

Towards 'Until the walls fall down'

An intended history of New Zealand Literature

1932-1963

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I would like first to look at the terms of my title. 'Towards' and 'intended' are the first operative terms. This seminar is given at the beginning of a process of intensive research, and any writing beyond notes and an outline is an intention at this point, and the outline is something to work towards, modifying and filling in.

Next there is 'New Zealand Literature, 1932-1963', with those oddly specific dates. The first is probably obvious enough, the publication of the *Phoenix* at the University of Auckland, the self-conscious beginnings of a literary movement. At the same time the date points to the Queen Street Riots, a potent symbol of social and political change. Elsie Locke, involved at least indirectly in both events, points out that there was no causal relation and yet it somehow seemed right, a response to the *zeitgeist*, that the possibility of both literary and social revolution should be raised in the same place at the same time. But, as Patrick Evans has reminded us, 1932 is also the date of the beginnings of the New Zealand Women Writers' Society, a group most definitely not included in the mostly male plans for a literary revolution and not afterwards seen by those male writers as part of the history that they were writing.

But what about 1963? If 1932 is arbitrary (after all, Allen Curnow starts his canonical period anthology in 1923, with R.A.K. Mason's first 'publication'), 1963 is more so. What I have in mind is the publication of Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat*, the novel that 'the age demanded' (or at least that the Caxton and *Phoenix* writers demanded), the period's long-awaited version of 'the Great New Zealand Novel', and a good closing marker for it. Of course nothing is as neat as that, and writings before 1963 anticipated the 'Post-provincial' period that was to follow, just as writings after that date continued in the 'Provincial' mode, looking back to the writings of the founders.

Those inclusive dates point to two generations, and crucial to my intended history is the distinction between them. The first is that of the self-appointed makers of a national literature, mostly born after 1900 and before World War I. They arrive in three waves. First there is a small group beginning in Auckland in the mid- and late-1920s - Mason (born 1905), A.R.D. Fairburn (1904), and, off to one side and associated by them with the maligned older generation, Robin Hyde (1906). Then come the *Phoenix*-Unicorn-Griffin and the *Tomorrow*-Caxton groups in Auckland and Christchurch, (and some of their outlying friends), arriving between 1932 and 1935, incorporating Fairburn and Mason, and including M.H. Holcroft (1902), Frank Sargeson (1903), Roderick Finlayson (1904), Winston Rhodes (1905), E.H. McCormick (1906), Charles Brasch (1909), Basil Dowling (1910), James Bertram (1910), Ian Milner (1911), Curnow (1911), John Mulgan (1911), and Denis Glover (1912). They are the central wave of the generation, but they are followed by a third, writers relating to them, mostly published by Caxton, first establishing themselves in the early- and mid-1940s, with the War as an interrupting factor: Greville Texidor (1902), Helen Shaw (1913), A.P. Gaskell (1913), Dan Davin (1913), John Reece Cole (1916), and G.R. Gilbert (1917).

