

Memories of Early Years and Other Writings
by Douglas Lilburn; edited by Robert Hoskins.
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Reviewed by Chris Bourke

Douglas Lilburn's Scottish-born father, a successful settler farmer, said of his son's chosen profession, 'If it had to be music, couldn't it have been bagpipes?'¹ Lilburn, described by a memorial plaque in Christchurch as 'the father of New Zealand music', contemplated becoming a writer if his musical compositions had fallen on deaf ears. He showed early promise when a Christmas poem written for a *Wanganui Chronicle* competition won second prize and 10 shillings, just after his 12th birthday. With a child's delight, 'Christmas Day' describes the comforting annual ritual as celebrated on his parents' farm, Drysdale: 'At dinner time you eat your fill / Of turkey and green peas, / And then you lie upon the lawn / In attitudes of ease' (p. 39).

Lilburn's adult writing is also evocative and descriptive but, unlike his quaint juvenilia, his most important essays are almost timeless. The two best-known, originally written as talks in 1946 and 1969, were given the titles 'A Search for Tradition' and 'A Search for a Language' when they were first published as booklets in the mid-1980s by the Alexander Turnbull Library. They were republished as an elegant gift book in 2011, with an introduction by John Mansfield Thomson and a coda by Jack Body. The talks considered the issues faced by composers finding a voice and a vocation in New Zealand: 'Tradition' was written in the wake of his early successes as a composer, when he emerged as the musical voice of the 1930s' cultural nationalists; 'Language' written when internationalism seemed more pertinent.

In this latest iteration, the two pieces provide the backbone of a collection of Lilburn's prose writing, many of which were originally written as radio talks and tributes. *Memories of Early Years and Other Writings* is like a jewel box, in its presentation and its contents. One can rustle around and always be delighted with what emerges, be it a musical transcription, the colour reproduction of paintings by his close friends Rita Angus and Evelyn Page, an anecdote in one of the tributes to his colleagues and mentors, or an illuminating footnote by the editor, Robert Hoskins.

The largest jewel gives the book its title. 'Memories of Early Years' was written from 1986 to 1988, when Lilburn was in his early 70s. He describes his childhood on Drysdale and in Wanganui itself; the 10,000 words finish as he leaves to begin boarding school at Waitaki Boy's High, in distant Oamaru. These notes towards a memoir are picturesque and poignant: a sense of isolation is well established before his departure. The nostalgic, reflective descriptions of his charmed early life are almost Proustian. They are written as sensuous vignettes, too precise to be scattered thoughts.

Lilburn was born in 1915, the last child of seven. While his upbringing was Presbyterian staunch, the family enjoyed the privileged life of early settlers who, through hard work and fortuitous timing rather than inheritance, had become very successful. By the time Lilburn was born, his father Robert had acquired vast holdings: Drysdale itself was 8000 acres, and he also owned smaller farms in the district. Much younger than his siblings, thoughtful, bookish and myopic, Lilburn's early memories suggest he was adventurous and inquisitive, like a well-spoken Huck Finn, uncomfortable in a starched collar.

With Mount Ruapehu on the horizon, Drysdale had four waterfalls, a big swimming hole, a two-acre orchard of fruit trees and a pataka for storing grains, home-cured bacon, onions. There were tree-houses, mud slides and many picnics. Although teased and manipulated by his older siblings, he enjoys their Zane Grey and Edgar Rice Burroughs novels, and the variety of music that his sisters play on the piano or a windup gramophone. Slowly, he became aware of

a 'social difference', where his privilege meant he was separated from making friends with local children. At the age of seven, his 'paradise security collapsed suddenly' when his parents leave for a two-year visit to the old country (p. 32). He forms a close bond with his guardians – his oldest brother, and his lively, warm-spirited wife – but this new security is unsettled again with the return of his emotionally austere parents. His father now retired, they leave Drysdale to settle in Wanganui; Lilburn's attendance at a Quaker primary school gives him a Thoreau-like respect for the environment, but otherwise the only respite from affluent gloom are the annual summer forays to the family bach in Titahi Bay. When the decision is made that he should go to a distant boarding school, the only words of advice from his father are, 'Well, son, you are going out into the world now, and you'll have to learn to stand alone' (p. 44).

