

## An Antimodern Manqué:

### MONTE HOLCROFT AND *THE DEEPENING STREAM*



MONTE HOLCROFT'S 1940 ESSAY *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand* received a great deal of attention when it appeared and seemed to capture the experience of many New Zealanders in a way that had not been achieved before.<sup>1</sup> Such was the success of this short work that Holcroft went on to write a trilogy and establish himself as one of New Zealand's foremost cultural commentators. Published by the Caxton Press in Christchurch, the essay quickly sold out. A second edition came out in 1946 and was republished along with *The Waiting Hills* and *Encircling Seas* in the compendium *Discovered Isles: A Trilogy* in 1950.<sup>2</sup> Holcroft had clearly touched on issues that were topical to wartime New Zealanders. Nevertheless, the essay (and much of Holcroft's subsequent work) has been the subject of both derision and critical neglect which has threatened to consign Holcroft, once described by the *New Zealand Herald* as 'New Zealand's only true essayist', to a mere footnote in the nation's literary history. *The Deepening Stream* delineated a formative aesthetic that captured the imagination of New Zealand's reading public and put forward a deeply felt antimodern vision that many writers and artists have either grappled with directly or, more usually, ignored but nonetheless reflected in their work. Holcroft will assuredly remain a problematic figure within New Zealand's cultural heritage — but hopefully more for his articulation of a peculiar brand of antimodernism than for his frequently noted opacity and populism.

With us since the Arts and Craft movement of the nineteenth century, surprisingly little has been written about antimodernism.<sup>3</sup> There was a brief flurry of interest during the 1970s, when Shulamit Volkov and T.J. Jackson Lears explored antimodernism in Germany and America respectively, but few other works had been produced until the late 1980s and 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Although the term 'antimodernism' is now accepted amongst historians as a fundamental aspect of twentieth-century experience, few writers have been able to find concrete evidence for its existence: it is one of those terms in the history of ideas that is so pervasive that it resists definition.

Lears has produced the most convincing definition thus far. He viewed antimodernism as a product of *fin-de-siecle* Europe, where fears of 'over-civilization' and apparently rampant technological advance led many bourgeois intellectuals to recoil from the present in order to take refuge in an idealized, rustic and 'natural' past.<sup>5</sup> British intellectuals associated with the Arts and Craft movement, like John Ruskin and William Morris, combined their mistrust of historical modernity with an antipathy towards the modernist aesthetic that accompanied it; deriding the onset of industrial capitalism as both physically and mentally inhumane and asserting the need for authentic experience and psychic

wholeness. Similarly, in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau demanded a return to nature and extolled the virtues of transcendentalism as an antidote to urban and industrial excess. In Germany the backlash to modernity took the form of social and political agitation by master artisans eager to retain their position in a society quickly adopting mass-manufactured goods.<sup>6</sup> As Lears points out, these reactions were prompted in no small part by the rise of psychology and sociology and a related awareness throughout the middle classes of Europe and America that the fabric of their societies were undergoing irreversible change. This was altogether understandable; despite obvious benefits, scientific and technological advances had made centuries-old certainties fade, and the development of factory labour, urban slums and general social dysfunction were of real concern to many people. These and other issues were, of course, significant reasons behind the colonization of New Zealand, which in its Wakefieldian guise can be viewed as being an antimodern project of enormous proportions.<sup>7</sup>

Monte Holcroft's antimodernism has a relationship to these *fin-de-siecle* concerns, but it is more accurate to discuss it in terms of the interwar period (1918–1939), when intellectuals were confronted with a world further complicated by explosive growth of commercial capitalism, combined with militarism, violent labour disputes and political divisions that had resulted in outright revolution in both Germany and Russia. These were years characterized by dis-ease, *ennui* and the rapid growth of therapeutic industries that aimed to profit from psychic distress in the general population. Antimodernists were at the centre of this movement, providing the European and American bourgeoisie with both succor and snake oil.

There is no simple way of describing the antimodern 'movement' between the wars, however. As Lears points out, 'the particular varieties of antimodernism were shaped by particular national circumstances'.<sup>8</sup> In Germany the splintered cultural circumstances of Weimar Germany led to both debauchery in the form of wild parties and increasingly widespread drug use, and the movement of antimodernists into the political arena, where they provided much of the impetus for a repudiation of the Social Democratic Party and an acceptance of fascism. German antimodernists were radicalized from labour unrest, but concerned enough about circumstances in Russia to repudiate both capitalism and socialism, in a movement that often tended towards outright anarchism. Weimar was, of course, an extremely complex cultural milieu. While many intellectuals (such as Bertold Brecht) embraced the mass culture offered by mechanization, others recoiled at the level of social fragmentation that fordism and Bauhaus design symbolized, and retreated into a folk past that luxuriated in the romantic philosophies of Goethe and Schiller. Others, like Franz Kafka, attempted a reconciliation of the old and the new with surrealist visions of human insects and a world gone mad with the law.

British antimodernism during the interwar period was markedly less radical and more inclined towards drawing room conversation and communal experimentation than street-level politics. A significant aspect was the tendency towards bohemianism amongst certain sections of the aristocracy, who were threatened by the growth of mass culture and commercial capitalism. They

responded by cutting up their estates into manageable economic units and withdrawing into an organic past that harked back to their days of leisure. Peter Mandler suggests that this trend began in the late nineteenth century, when ideals of patriotic heroism were replaced with ‘homeliness, craftsmanship, simplicity and honesty’.<sup>9</sup> Symbolized in the Arts and Craft movement (which continued into the twentieth century), domestic life came to be seen as an ideal that had been perfected in the past and was at risk of being extinguished.<sup>10</sup> This was in complete contrast to the growing modernist aesthetic, which has been widely described as ‘anti-domestic’.<sup>11</sup> Modernist living spaces evolved into the cold, functional architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, a far cry from homely living spaces with fires burning and medieval relics on the walls.

The burgeoning middle classes of Britain perhaps moved further than even the struggling aristocrats in the tendency towards an exultation of domesticity. Beset by an increasingly hectic pace of life, the home became a place of refuge from modernity, where father ruled (rather than being ruled, as he often was at work) and mother could engage in the feminine virtues of motherhood and domestic service. More radical antimodern thinkers took this one step further and asserted the need for a redefinition of home life in order to keep pace with the new ‘technology’ of psychology; they used the newly popularized sexual psychology of Freud to redefine gender relations both in and out of the bedroom. Amongst the educated middle classes, antimodernism took on a peculiarly therapeutic tone; the popular psychology of Havelock Ellis and middlebrow philosophies of Rudolf Otto and A. Seth Pringle-Pattison blended into a materialist aesthetic founded on organicism, nature and the quest for psychic well-being outside the strictures of traditional religion.<sup>12</sup> This trend continued and found its height in the bohemian counter-cultures of the 1960s.

