

# Review Article

## New Zealand Literary History

*James K. Baxter*. By Vincent O'Sullivan. Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1976. 64 pp.; *Mary Ursula Bethell*. By M.H. Holcroft. Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1975. 56 pp.; *Charles Brasch*. By James Bertram. Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1976. 60 pp.; *Frank Sargeson*. By R.A. Copland. Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1976. 47 pp. (all 'New Zealand Writers and their Work' series, general editor, James Bertram), N.Z. price: \$2.95. *James K. Baxter*. By Charles Doyle. Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976. 189 pp. N.Z. price: \$13.30 (Twayne's World Authors Series, editor, Joseph Jones); *Towards a New Zealand Literature*. By James Bertram. Hocken Library, 1971. 23 pp. N.Z. price: \$1.50; *Frank Sargeson In His Time*. By Dennis McEldowney. John McIndoe, Dunedin, 1976. 72 pp. N.Z. price \$5.95.

THE RECENT publication of a number of studies of the lives and work of New Zealand writers, chiefly in a series of booklets from the Oxford University Press and small books in the Twayne's world authors series, has made available a considerable amount of information about our literary history. It would now be possible to write a much more detailed account of this topic than was possible when E.H. McCormick wrote the pioneering study, *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (1940) or even his *New Zealand Literature. A Survey* (1959).

The present article makes no attempt to survey all the publications on New Zealand literature in recent years, but only the latest group. The aim is to reflect, sometimes in a personal way, on literary history, and not to venture far into criticism.

Before 1918 there were few New Zealand writers and very few of merit. A high proportion of them became expatriates in Great Britain, like William Pember Reeves, Katherine Mansfield and lesser figures like H.B. Marriot Watson. They were not replaced, as one might expect, by a vigorous new group after the first world war. In writing and in intellectual life in general, the leading figures before the war continued to lead after it. Sir Douglas Robb, a prominent surgeon, once wrote that 'Almost a generation of the best young men were wiped out'. He thought it took until after the second world war for the country to replace its lost leaders.<sup>1</sup> That he was not exaggerating is suggested by the casualties among university students. Of the 1,600 students and ex-students from the universities in Wellington, Christchurch and Otago who went to war, nearly a quarter were killed. The death rate of

<sup>1</sup> *Medical Odyssey*, Auckland, 1967, pp.18-19.

our overseas forces as a whole was about one-sixth. In literature, after the first world war, there were a few survivors, badly wounded, like John A. Lee (who began publishing fiction in the 1930s) and Frank S. Anthony (who died at the age of thirty-five), and a few new writers, too young to have gone to war. Of these the most notable was the poet, R.A.K. Mason, who was born in 1905 and published his first very slim volumes in 1923-4-5.

By the 1930s there was a handful of writers living in Auckland. They are listed in Dennis McEldowney's *Frank Sargeson In His Time*: Sargeson, Lee, A.R.D. Fairburn, Robin Hyde, D'Arcy Cresswell, Roderick Finlayson and of course, Mason. They were acquainted with one another, but did not in any sense form a school. The first coherent literary group in New Zealand history was associated with the publication of a literary journal, *Phoenix*, at the University of Auckland in 1932-3. It was originated, I believe, by James Bertram and contained work by Mason, Fairburn, Allen Curnow, and Charles Brasch. It was printed by Robert Lowry, a typographer with real flair. To him and to Dennis Glover, as a printer, New Zealand literature owes a great debt.

New Zealand literature did not – in 1933 – spring from the masses or from the soil. It was markedly élitist. At a time when most people did not go to secondary school, the writers who were about to become influential, and their associated critics, were highly educated. For instance, James Bertram, an outstanding journalist who wrote books about China, and after a long period of quiescence is now enjoying an Indian summer as a critic, went to Waitaki Boys High's boarding establishment, with Brasch and Ian Milner, son of the Rector and now an academic in Prague. The latter's father had created an antipodean imitation Rugby. By stages the lads set off for Oxford – Brasch accompanied by his father and sister. To a degree which seems extraordinary or quaint today, many of their generation were obsessed with Oxford. To get a Rhodes – like Bertram and Milner – was the height of colonial, male, middle-class ambition. Why was it that John Mulgan did not get a Rhodes? He went to Oxford, however, as did Paul Day and Dan Davin who both have written books about why Mulgan or someone else did not get his Rhodes! The ambitious lads wished to get themselves abroad. There were few overseas postgraduate scholarships for the picking. In the long run the tragic thing was that for many of them getting – or not getting – a Rhodes was the peak of their lives, like winning or not winning at the Olympics. For most people, of course, the heights of life are rarely reached at twenty.

