

*Charles Brasch: Journals 1938–1945*. Transcribed by Margaret Scott; with an introductory essay by Rachel Barrowman; annotated by Andrew Parsloe. Dunedin, Otago University Press, 2013. 648pp. NZ price: \$60.00. ISBN: 9781877372841.

It is one of the ongoing tragedies of New Zealand literary and cultural history that there is no biography of Charles Brasch (1909–1973). This means we need to reconstruct Brasch's life and thought from a variety of other sources, including this wonderful new resource. It represents the first major outcome from the ending of the 30-year embargo on the 25 metres of Brasch's papers in the Hocken library.

In the absence of a biography, these journals provide an invaluable service in allowing us to encounter a period of Brasch's life and thought without the double filter of what Brasch decided to make public in *Indirections* and its necessary editing down from 800 pages by James Bertram. The journals also enable a repositioning – or rather a re-emphasizing – of Brasch as primarily a spiritual thinker, poet and patron. Remember that in his opening editorial from *Landfall* (March 1947) Brasch proclaimed: 'what counts is not a country's material resources, but the use to which they are put. And that is determined by the spiritual resources of its people.' This meant *Landfall* was an attempt to publish and give voice to the spiritual resources of the people of New Zealand. Yet our readings of Brasch, *Landfall* and cultural nationalism more widely have tended to doggedly follow a determinedly secular ethos. However a rereading of these journals as spiritual journals allows us to reposition *Landfall* as first and foremost a spiritual undertaking for Brasch, one which found its fullest expression in a spirituality of place and landscape.

As Rachel Barrowman's fine introduction makes clear, this occurred because Brasch's life was 'defined by intellectual, cultural and spiritual exploration' (p.24). The *Journals 1938–1945* are important because they help us understand Brasch's explorations in a wider context of the tensions and the dislocation of exile. On the one hand, he is a New Zealander, born in Dunedin into a prosperous Jewish family. This puts him at a point of critical difference: not only culturally and religiously is he in the minority, but also his family's wealth and connections put him in the position of being able to be a patron in an egalitarian society. Yet Brasch does not quite fit in anywhere. In New Zealand he is too cultured, too European in his tastes, not blokey, queer, an aesthete, in many ways a European sensibility dislocated to the Antipodes; yet in Europe he is always a colonial figure, never attaining the entry of a stellar academic career, homesickness always loitering at hand, aware that he is a New Zealander and of the New Zealand landscape. More than this, I would argue that he is a South Islander more than a New Zealander, which dislocated him further within a New Zealand that was increasingly shifting its cultural, social and population focus ever northwards. Finally, as I want to emphasize, these journals demonstrate that he was a spiritual seeker from a country suspicious of such questions.

In discussion with Denis Glover in 1943 the possibility of what would become *Landfall* was initially outlined. As well as being of 'a high standard' and 'distinctly of New Zealand without being a parochial', Brasch emphasizes that it 'must also, in my view, take its stand as definitely theist, at the least, & definitely radical; though of

course it would not exclude good work by those who were neither. It should attempt to explore, in Holcroft's phrase, "the local nature of reality" (p. 385).

It is from this and myriad other such comments in these journals that I want to argue for *Landfall* as first and foremost a journal of Brasch's spirituality, a type of tragic pantheism, post-Christian in the contemporary expression of the term, that sought to reconcile settlers and the land they found themselves in and in the process express a new culture. This spiritual task is underplayed in our literary and cultural history. So it is worth quoting Brasch from 1944 as to what would become the aim and ethos of *Landfall*: 'what I am constantly striving to accomplish: to discover or recreate a world which shall be mine while at the same time embodying aspects of the real world; a home for the spirit' (p.508).

There is perhaps no better way to sum up what Brasch sought to accomplish in *Landfall* – for himself and for New Zealand – than as expressed in the phrase 'a home for the spirit'. As the journals show, Brasch was an intensely spiritual man, seeking a way to express his spirituality of what can be termed the exilic pantheist. *Landfall* is a spiritual journal and was, as emphasized here, *necessarily so* for Brasch. Yet our literary and cultural history is one that has tended to emphasize a secular reading – especially for Pākehā. So these journals are an invaluable resource for a reconfiguring and re-imagining of our cultural and literary life in these islands, a reminder that (as scholars of religion know) religion and the secular *always coexist* in necessary tension and that the culture and literature that arise in these modern tensions are the undertaking of what can be termed spirituality.

There will be many other readings of these journals that differ in their emphasis and claims. Yet the value of the *Journals 1938–1945* – and the ones that are hopefully to follow – is that they allow new access to the life and mind of a figure who, in his *Landfall*, allowed the re-imagining of New Zealand to occur.

MIKE GRIMSHAW

*University of Canterbury*