Lears suggests that the therapeutic nature of antimodernism was at its strongest in America, perhaps because it was in America where the conflict between rustic simplicity (idealized in the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe) and emerging commercial capitalism was most coldly delineated. Here, Lears argues, Nietzsche’s notion of a ‘weightless’, secularized society found full expression, leading in turn to a society filled with neurasthenic housewives and emotionally crippled businessmen.<sup>13</sup> Therapeutic antimodernism provided a means by which mass culture could fill the need in society for psychic wholeness, by offering wellness retreats along with philosophical and psychological remedies by the truckload. Lears argues that this ‘quest for authentic Selfhood’<sup>14</sup> and the recovery of intense experience was itself linked to a ‘crisis of cultural authority’<sup>15</sup> that accompanied the secularization of American society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Locked into the dawning age of mechanization and technology, many Americans no longer found succor in the church and began instead to experiment with psychological cures and new modes of living. Ted McAllister goes so far as to suggest that, when taken to its logical extreme, the term ‘antimodernism’ implied a response to the existential angst engendered by a Godless civilization: it reflected a yearning for an antidote to modernity.<sup>16</sup>

It is not often made explicit just how connected New Zealand was to the expanding modern world during the interwar years. The dominant myth is

of an insular, closed society dependent upon the land and agriculture for its survival, meekly following the dictates of mother England. To an extent, this was the case. James Belich's thesis of recolonization has much merit: New Zealand was indeed eager to remain under the economic and military protection of 'home' for most of its history. But (as Belich himself notes) the interwar years saw New Zealand expand its cultural scope considerably. American cars became commonplace and there was a burgeoning use of new technologies such as radios and household appliances.<sup>17</sup> Although New Zealanders were economically and politically tied to England, they were becoming increasingly influenced by the cultural capital of modernity. Of course, there is no contradiction here: historical patterns rarely exhibit single trajectories.

It seems obvious (evidenced most forcefully during the 1930s Depression) that New Zealanders were not spared the negative side of modernity. Labour unrest amongst miners at Waihi in 1912, the nationwide watersiders strike of 1913, ongoing agitation for reform of work conditions and calls for wide-ranging social reforms (culminating in the election of the first Labour government in 1935) all speak to New Zealand being decidedly typical in its experience of the early twentieth century. Although clearly not as industrialized as Britain, Germany or America, interwar New Zealand had the essential ingredients for Nietzsche's weightless society — and writers like Frank Sargeson were well aware of it. Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that modernity exerted a greater impact upon New Zealand during this period than rugby, racing and beer.

Caroline Daley cogently points this out in *Leisure and Pleasure*, and it is a facet of our history that deserves more attention.<sup>18</sup> As in other parts of the world, there was a healthy interest in new cultural fads, including various forms of dance, as well as walking and cycling,<sup>19</sup> and the body-worship explored by Daley. The global rationalization of capitalism, enabled by increasingly efficient technologies and modern forms of factory organization, created not only the time for leisure, but the leisure industry itself — where antimodern practices like sun-worship and nudism flourished.<sup>20</sup> As with the vaguely militaristic exercise regimes of Eugen Sandow (a central character in Daley's work), New Zealanders appear to have been quick to pick up leisure practices that aimed to offset the negative influences of modernity. Global trends that can be broadly described as 'antimodern' were commonplace throughout both islands (although clearly more common in the larger centres). Even Edmund Hillary, that icon of New Zealand masculinity, was taken in by the promise of a new era of health and well-being. Indeed, it is likely that his legendary capacity for high-altitude mountaineering was shaped more by Radiant Living than his admittedly clumsy efforts on the rugby field: 'As a family we attended further courses of lectures and when Dr. Sutcliffe established a branch of his school in Auckland we became foundation members. "Radiant Living" was rather an astonishing conglomeration of ideas, culled from a multitude of religions and philosophies. It included much practical psychology of the "think and grow rich" variety; there was great emphasis on healthy foods and a balanced diet; on a variety of rhythmical and relaxing exercises; on moderation in things of the flesh rather than abstinence or excess.'<sup>21</sup> It is significant that therapeutic antimodernism was in no way antithetical to the lifestyle of a Good Keen Man.

It fitted well with New Zealanders eager to find a way of life that chimed with their love of nature, independence and the outdoors. I would argue, along with Daley, that this general tendency was a dominant feature of our cultural landscape during the twentieth century.

Clearly, however, the most obvious cultural context for a discussion of Holcroft's work is the literary one. Lawrence Jones has used Allen Curnow's term 'anti-myth' to explore the immediate literary-cultural context of Holcroft and his peers; an expression which could almost be considered to be synonymous with antimodernism if Jones was not so scrupulous about claiming only a literary context.<sup>22</sup> Jones notes that the anti-myth was connected to 'a group of related themes centering on the land, the Pakeha relation (or lack of relation) to it, the history of that relation, the contrast to the Maori relation, and the relationship of New Zealand to England'.<sup>23</sup> The anti-myth was a response on the part of Allen Curnow, Charles Brasch, A.R.D. Fairburn, Denis Glover, Frank Sargeson, John Mulgan, Robin Hyde and others to both the spiritual and cultural barrenness of interwar New Zealand, and the overt jingoism of the preceding colonial period, which grated on their artistic sensibilities and appeared to them to be merely the faded echo of a dated Georgian style. These writers responded to this apparently all-encompassing banality (or, perhaps, 'weightlessness') with social realism and what they termed modernism. It has since become plain to literary critics that their mode of modernism contained heavy strains of the very Georgianism they despised, but Jones's point is significant: New Zealand's literary culture was developed in tandem with a set of philosophies that demanded authentic experience, a renewed spiritual relationship to the land, the recovery of reality and a repudiation of puritan codes of conduct. The missing element in Jones's analysis is the broadly historical one. Antimodernism was a pervasive aspect of New Zealand culture during the interwar period and provides an essential explanatory principle for most of our post-European cultural and intellectual history.<sup>24</sup> For followers of health and the sun it manifested itself in terms of Eugen Sandow and Radiant Living, and for followers of literature it manifested itself in the anti-myth and a search for authentic experience.

It is now commonplace in New Zealand accounts of the 1930s to note the development of the literary magazines *Phoenix* (1932–1933) and *Tomorrow* (1934–1940) and the rapid increase in social criticism, poetry and novel writing. New Zealand witnessed a quite remarkable flowering of the creative arts during this period. What all of this points to in the context of antimodernism is not only a tendency towards cultural dissatisfaction and a desire for renewal, but the same confrontation with historical modernity that prompted antimodern movements elsewhere in the world. As Rachel Barrowman notes, '[t]he nationalist literary movement sought to create a vigorous, independent New Zealand literature, a literature that was "rooted in life"'.<sup>25</sup> Like the much larger and more developed Australian intelligentsia of the same period,<sup>26</sup> New Zealand's intellectual base was composed of a small circle of middle-class Pakeha men who had the time and financial means to engage in moral and cultural issues, and the educational background to lend their pronouncements cultural force. New Zealand society simply did not possess the depth necessary for a more inclusive group that