It is well known that W.P. Reeves, Alan Mulgan and many older writers were obsessed with 'Home', but it would be surprising to many people to realize, reading Bertram or Brasch, for example, how long this continued. Not that it should be hard to understand, of course, if we think of how horrible as well as insular New Zealand was during the depression (although not as awful as the Motherland). In his *Mary Ursula Bethell*, M.H. Holcroft recalls how, although brought to New Zealand as a baby, Ursula Bethell, who later spent some twenty years in England, felt homesick for what Walter Nash called 'The Old Country'. Sargeson and Fairburn made their necessary pilgrimages. Many of the leaders of the student generation of the thirties, and New Zealand writers in general, became expatriates: Dan Davin, J.A.W. Bennett, who wrote for *Phoenix*; Brasch and Bertram, for years . . . I have not made a body count but it is probably true that most significant New Zealand writers before 1939 lived in England or Australia. After the second world war this changed to a striking degree. Although James K. Baxter was taken to England

as a boy, and for a time went to school there, in later life he visited only India and Japan. Until recent years, Kendrick Smithyman (a notably international writer) had visited only Norfolk Island. Relatively few of the new generation have exported themselves. Louis Johnson lives in Australia. Fleur Adcock lives in England – but, although claimed as a Kiwi, she spent most of her life there, including her early years.

In an article in *Islands* 15 on 'Catullus, Horace and Baxter', John Davidson suggested that the two Romans were 'alive and well and living in New Zealand'. One is constantly reminded, in reading the recent books on our writers, of the very strong influence that a study of the classics has had on New Zealand writing. One would not expect that assertion to apply to Sargeson, but his favourite authors are Gibbon and Milton, and he takes pride in translating Gibbon's naughty Latin footnotes. Baxter's first poem began with a Latin tag; throughout his work he constantly referred to classical mythology; at the end of his short life he published some adaptations from Catullus. Fleur Adcock's superb 'Note on Propertius I.5' is well known, as is the influence of Roman poets on Mason. Baxter had some Latin (and less Maori), but some of these others, like Alistair Campbell, were serious classical scholars. Scratch a New Zealand writer and she or he will reply, not in Australian or American English but in Latin. Of course this assertion underlines the continuing importance of the British, public school and Oxford traditions, whether inherited or imbibed at Oxford founts.

The authors of these books several times remark on the need for an overseas *imprimatur*. Dennis McEldowney emphasizes the publication of Sargeson stories in *Penguin New Writing* – along with Allen Curnow and Brasch. Charles Doyle observes that, in Baxter's time, it was still 'an accolade' for a New Zealand writer to be published in London by the Oxford University Press.

A good number of New Zealand writers have, in fact, been published by the O.U.P. in England. One wonders whether the presence of kiwi infiltrators on the staff of the Clarendon Press and the O.U.P. – Kenneth Sisam, John Mulgan, Dan Davin – may not have been a significant influence on our literature.

If any readers are sceptical about the emphasis given here to Oxford and the classics, they should read James Bertram's Hocken Lecture 1971, 'Towards a New Zealand Literature'. On page 1 we find Harrow and Balliol. On page 9 – in a reference to Sir George Grey's Maori collections! – we have Hesiod, Homer and Aristophanes. I doubt whether any of these New Zealand writers learnt Maori. One sometimes wonders whether they always knew which country they were in. Writing in *Islands* 5 about Brasch, Ian Milner (another of the Waitaki and Oxford group) recalls a return visit to New Zealand in 1971. One day, looking down from a cliff on the Otago Peninsula, at sheep and sea, he said to Brasch, 'Nothing has changed here since Homer'.