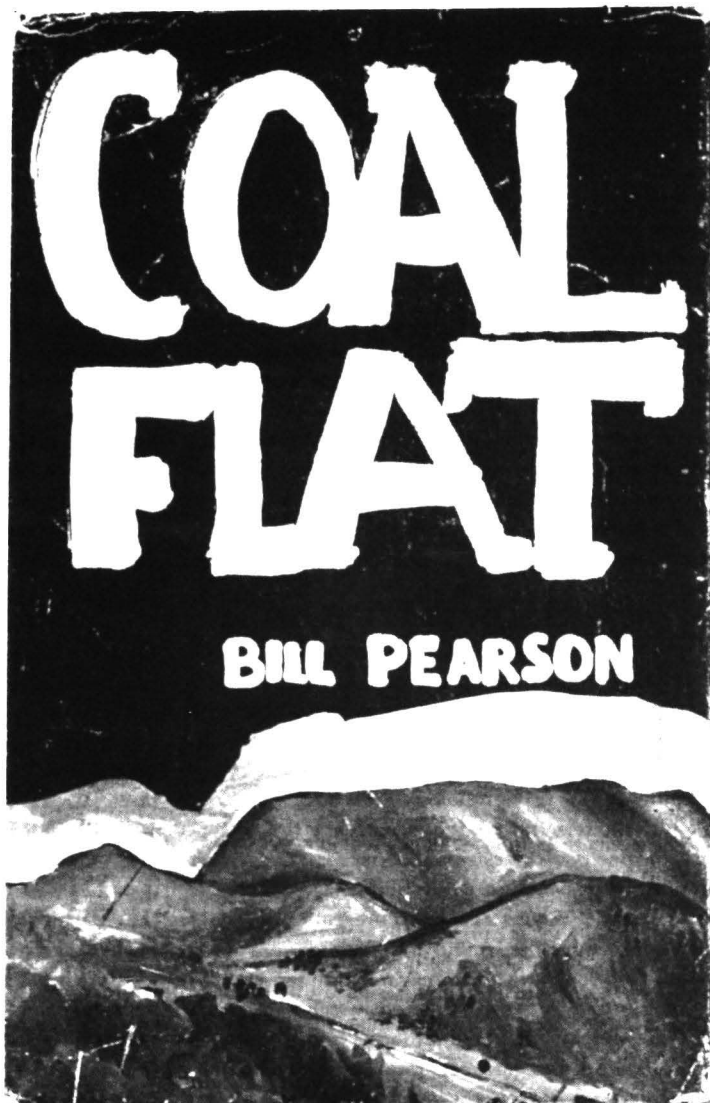
The second generation, even more overwhelmingly male-dominated than the first, is made up of writers born after World War I and before the Great Depression, who saw themselves as following on after the first generation and in some cases reacting against it or at least trying to modify its directions: Ruth Dallas (1919), Bruce Mason (1921), Hubert Witheford (1921), Maurice Duggan (1922), Ronald Hugh Morrieson (1922), Bill Pearson (1922), Keith Sinclair (1922), Kendrick Smithyman (1922), Robert Chapman (1922), Phillip Wilson (1922), David Ballantyne (1924), Janet Frame (1924), Louis Johnson (1924), Errol Brathwaite (1924), Alistair Campbell (1925), Ian Cross (1925), O.E. Middleton (1925), W.H. Oliver (1925), and James K. Baxter (1926). At the same time there is a smaller group of older writers, some of whom had tentative beginnings before or during the war, who established themselves afterwards: James Courage (1905), Sylvia

Ashton-Warner (1908), Guthrie Wilson (1911), Ruth France (1913), and M.K. Joseph (1914).

Finally, more immediately evocative than the two dates, there is that ringing phrase, 'until the walls fall down'. It is Chapman's, from the peroration of his 'Fiction and the Social Pattern' of 1953:

Meanwhile the attitude which the New Zealand writer takes to his society, and which informs his work, will continue to be based on the possibility here of a truly human ease and depth of living and on an attack on the distortions produced by an irrelevant puritanism of misplaced demands and guilts. The artist must sound his trumpet of insight until the walls of Jericho – the pattern as it is – fall down.

The point is that 'attitude which the New Zealand writer takes to his society'. We probably find the rhetoric moralistic, the biblical allusion extreme, the hope of radical social change through literature naive, but the assumption that the New Zealand writer is critical of New Zealand society is one that since the *Phoenix* generation we have taken for granted. That the writer is one who questions and subverts the patterns and myths of society seems to us almost self-evident. Yet this was not always the norm in New Zealand writing; before 1932 it was assumed that the writer shared the values and aspirations of the society. Thus in *Landfall* in 1953, Alan Mulgan, one of the survivors of the pre-*Phoenix* generation could take issue with Chapman, criticise the idea that 'deliberate sociological probing and exposure' was the proper function of literature, and insist that the writer should entertain and uplift by celebrating 'what is right' with society.¹ And a critical attitude to society was not the norm for the non-canonical writers of the period (mostly women, and a significant proportion of them born before 1900). For example, those that Terry Sturm deals with in his section on popular fiction in *The*



Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English are Rosemary Rees, Nelle Scanlan, Ngaio Marsh, Mary Scott, and Dorothy Eden for 1930-50; and Dulce Carman, Dorothy Quentin, Grace Phipps, and Mavis Winder for the 1950s. With the possible exception of Marsh, who shared some of the high culture concerns of the *Phoenix* writers, all of these writers support the very myths and patterns that Curnow and his group were trying to subvert: the glorification of the pioneers, the faith in progress, the sense of the rightness of middle-class puritan mores, 'the pattern as it is'. Perhaps Chapman's rhetoric looks less odd if we put his essay back into its cultural context.

This oppositional stance of the writer in relation to society is for me the defining characteristic of the

Above: The dustjacket of Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat* by Colin McCahon.

movement and period with which I wish to deal. The other defining ones tend to spring from or at least relate to it: the prevalence of critical realism, in prose and verse; the dominant themes of anti-puritanism, a debunking anti-myth, the sympathy for *Man Alone*, anti-materialism; the underlying dualistic structure of feeling, with the sensitive individual and Nature on one side, the dominant social pattern and its representatives on the other (although this dualism is complicated and modified by the second generation).

The intention, then, is a literary history of two generations of writers taking an oppositional stance to their society over a period of 30 years, a history of a movement, its internal relationships (there is a wonderful web of correspondence, influence, friendship, and rivalry), and in its external relationships to the environment of which it is critical. In the remainder of this seminar I wish to point towards the possible structure of such a history, and outline some of its themes.

The first section of the history might be entitled 'Repudiations and Loyalties: Ancestors and Contemporaries'. I would like to examine the repudiations through which the writers defined themselves by contrast and exclusion: the repudiation of the Georgians (as they understood that term) and the poetry of Quentin Pope's 1928 anthology *Kowhai Gold*, extending into the rejection of 'the menstrual school' of poetry, the poetry of 'brassieres and knickers' that Glover and Fairburn so maligned, with Eileen Duggan as the most formidable New Zealand representative of both the Georgian and the feminine; the repudiation of the genteel and romantic traditions in fiction represented by the writers Sargeson parodied in *Tomorrow*, such as Alan Mulgan, Hector Bolitho, or Joyce West; the repudiation of the gatekeepers of the literary establishment as they saw it, the despised 'Mulgan, Marris and Schroder'. The substantial representative figure I should like to look at especially is Mulgan.

Equally important would be the writers' chosen precursors and allies. Put next to the rejection of Duggan is the acceptance of several older writers of the 1920s as older siblings: Curnow and Glover's rather surprising acceptance of and publication of Ursula Bethell, Curnow and Finlayson's even more surprising championing of the work of D'Arcy Cresswell. Related is Curnow's appropriation of the precocious 1920s work of Mason. Put next to the rejection of the English Georgians would be the acceptance of W.H. Auden, C.Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice by Curnow and Glover and, in a more ambivalent way, by Fairburn, together with the championing of the later Yeats and Eliot as models

by Brasch, (and later there is both Curnow's and Baxter's championing of Dylan Thomas). If the overseas models and allies in verse were primarily British, those in prose were primarily American: Fairburn's holding up of *Huckleberry Finn* as model, Sargeson's choice of Sherwood Anderson, Mulgan's of Hemingway, Gilbert's of Saroyan, Ballantyne's of James T. Farrell, and, from the other side of the Atlantic, Davin's of the Joyce of *Dubliners*.