could speak to broader social strains. Although certain figures often attempted to reach the broad strands of New Zealand culture, their writing and speeches appeared to fall on deaf ears. D'Arcy Cresswell, for example, intended to educate and 'civilize' New Zealand through a series of eight radio broadcasts in 1933, but his tone was staid, derivative and oddly romantic. Despite gaining a level of approval from listeners, *Modern Poetry and the Ideal* was totally inattentive to the realities of life in New Zealand. In a letter to Ormond Wilson printed as a preface to the published version of his address he went so far as to suggest that: *'There is something fatalistic and final about the Southern Alps and the plains. It is the sort of unbending scene where dreadful idolatries thrive, such as Baal, a brazen conviction of being sufficient unto themselves, a Goliath of pride. Nice to be little David and smite them to death!'*<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, the antagonistic tone struck by the literary nationalists had important implications for Monte Holcroft. Firstly, 'nationalist cultural critiques ma[d]e . . . a claim for the value of literature'.<sup>28</sup> In Arnoldian fashion, literature was lauded as a means by which New Zealand could be led away from its (apparently) stagnant, derivative and shallow culture, towards modernity and an engagement with international culture. A necessary corollary to this was the need for writers and artists to adopt a public role. Writers were to take on the moral responsibility of redefining the cultural environment towards more sophisticated modes of expression. The public role of the intellectual was symbolized by the 'Man Alone' who stood outside his society, in implicit criticism; yet he retained all the ruggedness of the frontier male. The literary nationalists were affronted by what they perceived to be a strong element of moral puritanism permeating New Zealand culture, which had led to a population infected by materialism, conformity and hostility towards creative expression of any kind.<sup>29</sup> Artists and writers felt undervalued (indeed, scorned) by their peers, and much of their anger was directed against 'New Zealand puritanism'. Barrowman is undoubtedly correct in emphasizing the antipathy of these men towards their culture. Their attitude represented moral outrage as well as literary nationalism. It is important to recognize that they were not only reacting to internal stimuli, however.

Like Barrowman, Stuart Murray sees a 'nationalist critique of culture' in 1930s New Zealand writing.<sup>30</sup> The period was clearly one in which criticism became infused with broader global interests. In large part, this process was stimulated by international events such as the economic depression, the rise of fascism and the civil war in Spain. It became natural for writers to begin to critique their cultures, because it appeared as if their cultures were faltering towards chaos and needed to be redirected towards more stable modes of government. Moreover, the Marxist principles of left-wing thought demanded engagement with culture and the historical dialectic. As Stevan Eldred-Grigg has pointed out, New Zealand writers 'were mostly bourgeois males convinced they were "men of the left"'.<sup>31</sup> The global embrace of Hegelian and Marxist discourse inevitably thrust writers and critics into public roles; they were the intelligensia leading the working class to their true destiny. As Marx noted, 'literature . . . in every great modern revolution, has always given voice to the demands of the proletariat'.<sup>32</sup> In true antimodern style, Holcroft actually

referred to Marxism as mere 'dogma' and asserted the need for 'universal experience' to offset such narrow thinking.<sup>33</sup> But the point is that the global culture of the 1930s lent a certain seriousness to literary undertakings; it made literature significant in the battle for ideological supremacy. Writers and critics became a necessary part of the global cultural debate between left and right, and antimodernism was a significant component in that package. Eldred-Grigg rejected Holcroft's claim in *The Deepening Stream* that socialism was 'clearly discernable' in New Zealand literature of the period, but this somewhat misses the point, which is that the world was very much viewed in terms of left and right during the interwar period, and Holcroft felt that New Zealand was dominated by left-leaning writers and intellectuals, which it was.<sup>34</sup> Holcroft's comment reflected a global commonplace.

In Holcroft's local world, Marxist ideas were expressed through *Tomorrow*, established by Kennaway Henderson and H. Winston Rhodes in Christchurch in 1934. Under Labour's wartime censorship regulations the magazine was eventually forced to close in 1940, but in the interim it put forward 'a consistent critique of New Zealand culture' based around political, economic and social commentary.<sup>35</sup> *Tomorrow* also included book reviews and the odd piece of criticism and provided an outlet for several aspiring New Zealand writers of short stories and poetry (most notably Frank Sargeson). Basically, it was a culturally oriented magazine that viewed New Zealand society through the lens of international as well as local events. The political content of *Tomorrow* was unmistakable, and despite trying to appear non-partisan it soon came to be seen as a mouthpiece for the socialist vision. H. Winston Rhodes's influence was especially significant in this regard. He subscribed to the Marxist understanding of artistic roles, lauding heroic novelists who championed the working class. In the increasingly politicized environment of the 1930s, *Tomorrow* stood as a symbol for radical politics and cultural critique. In combination with *Phoenix* (the little magazine developed by students at Auckland University College and credited with sparking the literary revival of the 1930s) it provided an infrastructural precedent for the future development of New Zealand literature.

Despite being isolated from the harsher realities of war, mass culture and creeping commercial capitalism, New Zealanders still felt what Alvin Toffler later referred to as the 'Future Shock' which accompanied twentieth-century cultural and technological change, prompting both adventurers like Hillary and artists like Holcroft to search for meaning beyond the strictures of traditional philosophies.<sup>36</sup> Viewed from this perspective, interwar New Zealand begins to look like a veritable melting pot of ideas and intellectual activity, with Monte Holcroft symbolizing the middle-class alternative to Marxist action.

Montague Harry Holcroft was born in Rangiora in 1902, a year, he later noted, in which a mere 17 books and pamphlets on New Zealand subjects were published, only eight of them written in New Zealand. Holcroft grew up in Christchurch and was educated at Christchurch Boys' High School before taking a position as office boy at Aulsebrooks biscuit and confectionery factory in 1917. After two years in this position, during which time he suffered the premature death of his mother, Holcroft determined to travel in order to gather

experience for a career as a writer. He eventually made his way to Sydney, where he settled as a dockyard clerk, short story writer and budding novelist, publishing in a wide variety of Australian periodicals such as the *Australian Journal*, *Punch*, *Triad*, *Smith's Weekly* and the *Bulletin* (including literary essays on the infamous 'Red Page').<sup>37</sup> During his time in Sydney his marriage failed (subsequently he was haunted by accusations that he abandoned his family). The period also provided the background to his second novel, *The Flameless Fire* (1929). He had published *Beyond the Breakers* the previous year and *Brazilian Daughter* appeared in 1931. None of his novels was successful, however, and in later life Holcroft himself judged his unpublished novels of a higher quality than his works of the late twenties and early thirties. After abortive attempts to save his marriage, Holcroft returned to New Zealand, where he made a brief start to his journalistic career as a sub-editor of the Christchurch *Press* before embarking for London in late 1928.

At age 26, Monte Holcroft thus joined the expatriate New Zealand writers in London who were to so intrigue later cultural commentators. In moving to London Holcroft aspired to literary success; the prospects of publication and thus a reasonable living being the main motives for his move. In keeping with this aim, he employed the services of a literary agent and attempted to get published, frequenting writers' haunts and weathering a string of rejections. While in London, Holcroft kept in touch with other expatriates like D'Arcy Cresswell and Jane Mander (with whom he appears to have had a close and lasting friendship). Before Holcroft left for a tour of the Continent in 1929, Mander suggested to him that he should give up on London and return to New Zealand because of the overly competitive British publishing market. It was advice Holcroft took in 1930 after failing to elicit interest in his writing, but not before being heavily influenced by recent philosophical trends in Europe in the shape of Havelock Ellis's *The Dance of Life* (1923) and Herbert Carr's *The Freewill Problem* (1928). Later study along these same lines led Holcroft to mention A. Seth Pringle-Pattison's *The Idea of God* (1920) in *The Deepening Stream*.