Lilburn's 1946 talk considers the place in society and the world of New Zealand's composers and, effectively, artists of every discipline. 'A Search for Tradition' was given at the first Cambridge Summer School of Music, on the banks of the Waikato. Among those present were students such as Edwin Carr, David Farquhar, Dorothea Franchi and Larry Pruden, all of whom would be prominent in the next wave of New Zealand composers. Simultaneously, the country's first national symphony orchestra was about to be formed.

Lilburn later described the talk as 'a heartfelt sort of manifesto, and it sprang from a very real musical isolation' (p. 72). He had close friends who were poets and painters, but seldom other composers. His experience studying in London in the late 1930s – after earlier music studies at the University of Canterbury – had made him reconsider his status as a New Zealand artist. He found himself a foreigner in Britain: the music of Elgar and Vaughan Williams could not mean to him what it meant to the English, and Mozart's world was 'as remote as the moon' (p. 47). Nationalism wasn't possible in New Zealand's music, he thought: there was no tradition of folk song. Our creative problems had to be worked out in a totally new context.

Lilburn admitted that he knew little about Maori music: 'in its purer state', it was completely foreign. He was also sceptical of earlier attempts of incorporating (post-European) Maori melodies into New Zealand compositions written according to 19th century templates. However, he thought that after a few generations, 'the circumstances that shape us may fuse some of this Polynesian quality into our own ethos' (p. 55).

The 1946 talk called for 'practical and creative' teaching of music in New Zealand's universities, and for the community to make use of its composers (p. 72). By 1969, he found there was a lot more security for composers, with many commissions available: but too much security could cause a drain on creative energy. There was 'the danger for creative minds of a creeping paralysis of academicism' (p. 73). Yet there were few composers coming through, and those that did still had difficulties finding a musical language that reflected their human experience. New technologies meant that musical influences were now international and swiftly absorbed, and with the 'constant impact of new sounds and new theory, it may become more difficult for composers to realise their own identity' (p. 75).

These two talks stand alongside Bill Pearson's 'Fretful Sleepers' as pivotal messages in a national debate that is usually just a mumble; decades after they were written, the issues they discuss are no less relevant, and the clarity with which Lilburn expresses his ideas makes them suitable for use in the secondary school curriculum.

Besides the memoir, another standout piece is about the dramatised documentary *Journey for Three*, produced by the National Film Unit in 1950 to encourage immigration (from Britain). Lilburn wrote the score, and this essay originally served as the introduction for a radio broadcast of the music. While much of it is a synopsis of the film, for an audience bereft of the images, the discussion of the role of the film composer connects with Lilburn's earlier thoughts on how composers can serve their community. The inclusion of an exquisitely transcribed, 17-page manuscript for the 'Mountain Rescue' passage from the film, is an unexpected bonus.

Other pieces in the anthology include a short history of Victoria University's pioneering Electronic Music Studios, reflections on his teacher Ralph Vaughan Williams, on Ravi Shankar before a tour that Lilburn encouraged the NZBC to sponsor, and tributes to friends and colleagues who helped shape New Zealand culture. Besides Angus and Page, the obituaries of Charles Brasch, Alex Lindsay and Maurice Clare share intimate details that enhance understanding of their creativity – and how they contributed to Lilburn's.

Hoskins's astute annotations add considerably to earlier publications of the 'Search' essays and the shorter pieces collected here. He restores passages that have been deleted, and explains obscure references. The additional context makes this handsome book a useful resource for musicologists and those exploring New Zealand studies. Lilburn was a prolific and considered writer, especially of letters: so there is still scope for another wide-ranging collection, perhaps with more modest production values.

¹Douglas Lilburn, interviewed by Chris Bourke, Thorndon, Wellington, 3 October 1985, douglaslilburn.org/interviews.html