Sargeson continued his lonely and frugal struggle in his bach in Auckland. By the late thirties he had made a major advance in our writing. Following the pioneering efforts of Frank S. Anthony, he had succeeded in writing prose in New Zealand English, not by quaint phonetic spelling, but by writing in the local speech rhythms and vocabulary. Brasch had sailed off to Oxford in 1927, where he did not do well. He returned briefly for two visits in the 1930s – fighting what Bertram calls his 'prolonged sullen struggle' against his father, for artistic independence and against accepting a life of accountancy

and business. Only in late 1945 did he return permanently, to launch a literary periodical, *Landfall*, which he wanted to be 'a more substantial, a mature professional *Phoenix*', 'theist, at the least, and definitely radical . . .'.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of *Landfall*, from 1947 onwards, in encouraging New Zealand writers. Its editor was demanding, fastidious (too fastidious, personally, for this rough world, he seemed to many people). He had a broad background in European art and literature. Eric McCormick thought the early issues showed a 'slightly timid good taste'. It seemed to me that *Landfall* became very academic, but one of its chief merits was that it introduced high standards of reviewing to this country. Above all, perhaps, *Landfall* was high-brow. Its success indicated that there were now enough people in New Zealand who liked journals like *Horizon* and *New Writing* to sustain such a periodical. Since 1972 *Landfall* has declined and been superseded by *Islands*, edited by Robin Dudding, who succeeded Brasch as editor of *Landfall* and then launched his own journal.

The appearance of Allen Curnow's *A Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1945 and the launching of *Landfall* were growth marks in our literature. They also suggested that New Zealand had a new literary Establishment, Curnow and Brasch, to replace the 'Marris, Mulgan, Schroder' once denounced by Glover. The first post-war group of writers, and the most clearly-marked such group in our history, was united partly by hostility to the new literary dictators and reputation makers or breakers. This was the 'Wellington group' of the 1950s. Something of its story is chronicled by Charles Doyle, an English immigrant who was then a disciple of Louis Johnson and an uncritical acceptor of the group's views and prejudices. Now a poet and academic in Canada, he is more objective. The centre of the group was probably Johnson. Its greatest star, by far, was Baxter. The principal other members were Alistair Campbell, W.H. Oliver, Hubert Witheford, Pat Wilson and a Dutchman, Erik Schwimmer, who was not a writer, but had some obscure kind of intellectual influence.

This group started several literary journals, short-lived rivals of *Landfall* — *Hilltop*, *Arachne* and *Numbers*. In those years I spent long periods in Wellington 'doing research' and was present at a solemn gathering to discuss a title for the last of these journals. I suggested 'Whimper' but levity was not much appreciated. M.H. Holcroft, in an editorial in the *Listener*, spoke of 'Lisping in Numbers'. The other important medium for the group's views and writing was the *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook*, edited in 'slapdash fashion' and without Brasch's critical standards, by Louis Johnson.

Partly the group was united, as Doyle recalls, by a grievance against the older generation. Some of its members stood for internationalism in literature, as opposed to Curnow's commitment to the specific, the local, the New Zealand experience.

It should be mentioned that, whereas Auckland was the literary centre of the early 1930s, and Christchurch (and Dennis Glover and the Caxton Press) in the late 1930s and again immediately after the war, the chief centres thereafter were Auckland and Wellington. Bertram says that Wellington and Dunedin were 'the most active literary centres' after the war. This seems to me quite wrong. After Curnow moved to Auckland in 1951 and Baxter and Glover to Wellington, in 1948 and 1955, there were few significant writers in the South Island other than Brasch. *Landfall*, of course, was a Christchurch-Dunedin enterprise. And in Christchurch, the Caxton Press and the Pelorus Press were active in publishing New Zealand books.

The Wellington group often denounced Auckland, but there was no comparable Auckland clique or school. The writers in Auckland knew one another, but were more likely to drink together than to concoct literary manifestos. The main attack of the Wellingtonians was on Curnow, who appeared not sufficiently impressed with Wellington talents.

Among the Wellington group, having migrated from Dunedin via Christchurch, Baxter was a phenomenon. He seems to me to have had an astonishing natural talent, and devoted most of his life to his craft. Doyle notes that there are eighty-three surviving poems written between the ages of eleven and fourteen.

There was in Baxter a considerable element of self-dramatization. Vincent O'Sullivan remarks that he 'mythologized his life', so what was personal in his life he saw as the product of world forces; his life was the story of Everyman; its events were public events. He acted out his myth to an extraordinary degree, abandoning his wife and family to become a guru, Hemi, living in a small commune at Hiruharama – Jerusalem – where he is buried. His drama went a long way. O'Sullivan quotes one of his last poems in which he wrote,

And I may yet build by his law  
A House of gold and not of straw  
Where the wild tribes may take their rest  
And lean upon the Father's breast . . .

and observes that 'the implications of these lines may be fairly hard to take'. In other poems he seems to identify himself with Christ. It should be added in haste that some of his greatest poems were written at this period.