Returning to Wellington, Holcroft continued to try to make a career for himself as a writer of short stories and novels, undergoing hardship that he later attributed to his stance in chapter six of *The Deepening Stream* where he stated that '[a] great responsibility rests on the serious writers of New Zealand to-day'.<sup>38</sup> A second marriage and the prospect of a son led Holcroft to shift south to Christchurch in order to write for the *Press* and gain a more regular income. It was in this role that he met J.H.E. Schroder, who was then editor of the literary page. Schroder was to become a considerable influence on Holcroft's essay style (a collection of Holcroft's essays written for the *Press* during this period was published as *Timeless World* in 1945). Holcroft mentioned in his autobiography the presence of Denis Glover, Allen Curnow and Ngaio Marsh in Christchurch, and it seems as if he busied himself in the local literary scene before taking up a position with the *Southland Times* as a political and economic commentator in 1937. That year he also began work on *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand*; two years later war broke out in Europe.

It is important to note World War II's effect on literary publication in New Zealand. Not only did many writers (such as Denis Glover and Kendrick Smithyman) enter the armed services and therefore curtail their literary activities, but opportunities for literary publication became severely limited, especially in the all-important London market. The war blunted creative production in London by turning people's attention towards the spectacle of war.<sup>39</sup> The same can be said of the New Zealand literary scene, where the production of literature declined markedly. This was exacerbated by wartime restrictions on paper use in both Britain and New Zealand. Those writers left in New Zealand became aware of their dependence on the London market and began to look to local possibilities in publishing. Moreover, the New Zealand wartime government of Peter Fraser was widely held to be authoritarian and (perhaps unnecessarily) harsh towards dissent of any kind, naturally antagonizing many writers left at home who felt it necessary to criticize the war effort.<sup>40</sup> Criticism of the war was more than balanced, however, by a development of New Zealand's masculine mythology that had been forcefully portrayed by John Mulgan in *Man Alone* (1939). War was a means by which the rugged image of the New Zealand male could find expression, and it prompted a significant body of literature after the soldiers returned.<sup>41</sup> It was in this environment that *The Deepening Stream* evolved, as a means by which stock could be taken of the current status of New Zealand culture and literature, but also as a way to continue development of a national literature under extremely trying circumstances. As other historians have already noted, World War II not only extended New Zealand's involvement in the wider world, it prompted internal criticism and the further development of ingrained cultural traits.

Paradoxically, however, the outbreak of World War II was followed almost immediately in New Zealand by national centennial celebrations. The associated injection of government funds into the local cultural scene was directly related to the eventual publication of Holcroft's first successful piece of writing. A centennial branch of the Department of Internal Affairs had been established in 1936 to oversee all the planned celebrations for 1940. These ranged from an exhibition in Wellington to essay competitions and government-sponsored architecture.<sup>42</sup> This was to be the first major foray of a New Zealand government into patronage of the arts, and a great deal of planning went into the event. The Centennial Exhibition in Wellington attracted 2,641,031 visitors over a 12-month period (one million more than the entire population at the time).<sup>43</sup>

In line with other elements of the centennial, the literary celebrations were politically inspired. The initial idea for a series of works celebrating New Zealand's intellectual heritage was conceived by Joseph Heenan, under-secretary of Internal Affairs. Heenan approached Eric McCormick in his capacity as secretary to the National Centennial Historical Committee over the possibility of editing the entire series, which was to have a much broader base than literature alone. In order to convey the wide range of intellectual interests in New Zealand the series included works on discovery (J.C. Beaglehole), exploration (W.G. McClymont), settlement (James Cowan), farming (G.T. Alley), administration (L.C. Webb), social services (W.B. Sutch), external relations (F.L.W. Wood), education (C.W. Beeby), science (S.H. Jenkinson),

women (Helen Simpson), art, literature and language (E.H. McCormick), Maori (Apirana Ngata) and Pakeha (Oliver Duff).<sup>44</sup> Ngata's work on Maori was never completed and Sutch's work on social services was not accepted by the prime minister.<sup>45</sup> It has been pointed out that Fraser was opposed to Sutch's left-wing views and that his refusal of the manuscript was part of a general repression of the left within the Labour Party.<sup>46</sup> Although the centennial was designed to celebrate the nation's cultural heritage, it was to be along acceptable party lines.<sup>47</sup>

*The Deepening Stream* was not commissioned specifically for the centennial celebrations, but was awarded first prize in the essay competition and gained publication by Denis Glover's Caxton Press largely on this basis. Holcroft had begun writing an extended essay on New Zealand during his first year at the *Southland Times*, a period described in his autobiography as one of relative security and stability that acted to coax knowledge out of him gained through years of travelling and reading. Journalism excited Holcroft by placing him in the world of 'people and affairs' while at the same time prompting him to draw associations between society and his own recently developed philosophy.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Holcroft patterned *The Deepening Stream* with his personal philosophy to the fore. This explains much of the negative criticism that surrounded the essay, because Holcroft's belief system was both deeply felt and idiosyncratic to the point of being unintelligible to a large section of his audience.

Initial responses to *The Deepening Stream* were positive. Eric McCormick made a reference to the work in *Letters and Art*, lamenting that this 'important essay . . . appear[ed] too late to be considered in this survey'.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the 1940s criticism was generally favourable, with commentators suggesting that *The Deepening Stream* was a 'work to which any man of letters could put his name'.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, it came to be interpreted as a symbol of cultural uniformity, a sign of New Zealand's dependence on Britain and a myth of New Zealand's pastoral-utopian yearnings. Holcroft's antimodern nature came to strike many New Zealand critics as ethereal and withdrawn from the realities of life. He was a sensitive and thoughtful person, and this did not make his writing palatable to local critics who yearned for a hard-edged philosophy that could wrestle with their country's provincial fixation with number eight wire and masculinity.<sup>51</sup>

Holcroft's essay was (and still is) problematic. Despite the fact that his writing style and philosophy were opaque, he nevertheless sold many books and prompted a great deal of critical attention. Responses to *The Deepening Stream* (and the later trilogy) made explicit an obvious and understandable point of difference between it and McCormick's seminal *Letters and Art*, for instance. Specifically, whereas McCormick prompted only one negative review (from journalist Pat Lawlor of *Truth*<sup>52</sup>), Holcroft was subjected to numerous attacks on his writing style, intellectual integrity and general philosophy. Whereas McCormick was praised for his 'lucid and invaluable' contribution to New Zealand letters,<sup>53</sup> critics were prone to point out such specifics of Holcroft's writing as his frequent use of 'the indefinite article before an abstract noun not preceded by an attributive adjective: he speaks of 'a true freedom', 'a solicitude for the young', and so on'.<sup>54</sup> Critics also accused Holcroft of

deliberate vagueness through his frequent use of attenuate phrases like ‘a little’ and ‘somewhat’.<sup>55</sup> J.M. Winchester asserted that ‘[g]enerally, however, when he is not being banal he is preposterous, and can seriously put forward such propositions as that New Zealanders are afflicted with “the Memory of a Voyage”’.<sup>56</sup> D.D. Raphael’s review of *Encircling Seas* was equally harsh and pointed in its philosophical criticisms.<sup>57</sup> At an early stage in his career Holcroft’s writings were criticized for being amateurish and inattentive to the need for precise prose writing to get across complex ideas. Although *The Deepening Stream* and Holcroft’s later writings are often referred to in histories of New Zealand literature and criticism as being at the core of a move towards a truly national literary tradition, there has been a surprising amount of denigration of his work.