My second section might be entitled 'Constructing an Anti-myth' and would be concerned with the major themes from 1932 to 1940. I would want to look at the writers' attitudes to puritanism (with some attention as to just what they meant by that slippery term - it certainly wasn't John Milton's puritanism); to the Great Depression, with special attention to their treatment of the events of 1932; to World War I, with the revisionary texts of Hyde, Lee, Ormond Burton, and Archibald Baxter; to the international crisis of 1935-39, with the political journalism of Bertram, Milner, and Mulgan, the writings of Rewi Alley, and the political poetry of Curnow, Glover, and others (much of which remains interred in the files of *Tomorrow*, having been excluded from the collected or selected poems); to 'the unhistoric story' of New Zealand history, a recurring concern not only of Curnow but of Cresswell, Fairburn, Finlayson, Sargeson and Hyde, culminating in Sinclair's verse and his Penguin *History of New Zealand*, surely one of the key texts of the period (while the whole set of historical attitudes would need to be contrasted to those of Scanlan and the historical novelists and romancers).

My third section would probably be entitled 'Interregnum' and would deal with the writings of World War II and its aftermath. There is the interesting question raised by Chapman of how much the literary front-line accounts of New Zealanders at war put aside criticism of the social pattern (removed from puritanism and its female moral guardians) and affirm something like solidarity with frontier male social values. I would want to look at the accounts by Glover, John Mulgan, Davin, Cole, Phillip Wilson, Guthrie Wilson, Joseph, Pearson, and others, and compare them to the more popular accounts such as those by Francis Jackson and Hugh Fullarton and the more literary war memoirs and histories such as those by Howard Kippenberger and Davin. Next to them I would like to put the accounts of the home front by Curnow, Sargeson, Finlayson, Texidor, Gaskell, Gilbert, and, in quite a different key, Eileen Duggan and the young Baxter.

My fourth section might be entitled 'Down the Cleared Path' and would look at writing from 1945 to



Blackwood Paul, publisher, at the time of Coal Flat.

1963, both of the second generation and the later work of the first. One concern would be the making of a poetic and a canon by Curnow, and the reaction to this by Baxter, Johnson and others, with special attention to Baxter's attempt to construct a romantic poetic opposed to Curnow's realist one. This might lead to a chapter entitled 'Two Versions of the Fall', looking at what Curnow and Baxter were actually doing in their poetry, possibly finding similarities that were not acknowledged in their prose controversy, similarities related to their common attraction to Dylan Thomas and his use of myth and archetype. Another chapter on 'The Suburban Muse' might look at 1950s poetry, especially Johnson's, and the development from Romanticism towards a suburban poetry of a different kind of social criticism from the anti-puritanism of the 1930s, tinged with that favourite 1950s theme of 'adaptation'. At some place in here there would need to be a chapter on the attempts to

make a drama: a glance back at the abortive attempts in the 1930s; the post-war stillborn literary drama of Cresswell, Curnow, and Sargeson; the heroic struggles of Bruce Mason up to *The End of the Golden Weather*. Then there might be a group of chapters on 'The Transformations of Man Alone': a glance back at the treatment of the theme by Mulgan, Hyde, Sargeson, and John A. Lee; a look at the existential turn given it by Cole, Erik de Mauny, Phillip Wilson, Guthrie Wilson, Duggan, Pearson, Redmond Wallis, the early Maurice Shadbolt, Maurice Gee, and Graham Billing; an examination of child and adolescent alone, from Sargeson and Gaskell through Ballantyne and Maurice Duggan to *Courage and Cross*. That might lead to the treatment of 'Woman Alone' and the escape into inner worlds from Hyde and Gloria Rawlinson to Helen Shaw and on to Ashton-Warner and the early novels of Frame. That finally might lead to 'Seeking out the Threads of our Lives: Towards the Great New Zealand Novel': the formation of the aesthetic of critical realism by Sargeson and Chapman; the failure of the 'sons of Frank' to write the novels for which Sargeson was looking; Sargeson's own

relative failure; the instructive careers of Davin and Ballantyne; the *annus mirabilis* of 1957-58; the saga of the writing, publication and response to *Coal Flat*. And there we are at 1963!