I accept Charles Doyle's judgment that Baxter was 'one of the finest poets of his generation writing in English'. But I think, Doyle is a little too uncritical at times: he credits Baxter the saint with growing his own food. From various youngsters who stayed with him I gather that there was little serious attempt to create a self-sufficient *ohu*. Baxter helped many of his *mokai* – so Baxter called them, 'the fatherless', although the word means 'slave' – both in Hiruharama and in Auckland: druggies and dropouts and disturbed young people. But people who know a little about this period would stop short of Doyle's assertion that Baxter's life was 'a living and vivid example of the full practice of the life of charity, the Christian life'. He was certainly the most extraordinary person I was ever fortunate enough to know.

These writers were a remarkable group of New Zealanders. Almost to a man – or woman – they rejected New Zealand society and its *mores* and standards. Sargeson – like Fairburn – was devoted to 'organic' gardening – making compost and eschewing chemical sprays forty years before today's youth heard of such things. Brasch was wealthy, but Sargeson and Baxter chose a life of poverty, rejecting possessions. Baxter wrote that New Zealand was not 'a Happy Island', as the politicians said, but was in fact, 'an unjust, unhappy one'. He found positive values only in Maori society, in Maori *aroha*: Pakeha society was spiritually dead. He saw the role of the artist as being 'a cell of pure living in a corrupt society': the poet, in his life and work, should be a social commentator and reformer. He was not in any ordinary political sense left-wing – but his last poem began with an exhortation to Father Lenin.

A good many New Zealand writers never married – a fact which leads to a topic it is often thought improper to mention about our writers. A number of

the more prominent have been homosexuals, whether active, latent, or, as Bertram says Brasch was, 'bisexual in his feelings'. Fairburn gave great offence to some of his friends by denouncing the 'green international', yet it is clearly true that in Europe and the USA and New Zealand, there have long been numerous homosexual writers who review – and praise – one another, and act like a secret society. Has New Zealand writing been influenced in any way by homosexual views or tastes? Obviously some kinds of attitudes towards society are, indeed, homosexual, and influence the kind of writing that results. Probably certain sorts of vigorous, perhaps bawdy, or vulgar writing were excluded from *Landfall*, writing of a sort, which flourished in Australia. There was a certain *prissiness* about *Landfall* and a preciousness about much of the post-war prose and poetry in New Zealand. It could be the case – and I have heard well-known writers say so – that *Landfall* did not offer a warm reception to some of the new novelists of the 1960s, like Maurice Shadbolt or Noel Hilliard – who did not write like Sargeson.

Looking at the books on recent writers – and their authors – one reflects upon how many of our recent writers have been Roman Catholics, whether practising, converts or lapsed: Davin, Maurice Duggan, Eileen Duggan, Baxter, O'Sullivan, Sam Hunt, W.H. Oliver . . . and there are also the Catholics who write about them, including some priests in civilian clothing. There is, indeed, a Catholic *Mafia*. Yet I must add that the obvious book that is not yet written is on Maurice Duggan – and who better to write it than O'Sullivan?

The Irish, like homosexuals, have formed a sub-culture in New Zealand. To some extent that has also been true of women – a high proportion of our best writers have been women. These groups have felt alienated from society as a whole, which has enabled them to criticize it and write about it, to some extent, from outside. Probably no important writer has celebrated the values promoted by politicians, the media, the R.S.A., the Farmers' Union, the Rugby Union . . . . From this point of view one would expect the great New Zealand writer of the future to be Catholic, Maori, lesbian and probably politically left of centre.

Dennis McEldowney's book on Sargeson is beautifully written, as usual, and puts R.A. Copland's in the shade. McEldowney reveals that Sargeson changed his name – but does not tell us why. As a critical study O'Sullivan's is the best of the Oxford series, 'New Zealand Writers and their Work'. Doyle's *Baxter* is more ponderous and contains errors. 'Macrocarpa' is neither a Maori word nor a 'native' tree; a *kea* is not a hawk; '*Ao-tea-Roa*' and '*Wharepuni*', are not Maori words. However, his book is very warm, devoted and interesting. Bertram's *Brasch* contains much fascinating biographical information and is a first-class brief study. Personally I find a little hard to swallow his assertion that an examination of a draft holograph of Brasch's lyric 'Winter Ceremonies' might be 'as instructive to later students of poetic technique as reference to the manuscripts of Keats'. M.H. Holcroft's book on Ursula Bethell, McEldowney's, Bertram's and Doyle's all gain a great deal from the fact that the authors knew their subjects personally.

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