Allen Curnow tended to defend Holcroft, despite a few misgivings over his style and philosophical intent and was one of few who enjoyed Holcroft’s cultural philosophy over McCormick’s ‘social content’.<sup>58</sup> Curnow characterized Holcroft as an essayist, a stylist who relied on a ‘poetically-toned prose’ to make his point.<sup>59</sup> He later suggested that he could not have written his introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923–1945* ‘if Holcroft hadn’t written his essays, and McCormick his *Letters and Art*’.<sup>60</sup> Curnow’s support for Holcroft and a perception that they held shared motives in their writing led a group of writers to suggest that the pair (along with Charles Brasch) had propagated a ‘South Island Myth’<sup>61</sup> based on ‘Holcroftian’<sup>62</sup> social realism and a wholesale application of the pathetic fallacy. Curnow himself denied the charge<sup>63</sup> and was supported by C.K. Stead in the Auckland Winter lectures of 1960, but the debate was heated, centering around the utility of terms such as regionalism and nationalism, and whether South Island writers had developed a sickly aesthetic that had no basis in experience for most New Zealanders. Keith Sinclair suggested the myth was a very real regional variation (made more noticeable as a result of increasing urbanization in the North Island), but one which was quickly losing appeal as South Island writers became less preoccupied with isolation and exile.<sup>64</sup> Despite such attempts to diffuse what was becoming a quite damaging debate, five years later Kendrick Smithyman criticized Holcroft, Brasch and Curnow on the grounds of an unimpressive metaphysic, and accused Holcroft of an ‘ingenuous lack-logic’.<sup>65</sup> Younger writers tended to view Holcroft’s language as prescriptive and opaque and the debate has never been quite resolved. It continued to be leveled in various forms until the 1980s when Roger Horrocks<sup>66</sup> enlisted James K. Baxter’s much earlier opinion that Holcroft and Curnow had propagated a ‘myth of insularity’<sup>67</sup> that was creatively unhealthy. Accurate or not, the accusations of the North Island writers were largely based on a dislike of what can only be termed antimodern tendencies in the South Island writers; a recourse to land and spirit in the absence of any concrete particulars that might lend themselves to nation-building.

Attacks such as these, that isolated a South Island myth or claimed the presence in New Zealand of a triumvirate of cultural mythmakers, had the effect of isolating a more general impression of a dominant ‘Reality Gang’<sup>68</sup> of mid-century poets and writers consisting of Allen Curnow, A.R.D. Fairburn,

Charles Brasch, Keith Sinclair and various others including Monte Holcroft. That Holcroft was a central element in both the South Island myth and various historians' suggestion of a literary–cultural triumvirate suggests both something of his influence and something of the power of antimodernism to attract an audience in New Zealand. Stead pointed out in his defence that he did not 'think anyone aware of the emptiness of New Zealand's intellectual life at the time Mr Holcroft began writing could blame him for finding it necessary to discuss literary problems with hills rather than with human beings'.<sup>69</sup> Stead's remark holds equally well for Curnow, Fairburn, Brasch and Sinclair. But Holcroft was never quite one with these writers either. His persistent examination of Pakeha New Zealand's spiritual core (without, it should be noted, looking anywhere near Maori beliefs in these areas) set him apart.

It could be argued that Holcroft's antimodern tendencies displaced his central point in *The Deepening Stream*. He was an inquisitive critic imbued with passion and little direction, capable of asserting that 'Few things are more dismaying to me than the thought of a spurious culture, composed of notions and novelties brought in from other lands, and failing to generate any original life of its own because there is no native strength which can absorb the alien elements and give them new values in the affirmations of a local spirit.'<sup>70</sup> In attempting to force the development of a sophisticated and significant local culture, Holcroft was often led into prose that appeared to his contemporaries to be not only plaintive and unnecessary, but badly written. The main objections to Holcroft's writing lay in his appropriation of antimodern positions like those of Herbert Carr, Rudolf Otto and Havelock Ellis. These influences made *The Deepening Stream* difficult for uninitiated readers. Indeed, it is surprising that he continued to try to import antimodern ideas from Europe instead of looking to Maori spirituality or more pointedly (since writers of the 1930s were sensitive about trifling attempts to use Maori spirituality and iconography) to America, where Emerson and Thoreau had articulated a nature philosophy that appears at first glance to be extraordinarily well suited to New Zealand.

Despite being criticized frequently, however, Monte Holcroft and *The Deepening Stream* have failed to elicit any extended discussions of the author's philosophy and its relationship to his critical stance. Stuart Murray comes close in his discussion of Holcroft in *Never a Soul at Home*, but Holcroft only appears in relation to Ursula Bethell and Eileen Duggan (whom he staunchly supported). Murray recognizes Holcroft's attempt to formulate a 'cultural psychology' for New Zealand and his orientation towards the land as a source of creative energy, but the discussion is brief and Murray concerns himself with the entire trilogy rather than attempting to identify *The Deepening Stream* as a ground-breaking and canonical text.<sup>71</sup> It is necessary to keep in mind the critics' assertions that Holcroft had a habit of 'offering a symbol and calling it a cause' and clouded his writing with opaque references.<sup>72</sup> But the importance of *The Deepening Stream* to New Zealand literature generally, and our history of ideas in particular, demands attention.

Chapter one of *The Deepening Stream* covered only six pages (none of the eight chapters was longer than 11 pages), and presented an outline of New Zealand as a young nation tied 'to the capitalist structure of other lands,

especially Britain'.<sup>73</sup> Holcroft viewed New Zealand as a symbol of remoteness and progressive social experimentation, populated by cinema goers, gamblers and travellers; a 'microcosmic'<sup>74</sup> attempt to create a 'British community . . . in the southern Pacific'.<sup>75</sup> The lack of a genuine proletariat or serious class divisions further suggested to Holcroft that New Zealand might be a symbol of a future socialism 'of long and steady growth'.<sup>76</sup> This notion of growth was as important to Holcroft as it was to McCormick; New Zealand culture was envisaged as a branch of the British trunk. The conception was natural for most mid-century intellectuals in New Zealand (as elsewhere in the Commonwealth) because it implicitly suggested that success would arrive eventually, with appropriate toil. Holcroft stated that 'I have always believed that a nation must pass through bitter struggle before it can achieve any real strength of soul'.<sup>77</sup>

There were obvious difficulties associated with Holcroft's conception of national growth, especially in the context of the totalitarian states that were threatening global stability at the time he was writing; the parallels with German nationalism in particular are obvious, if slightly uncomfortable. Holcroft referred to a 'national ethos' that could be discerned through music, art and literature in the older nations like Italy and Germany, a concept also representative of a bond between the individual and the collective mind.<sup>78</sup> Yet he was unable to reconcile this belief in a national soul with the prevalent tendency in Europe at the time towards fascism and totalitarian control. This aspect of Holcroft's thought exposes a direct lineage to the post-Kantian German idealism of Herder and the New Zealanders' various prevarications on the subject. Hegel, for instance, while suggesting a means of categorizing the nationalist urge, was seen by Holcroft to have betrayed his logic with 'German prejudices' that were later expressed (differently but more forcefully) in 'the declamations of the diseased Nietzsche!'<sup>79</sup> And yet Holcroft was at one with these writers in viewing nationalism as nothing more or less than 'a condition of survival' against the inexorable advance of history.<sup>80</sup> He believed that '[t]he soul of a nation is that indestructible work of the collective spirit which can knit a people into a unified group and strengthen it against the struggles and calamities from which no age can hope to escape'.<sup>81</sup> This is the kind of logic that infused German antimodernism with its fascist tendencies and it is instructive to recognize that New Zealand (through Holcroft and *The Deepening Stream*) has witnessed the success of precisely the same ideas. The similarities can be put down to factors inherent in the nation-building process (Germany and New Zealand were both relatively young nations) and differences to the fact that antimodernism has largely remained both apolitical and culturally marginal in New Zealand.

