

Hard Frost: Structures of Feeling in New Zealand Literature, 1908–1945

By John Newton

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Reviewed by Anna Smaill

John Newton's *Hard Frost* opens by chiming the death knell for New Zealand literature. New Zealand writing, or at least the habit of thinking about it as such – a habit instilled so carefully and well by the arbiters of cultural nationalism – is over. It is a statement that Newton communicates with both nostalgia and an occasionally vivid sense of loss. Yet it also comes with a writerly and critical relish. Opening as it does, with a corpse, it shouldn't surprise us that Newton's project (this book is the first in a trilogy of three) quickly establishes itself as a whodunnit. If this is a cold case, and these are surely bones that have been picked over many times, it is up to Newton – detective and protagonist – to justify reopening the investigation.

The task Newton has set himself in this initial book (the second will follow the *Landfall* era, from 1947-66, the third will track the “death throes” of literary nationalism in the 80s and 90s) is to look back harder at the 30s and 40s as a period that so convincingly and forcefully made itself synonymous with New Zealand literature *qua* literature. It is a contested site, now, of course, after the pitched battles of the culture wars. But Newton argues that there is useful, even vital information yet to be discovered, if only we bring “more wide-ranging and curious ways to engage with it” (14). As signalled in *Hard Frost*'s title, this endeavour will be shaped by Raymond Williams's notion that the unconscious flavour of an emergent culture – its “structure of feeling” – can be discerned via its art and literature. In turn, to understand this art, the critic must listen in to, and imagine themselves into, the interstices of cultural awareness, the elements of taste and behaviour that shape and thus necessarily constrain that production. Such historically and generationally alert acts of eavesdropping will justify and sustain Newton's return to this territory.

Hard Frost's approach is two-pronged. Newton begins by arguing that Curnow's almost single-handed invention of literary nationalism is an act of ingenuity that we have all underestimated. The cultural nationalists created a version of New Zealand writing that turned away from nationalism's Romantic roots and grafted itself instead to the more recent intellectual products of modernism. In doing so, it managed to somehow function as an egalitarian, localist project while remaining alert to modernism's elitist, individualistic, cosmopolitan and internationalist mores. What results, Newton argues, is “a unique local variant” with a hardy, “no.8 wire singularity”. This groundwork is convincing, and usefully draws on the global economic, social and sexual history that is often missing from assessment of New Zealand thought. The context is also crucial in Newton's second goal, which is to evaluate cultural nationalism's wider cost. The hardbody masculinist culture of modernism created a climate in which women writers – not just nationally, but internationally – struggled and failed to find purchase. The damage done to New Zealand literature is, Newton states, still being felt.

Hard Frost's method is more pointillist than procedural. Chapters respectively add new angles and shadings to the period's usual suspects, and in doing so build up a fresh portrait of New Zealand's particular modernist disposition. Mansfield's exclusion from the cultural nationalist canon points to the NZ anti-myth's specific intolerance for a subjective, self-delighting vision

of this country; excellent close-readings of Blanche Baughan, R.A.K Mason and Ursula Bethell offer fresh and surprising insight into the psychodrama of Curnow's curatorial vision; the way in which successive generations of women leant into and were then pushed out of mountaineering becomes an objective correlative for the shift toward a strictly homosocial literature.

Williams's intuitive methodology encourages the exploration, in Gallagher and Greenblatt's words, of the "cul-de-sacs where unrealized possibilities were stranded". This is put to particularly good work in Newton's examination of the toll the period's masculinism took on male writers. An engaging chapter is devoted to exploring the differing ways in which the careers of Fairburn and Glover were blighted by the same "hard frost" that chilled Robin Hyde's work and life. Crucially, in placing New Zealand literary nationalism within an historical and international context, Newton reminds us that its key players were not just agents, but themselves acted upon and at times inhibited by powerful currents of thinking and taste. It is a necessary corrective to the accusatory criticism of the 90s, which – as he states – often fails to discriminate between shared cultural attitudes and individual inclinations.