But there would need to be one more section, 'After the Flood', the history of the histories of the period. There might be a look at the retrospective biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs: Mulgan, Glover, Sargeson, Brasch, Frame, Ashton-Warner, Milner, Bertram, Sinclair, Fairburn, Baxter; and the fictionalised treatments of Sargeson and Frame and others. Then there is the history of the literary histories, something I would like to look at a little more closely now, to put this intended history in context. I am concerned with the history of the recognition that the period was a period and that there were two generations, and with the changing attitudes towards them. The recognition of the first was, of course, self-recognition. McCormick's Centennial volume, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, proclaimed it in its last chapter, Holcroft's Centennial essay, *The Deepening Stream*,

helped to define its agenda, and Curnow's introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45* codified the history of the leading genre and established its canon. Brasch's editorial notes in *Landfall* from 1947 onwards and Sargeson's broadcasts, essays, and reviews further defined the history. The power of this emerging consensus view can be seen in the four histories of New Zealand literature published by J.C. Reid over 25 years. His first attempt, *Creative Writing in New Zealand* (1946) acknowledges that a significant body of new writing appeared in the 1930s, but it presents this as a not entirely positive phenomenon, seeing it as an expression of a secular humanism that he finds inferior to the attitudes of Eileen Duggan, his preferred model for New Zealand writing. By the time of his 1970 essay in *The Literatures of Australia and New Zealand*, his view is very much in accord with McCormick's (as further expanded in his 1959 *New Zealand Literature: A Survey*, the period's definitive literary history). Beginning as a critic of consensus history, Reid ended by confirming it.

The second generation virtually accepted the first's view of themselves as the makers of a genuine New Zealand literature but wanted room in the history for their own concerns. The key accounts of the early 1950s, Baxter's *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry* and Chapman's *Fiction and the Social Pattern* emphasise the continuities and the shared agenda, the oppositional stance in relation to a puritan and bourgeois society, but the later accounts stress the differences. This is evident in the long Baxter and Johnson vs. Curnow paper war which ended only with Smithyman's *A Way of Saying* in 1965, which perhaps so complicated the dispute as to sink it beneath the weight of distinctions.

The radical revisionism did not happen until 1990, when most of the first generation and many of the second had died, and others of the second had stopped writing, with at least three literary generations having succeeded them. The first of those new, post-provincial generations, that of the writers born in the 1930s and early 1940s, found its primary historian in C.K. Stead (born 1932), and the second, the *Freed* generation, found it in Ian Wedde (born 1946). Whatever their differences, both accepted the basic provincial canon (with Stead especially involved in arranging it

into a hierarchy – Curnow, Sargeson, Mulgan and Frame up, Fairburn, Glover, and Brasch down), and both historicised it. The most thorough revisionism comes with Patrick Evans' *Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* in 1990, where the historicisation is both more radical and more critical. Evans affirms the existence of the period and the canon, but points up the literary politics involved in its making, the exclusions, and the restrictive assumptions. The writers' own history of the period is seen as a successful act of appropriation, not as a self-evidently true account of the making of a national literature. The *Oxford History* of the next year brings a different kind of revisionism. The generic arrangement of the multiple-author book means that it does not emphasise period as such, but its sense is strongly present not only in my account of the novel, but in MacD.P. Jackson's and Elizabeth Caffin's account of the poetry, Lydia Wevers' of the short story, Peter Gibbons' of the non-fiction, and, to a lesser extent, Howard McNaughton's of the drama. The revisionism comes not so much in a political analysis such as Evans carried out, as in putting the canonical writers and the favoured ones in the context of non-canonical writers and unfavoured ones – children's literature, non-fiction, drama, popular literature. Inevitably the provincial movement does not loom as large as it does in its own accounts.

My proposed history would follow on from these revisionist accounts, emphasising a period sense across the genres in a way that was impossible in the *Oxford History*, while taking a generically wider but chronologically narrower focus than the *Penguin*. There have been these general studies, and there have been generic ones, but not yet a period history, so this approach would aim at breaking new ground.

Such, then is an outline of intentions. Nothing, of course, ever comes out when we intend it to, or how, and there will probably be a long and painful tale of the history. But that is another story, still to reach its conclusion.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Landfall* 25 (March 1953), 58.

² *Landfall* 28 (December 1953), 293.