Holcroft's defence against this contradiction in his logic provides another viewpoint. In effect, he simply deferred to New Zealand's provincial status in relation to Britain, frequently suggesting that New Zealand had not yet discovered its soul.<sup>82</sup> In this manner the contradictions largely disappeared, because Holcroft's argument was related to a Dominion (as opposed to a nation) whose very title suggested a diminution of responsibility. Holcroft viewed New Zealand as an adolescent nation at best and was in favour of a solidification of the provincial stance rather than an outright declaration

of creative independence.<sup>83</sup> The attainment of responsibility (in intellectual respects) would follow the discovery of a New Zealand soul. Although Holcroft did not believe he could discover it on his own he was clearly interested in getting the process underway by prompting New Zealanders to 'make a new journey into the wilderness'.<sup>84</sup>

Throughout *The Deepening Stream* this element of Holcroft's thought was extended. In chapter two he contrasted New Zealanders' interest in outdoor pursuits such as amateur botany, holidays in motor camps and mountaineering with an underlying complacency in the population that eschewed a sentimental attachment to the land. Because his philosophy was inherently antimodern, this lack of assimilation to the land was suggestive to Holcroft of a much deeper issue. Tourist brochures and tiki appeared to rest against more 'sinister' reminders of 'The Primeval Shadow' like the bush of Westland.<sup>85</sup> Holcroft used ephemeral, transitory images of New Zealand popular culture to draw attention to the reality behind them. It was characteristic of his prose that he set up binaries such as this, between surface and depth, light and dark, old and new. The technique was effective in that it aided in understanding through the use of a simple juxtaposition of images, but many readers were affronted by apparently bald associations arrived at through this process. Bill Pearson was one of several readers who felt that Holcroft was creating a cult of emptiness and dissociation that was anathema to the more developed cities of the North Island, where such finds were only accessible by archaeological excavation.<sup>86</sup> The point was basically valid, but it misrepresented Holcroft's inherently metaphysical conception of reality. Holcroft was attempting to search for first principles that could direct him towards an apprehension of the New Zealand soul. Antimodern materialism is hardly dependent upon the presence of natural fecundity.

An indication of the depth of Holcroft's antimodern sensibility lies in his reference to Pringle-Pattison's work *The Idea of God* (1916).<sup>87</sup> Pringle-Pattison's book contained one chapter in particular that is essential to a proper understanding of Holcroft's belief system: 'Man as Organic to the World'.<sup>88</sup> Placing himself in opposition to a line of philosophers from Descartes onwards, Pringle-Pattison asserted that the central failure of modern philosophy was a failure to view man as 'organic to the world',<sup>89</sup> meaning that earlier philosophers were wrong in their attribution of human experience to a cognitive process between the knower and the known, thereby 'extruding man from the world he seeks to know'.<sup>90</sup> In Pringle-Pattison's philosophy, reality was construed as *sui generis*,<sup>91</sup> so that any reference to cognition as an interaction between knower and known was simply a 'mystification'.<sup>92</sup> *The Idea of God* suggested to Pringle-Pattison (and Holcroft) that '[t]he word cognition misleads us by its exclusive reference to the object as something external; we forget that cognition is an experience of the soul'.<sup>93</sup> In this conception of reality, intellect and thought were viewed as continuous and inextricable from a world system in which mind and nature are believed to be in organic community. Holcroft's understanding of the relationship between intellectuals and their nation was inherently metaphysical, based upon a nature mysticism that asserted the primacy of experience *sui generis*. To a person with an inherently metaphysical (as opposed to Cartesian)

belief system, nature and mind are inextricable, so criticism of Holcroft on the grounds of divergent geography was inadequate. Moreover, his stance has been typical of many New Zealand cultural commentators over the years who have repeatedly asserted that their country possesses some kind of sublime, primeval quality that defies (European) attempts to subjugate it to their will. Although undoubtedly 'antimodern', it is not in and of itself an inappropriate position to adopt.

Several other influences on Holcroft's philosophy come to the fore in this context, especially Havelock Ellis's work *The Dance of Life* (1923). Holcroft read this exceptionally popular work while in London and later attributed it to his subsequent interest in philosophy.<sup>94</sup> Ellis's philosophy was everywhere present, especially in his praise for thinkers like the Chinese philosopher Lao-tze. Lao-tze's writing was translated by Havelock Ellis into chapters on dancing, thinking, writing, religion and morals. Like Pringle-Pattison, Ellis was a materialist who refused to separate nature and mind, hence the reference in his title to dancing as both a literal and figurative embodiment of human existence. Holcroft's attempts in *The Deepening Stream* to enunciate first principles of human existence on the islands of New Zealand was reminiscent of Ellis's attempts to distill an 'essential reality'. Herein lies the central tension in Holcroft's philosophy (like the colonial and post-colonial contexts more generally), the dualism that led critics like D.M. Anderson to present him as a contradictory muddle of materialist and idealist.<sup>95</sup> His search for first principles pointed to a basic problem encountered by many of his contemporaries. Whereas Pringle-Pattison and Ellis employed first principles to formulate a globally significant philosophy, Holcroft centred on New Zealand. He used his metaphysical belief system to explore what he perceived to be foregrounds to a national philosophy, in effect fencing off an area of study solely in the interests of purposive cultural inquiry. Such a move was natural and defensible in the colonial context, but would have been even more justifiable if he had been capable of articulating the more radical (antimodern) implications of his perspective.

The most obvious foreground to any New Zealand philosophy in Holcroft's mind was nature, as a symbol of both primitive impulses and the unknown. Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) was important in this context. Holcroft mentioned Otto's work in the last offering in *The Deepening Stream* trilogy, *Encircling Seas* (1946), while discussing the 'supernatural'.<sup>96</sup> In particular, Holcroft referred to Otto's development of the word 'numinous' to refer to apparently *a priori* human reactions to nature and the unknown.<sup>97</sup> Otto described the numinous as an emotional and psychological but non-rational reaction to 'the Holy',<sup>98</sup> a 'perfectly *sui generis*'<sup>99</sup> attraction to the 'Wholly Other'<sup>100</sup> that engendered a sense of mystery and fascination. Holcroft's intellectual debt to Otto (and the post-Kantian and romantic traditions Otto represented) leached through his prose, with reference to 'The Primeval Shadow',<sup>101</sup> 'the struggle against the forest'<sup>102</sup> or later and more directly, to 'Mystery and Conflict'<sup>103</sup> and 'an inrush of the ancient barbarism'.<sup>104</sup> Nature mysticism and primitivism were common to the Europe that Holcroft visited during the 1920s, coalescing in its most celebrated form in Weimar Germany and the writings of Thomas

Mann, Franz Kafka and (later) Carl Jung.<sup>105</sup> Although Holcroft's training was sadly lacking — at best he could be described as an amateur philosopher — the project that he undertook retains significance, perhaps even more so because of his intellectual debts to central European philosophers.