Yet neither is Newton interested in excuses. If anything – as his chapter on Robin Hyde demonstrates – this is an approach that sharpens a sense of culpability and loss. In total, *Hard Frost* carves out a space for criticism in which reading with an eye to intention – so long a New Critical and post-structuralist dirty word – is actually enabling and enlightening. A reading that is alert to the writer's intention also forces the critic to approach the text with their own, human, investment. Having a "feeling" about a writer's intent – listening in for those clotted spaces where biography and language meet – requires critical audacity. One's ear is on the line: and there is thus, suddenly, something at stake, something to be risked.

This in part explains why, as critical texts go, *Hard Frost* is such a page turner. Newton is prepared to make arguments. And we are interested, of course, in whether he will pull them off. We also begin to see that for Newton, who is a poet – and whose own reading journey is a minor, though consistent, thread in this text – Raymond Williams's methodology has another form of appeal. The combination of "constant alertness", "curiosity" and historical rigour required in order to read for "structures of feeling" begins to suggest the critic as a kind of artist in their own right. Newton is open about his own involvement in the narrative, and it is largely invigorating to read a criticism anchored in the personal, in which declarations of individual taste are sifted along with other evidence and argument. Occasionally, though, the literary-history-as-subterranean-portrait-of-the-author risks feeling a tad claustrophobic. At times I found myself wishing to shrug off the critic's presence at my shoulder, to challenge his experience as the rather too forceful measure of my own.

The text's self-consciousness also at times leads to an odd sort of imbalance. *Hard Frost* spends a great deal of energy on the positioning of argument, on the negotiation of stance and space, yet I often left the book hungry for more, and more attentive, close reading, for more time spent with the literature itself. Occasionally, too, the limits Newton places on his own investigation felt oddly circumscribed. This is most conspicuous in the chapter on Sargeson. Here, Newton spends considerable time delineating the historical and social context in which Sargeson wrote as a gay man in mid-century New Zealand. It is crucial to measure the writer's intention, and the extent to which he controls the not-so-subtle double *entendres* of his fiction, Newton

argues: “to appreciate the game he’s playing, we need to ask: *What does he think he’s saying, and to whom?*” So far, so good. But here, the role of the critic as self-effacing eavesdropper is second-guessed. Suddenly hide-bound by empirical evidence, Newton suggests that we cannot read these texts as *consciously* concealing their sexual subtext because nowhere in Sargeson’s archives can he find an overt wink-wink, nudge-nudge reference to this game:

If he was aiming a joke at realism, there must have been someone to enjoy it with. But after weeks spent combing the Sargeson archive, I am forced to conclude that no such reader existed. There is no one whom Sargeson digs in the ribs, no reader whom we hear him check in with in order to alert them to the subtext and to make sure they’re getting it. ... The hidden truth betrayed by these stories – the blockage, the pathology, the compromising secret, the great ‘reveal’ about Sargeson’s project and the way it shapes our mid-century fiction – is more scandalous than sex. It is that *Sargeson can’t read*. (298)

While I admire the narrative drive that bubbles beneath this passage, as revelations go it feels undercooked. Newton frowns on any side-stepping of this question via “the deconstructive catechism” of undecidability. He is adamant: if the undercurrent of Sargeson’s work is “unconscious”, then, quite simply, “Sargeson himself cannot hear them.” Yet, as with the slide between conscious and unconscious awareness, there are surely many shades in the spectrum between conscious and unconscious intent. Neither am I convinced that there is a direct or necessary connection between conscious intent and the impulse to discuss – and write about – one’s literary goals, particularly in prudish, homophobic 1940s New Zealand.

And this is where it would seem that post-structuralist “undecidability” might – in the context of a more personally engaged discussion of intentionality – be rehabilitated in the notion of decorum. Even when one’s own taste and argument is on the line, is there a necessary adroit, last-minute sidestep that behoves the attentive, curious, and *motivated* critic? Part of what makes Raymond Williams’s intuitive methodology so appealing is the sense it evokes of both the responsibility and the limitation of the critic. She *must* listen in to the structure of feeling; she must train herself in this pursuit, but there will always be limits and blind spots. The fact that we remain entrenched in our own subjectivity, and in our own generational bias, must surely force the critic ultimately to respect the *otherness* of the writer and their time, the subjectivity of those internal structures.

The real pleasure and utility of *Hard Frost* is, however, considerable. It is filled with detailed, attentive, wide-ranging and painstaking scholarship and it is refreshingly passionate and partisan in its approach. I eagerly await the next instalment.