Nola Millar: A Theatrical Life. By Sarah Gaitanos. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2006. 408 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-86473-5375.

NOLA MILLAR WAS THE FOUNDING DIRECTOR of what is now known as Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School. Running the school was the culmination of what Sarah Gaitanos quite rightly refers to as 'a theatrical life'. Millar's involvement with theatre began in her childhood: her father founded *New Zealand Theatre & Motion Picture*, New Zealand's first monthly magazine dedicated to the stage and screen. Nola worked with him on the magazine, but it was in the 1930s that her own theatrical life began. Having left Wellington East Girls' College she joined the school's Old Girls' Drama Club and performed in competitions run by the British Drama League. By 1934 she was directing plays, something she continued to do until her death in early 1974.

Amateur theatre groups in mid-twentieth-century New Zealand tended to perform light comedies and popular melodramas. Nola Millar thought that theatre should be more challenging. In 1946 she joined Wellington's Unity Theatre, a radical, left-wing group, interested in producing dramatic works with a political message. Millar directed her first Unity production in 1948, and as the Chronology of Productions Gaitanos provides indicates, it marked the beginning of a long and very productive relationship.

When Richard and Edith Campion set up a national theatre company, the New Zealand Players, in 1953, Millar was invited to be a director's assistant. She did not stay long in the position but like the Campions believed that New Zealand was ready for a professional theatre company. In 1960 her New Theatre Company took to the stage with *Macbeth*. Her next step was to combine New Theatre with a drama school. This she achieved in the late 1960s. It provided the foundation for the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand Interim Drama Training School, which opened in 1970. Toi Whakaari was born.

For those interested in the history of the theatre in mid-twentieth-century New Zealand Gaitanos's book is a goldmine. She has dug deep into the archives and spoken to everyone who knew Millar — and Millar knew everyone in the theatre scene. The result is a roll call of New Zealand thespians and playwrights: James K. Baxter, the Campions, Kate Harcourt, Ray Henwood, Bruce Mason and Peter Vere-Jones all appear, along with surprises like celebrity chef Des Britten, who Millar directed in a Waipawa Musical and Dramatic Society production of Chekov's *The Wedding*.

Nola Millar will also be useful for those interested in the left — Millar's father, Frank, was a key player in the Public Service Association — and libraries. Alongside directing plays Nola Millar worked for many years at the Turnbull and was for a period the reference librarian at Victoria University. She was the sort of librarian historians dream of, an unpaid research assistant who loved to ferret out the facts.

Millar's approach to her library work and Gaitanos's approach to Millar's life share much in common: regardless of how insignificant a 'fact' might be, it is included; the context of the fact is less important than the actual piece of information; and the facts are assumed to speak for themselves. For a number of years Millar worked on what Gaitanos refers to as a 'definitive history' of theatre in New Zealand (p.158). It was