New Zealand literary nationalists like Holcroft were usually British in outlook, reflecting their colonial legacy and looking to Europe for cultural models, despite being part of a broader process of 'cultural decolonization'<sup>106</sup> prompted by access to American and other post-colonial literatures.<sup>107</sup> Stuart Murray has identified a strong element in Holcroft and other early New Zealand literary nationalists of 'Settler Modernity',<sup>108</sup> a local variant of European (and, more precisely, British) modernism represented in literature by T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf.<sup>109</sup> Chapters three ('Before the Earthquake') and four ('Petrol Fumes') of *The Deepening Stream* were particularly reminiscent of British modernism and H.G. Wells in particular. The two chapters were rambling and conjectural, and 'Petrol Fumes' in particular has been ridiculed for the use of the car as a symbol for global decline.<sup>110</sup> *The Deepening Stream* contained a passage in which Holcroft readily identified the level of his own interest in cars: 'I recognize the value of the motor, and am ready to take advantage of its mobility whenever I am offered a ride in somebody else's machine'.<sup>111</sup> Pointing out the pitfalls of time payments and so-called easy terms on motor cars as well as houses, Holcroft suggested it was symptomatic of a society that 'gradually builds up a state of mind in which the capitalization of unearned income, the anticipation of profit and other financial expedients, can be accepted with equanimity'.<sup>112</sup> Holcroft's attempt to use the motor car as a symbol of New Zealand's experience of the modern world was not successful because New Zealand at the time lacked the urban complexity necessary to carry the central premise of the symbol, but it is highly reflective of his antimodern antipathy towards mechanization and commercial capitalism.

Symbolized by the motor car, modernity in *The Deepening Stream* appeared as evidence of an old world in decline, with New Zealand positioned as 'an appanage [sic] of a decaying civilization'.<sup>113</sup> Pessimism like this was typical of early twentieth-century modernism in Europe, reflected in its starkest forms in the nihilistic Dada movement and antimodern novels like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) that posited an inhuman future dominated by machines and totalitarian control. In Britain H.G. Wells had been writing novels of future world domination since *The Time Machine* (1895), suggesting that scientific advance might lead the world to catastrophe. In these visions of the future, machines were viewed as symbols of a dysfunctional and decaying world. In a similar tone Holcroft surmized that New Zealand might replace Britain at the centre of a new empire after the old world had been devastated by aerial bombing.<sup>114</sup> He wondered 'whether the agony of the old world might not be the condition of a future expansion in the Pacific'.<sup>115</sup> At all times future oriented, Holcroft could not help engaging in speculation over the implications of another world war for New Zealand, clearly seeing the possibility of major gains. Futurism and science fiction have had a limited history in New Zealand, but the tendency is clearly present, from Julius Vogel's *Anno Domini 2000* (1889)<sup>116</sup> to an entire periodical one hundred years later.<sup>117</sup>

Holcroft's visions of a future New Zealand may appear dated now, but the tendency reflected the author's belief in the role of the artist as a seer, a cultural interpreter. He felt that 'the spirit of a country, recognizable in history and literature, is a kind of collective definition undertaken by a line of creative writers'.<sup>118</sup> Such a quotation reflects Holcroft's debt to the British critical tradition and in particular the concept of the writer as seer associated with Matthew Arnold and later literary critics. A reinforcement of Holcroft's debt to this group of critics lies in his articulation of education as a means by which modern society might be saved. Like Q.D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) and her husband F.R. Leavis in *For Continuity* (1933) — and antimodernists in America<sup>119</sup> — Holcroft prescribed quality education in order to avoid the development of 'a barren criticism and a naive aesthetic'.<sup>120</sup> Although clearly influenced by Leavisite thought, 'A Wider Basis for Education' differed from the Leavises in its attention to particulars of the New Zealand context, leading Holcroft to assert the need for regionalism and education tailored to community needs.<sup>121</sup> His aim was to develop an educational infrastructure that would promote creativity through its diversity, a far remove from the Leavises' attempts to inculcate a system of mass education on a national or even international scale. Holcroft drew support for his arguments from a recognition of the efficacy of education in the development of totalitarian control (once again, Holcroft was both attracted and repelled by the nationalisms of Europe).<sup>122</sup> His stated aim in educating society was a belief that mere cultural importation was not enough, because '[t]he shape of cultural mutations must be defined first of all in the unconscious of society'.<sup>123</sup> Like the antimodernists of Britain and America, Holcroft saw it as 'The Writer's Task' to draw these unconscious changes to the surface.

Holcroft was well aware of the toil involved with 'The Writer's Task', especially in a country 12,000 miles from its major tradition. He had experienced first-hand the effect of isolation on an aspiring writer, and his sixth chapter read autobiographically in its depictions of the lone New Zealand writer toiling against an indifferent society. *The Deepening Stream* actually reflected a change in Holcroft's orientation as a writer, from novels to criticism. He began to feel as though criticism could extend the experience of a good poem and make a real contribution to the birth of a local literature. It was important to him that New Zealand should have well-equipped critics who could avoid 'intellectual rash[es]'<sup>124</sup> like Marxism, thereby ensuring that creative visions of New Zealand would 'transcend the limits of emasculated theory'.<sup>125</sup> Like McCormick, Holcroft also did a great deal in *The Deepening Stream* and subsequent literary-critical publications to privilege the 1930s as the birthplace of New Zealand literature, bringing Bethell and Duggan into the public consciousness and noting the centrality of figures like A.R.D. Fairburn and D'Arcy Cresswell (who had failed to elicit critical praise). It is widely held that Holcroft was the only critic of note in New Zealand at the time.<sup>126</sup>

Holcroft was essentially an essayist (he confessed that it was a style suited to him from a very early age), and in line with his developing views on criticism he soon came to see the essay form itself as an important tool.<sup>127</sup> In a published lecture to the Workers' Education Association (WEA) at Otago University in

1947, Holcroft made his views on the essay form quite clear, articulating at the same time what can be seen as a manifesto for future literary criticism in New Zealand. It is for this reason that his writing has been consistently identified as a central element in the ‘critical triumvirate’. Despite the fact that Holcroft was never particularly esteemed as a writer or intellectual, he has frequently been identified as crucial to the development of a New Zealand literary aesthetic because of his generally healthy attitude towards intellectual development in a small nation like New Zealand. For example, he suggested in the lecture to the WEA that ‘in New Zealand, where other forms of creative writing — with the exception of poetry — are still in a nascent condition, the essay can be used as a clearing house for ideas. If the ideas are of doubtful value, they can be argued and refuted; but the argument must be at a high level, and the process will then be, in effect, a clarification of purpose within the arts’.<sup>128</sup>

The final two chapters of *The Deepening Stream*, ‘Experience and Ideas’ and ‘The Adventurous Mind’, presented his vision of how New Zealand should best go about this task of cultural and artistic development. In particular, Holcroft opposed a decline into ‘intellectual nihilism’ that might sever ties with the past, and felt that an empirical reference to history solidified cultural interpretation.<sup>129</sup> Despite being worried about the global situation, Holcroft wrote that New Zealand was largely shielded from the ‘gospel’ of mass opinion by an egalitarian and stubbornly individualistic spirit.<sup>130</sup> Unfortunately, he also felt that the historical conditions of New Zealand’s settlement ‘created the conditions for a slow mental advance’, a factor compounded by a lack of an academic tradition to attract top writers.<sup>131</sup> It becomes clear in these final chapters that Holcroft was genuinely concerned about New Zealand’s lack of intellectual maturity. His belief that Britain and the rest of the old world might be destroyed, combined with the prevalence of dangerous ideological ‘rashes’ like Marxism, makes this understandable: from where was New Zealand to gain protection if the modern world imploded? It was a dilemma which worked itself out — in the direction of America — during the war.

In Holcroft’s mind, the only way to reverse this paucity of intellectual activity (and hence secure New Zealand for future generations) was through the development of a ‘New Zealand metaphysic’ that could act as ‘a centralizing effort of intellect that would be followed by an enrichment of the general culture’.<sup>132</sup> Revealingly, and in line with his interest in philosophers like Pringle-Pattison and Herbert Carr, Holcroft claimed he was rejecting the modern philosophy of A.N. Whitehead and called for a return to the thought of Hobbes, Berkeley and Hume.<sup>133</sup> He exhorted his readers to leave the intellectual shallows and develop a national philosophy in line with the historical circumstances of settlement. Although few would claim that New Zealand has achieved anything like consensus about those circumstances, there is evidence (most notably the Waitangi Tribunal) to suggest that Holcroft’s vision has been at least partially realized.

Although at times harshly criticized for both his writing style and philosophy, Holcroft’s ideas have survived and continue to provide literary critics and authors alike with a sense of their relation to the geography and culture of New Zealand. There was an inherent dualism in Holcroft, however. Not only did his

prose often proceed through an examination of binaries, there was an innate contradiction in his logic between a universal materialism and nationalistic idealism, a tension that is in my opinion one of the primary indicators of an antimodern sensibility. Holcroft was a classic representative of the antimodern worldview, torn between the particular and the universal in both physical and metaphysical terms. Of course *The Deepening Stream* itself had an essentially historical quality. Placed in tandem with McCormick's *Letters and Art*, Holcroft's essay 'helped establish the boundaries for what a local literature might be', while at the same time prompting healthy and open critical debate that invigorated the local intellectual community.<sup>134</sup>

In examining the aesthetic that lay behind New Zealand's Pakeha cultural traditions, Holcroft was attempting to raise New Zealand literary criticism to the status of art, using antimodernism to posit searching moral questions about New Zealand's aesthetic inheritance and future. Although his intensely self-reflexive stance created an essay that was opaque to many of his readers, and many of his conclusions appear trite and over-zealous, he provided New Zealand with the hint of a tradition that has an immeasurably rich cultural genealogy. In searching after a New Zealand aesthetic, Holcroft presented his readers with his innermost thoughts, his innermost feelings about his nation and its culture. That his stance was essentially (if not self-consciously) antimodern should give us pause for reflection when we consider New Zealand's cultural and intellectual heritage.

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## NOTES

1 M.H. Holcroft, *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand*, Christchurch, 1940.

2 M.H. Holcroft, *The Waiting Hills*, Wellington, 1943; *Encircling Seas: An Essay*, Christchurch, 1946; *Discovered Isles: A Trilogy*, Christchurch, 1950.

3 T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880–1920*, New York, 1981, first publ. 1963, pp.59–96.

4 See, for example: Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, Frankfurt, 1987; Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a Postliberal Order*, Lawrence, Kan., 1996; Lynda Jessup, *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing The Boundaries Of Modernity*, Toronto, 2001.

5 Lears, p.45.

6 Shulamit Volkov, *The Rise of Popular Antimodernism in Germany: The Urban Master Artisans, 1873–1896*, Princeton, 1978.

7 The topic requires an essay in itself (and has been approached from the cultural studies perspective by Jonathan Lamb already), but the antimodern position imagined New Zealand as part of the South Pacific sublime. Ever since the voyages of Abel Tasman in the seventeenth century, European geographers and explorers had suggested that the islands might be the lost promontory of *terra australis incognita*, the great southern continent. Until the voyages of James Cook in the following century, the islands known as Staten Land held the beguiling possibility that the world map was missing a vast and fecund continent. From the earliest years of oceanic exploration, in other words, northern hemisphere intellectuals represented New Zealand as a place of unknown wonders and, in all likelihood, sublime terrors. Between 1642 and 1840, in a strange process that reoriented Europe's antimodern gaze towards the antipodes, New Zealand became a global signifier for the sublime.

8 Lears, p.7.

9 Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, New Haven and London, 1997, p.142.

10 Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*, Oxford, 2001, pp.57–107.

11 Christopher Reed, *Not At Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, London, 1996, p.11.

12 F.R. Leavis established his career as a literary critic on the notion of organicism and it was to hold great interest for New Zealand cultural nationalists during the 1930s.

13 Lears, p.32.

14 Lears, pp.17–124.

15 Lears, pp.3–7.

16 McAllister, *passim*.

17 James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland, 2001, pp.251–4.

18 Caroline Daley, *Leisure and Pleasure: Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900–1960*, Auckland, 2003, p.4.

19 James Watson, 'The History of Leisure, Recreation and Tourism in New Zealand', in Harvey C. Perkins and Grant Cushman, eds, *Leisure, Recreation and Tourism*, Auckland, 1994, p.21.

20 See Daley, chs 4 and 5.

21 Edmund Hillary, *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win*, London, 1977, p.26.

22 Lawrence Jones, *Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture 1932–1945*, Wellington, 2003.

23 *ibid.*, p.173.

24 It would not be stretching the point to suggest that it applies to our pre-European history as well, at least as far as the voyages of discovery, the post-Kantian sublime and *terra australis incognita* are concerned.

25 Rachel Barrowman, *A Popular Vision: The Arts and the Left in New Zealand 1930–1950*, Wellington, 1991, p.56.

26 Brian Head, 'Introduction: Intellectuals in Australian Society', in Brian Head and James Walter, eds, *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society*, Melbourne, 1988, p.27.

27 W. D'Arcy Cresswell, preface to *Modern Poetry and the Ideal*, Auckland, 1934. Emphasis in the original.

- 28 Barrowman, p.58.  
 29 *ibid.*, p.45.  
 30 Stuart Murray, *Never a Soul at Home: New Zealand Literary Nationalism and the 1930s*, Wellington, 1998, p.30.  
 31 Steven [sic] Eldred-Grigg, 'A Bourgeois Blue? Nationalism and Letters from the 1920s to the 1950s', *Landfall*, 41, 3 (1987), p.294.  
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