

The Expatriate Myth: New Zealand Writers and the Colonial World

By Helen Bones

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Reviewed by Anne Maxwell

Scholarly books about New Zealand literature generally attract only New Zealand readers, but this book is arguably relevant to scholars of all New World countries. As the title suggests, Bones' argument is a bold one, but it is also meticulously argued using an impressive array of statistics. Pithily summed up, Bones contends that expatriation was not as essential to the New Zealand literary imagination in the early years of the twentieth century as has commonly been portrayed, and it follows from this that the category of 'expatriate' may not be particularly useful for explaining or evaluating New Zealand writers' experiences (10).

As Bones herself explains, it has long been a tenet of New Zealand literary history that many of the country's more ambitious writers and artists left New Zealand for Britain in the early part of the twentieth century out of a sense of frustration with the nation's lack of culture. Bones argues that the opposite in fact was true – not only did significantly fewer writers leave for Britain than has been claimed, but there was in fact no such cultural dearth; that New Zealand in the early twentieth century was still part of the colonial world and this meant it was naturally home to a rich and vibrant literary culture albeit it was not one that was national. She also contends that it was precisely the writers and critics who were wedded to the concept of literary nationalism that have perpetuated this myth of the expatriate writer, and they have done so in order to promote a high art form of literature that they say is authentic to New Zealand and upon which a distinct New Zealand cultural identity and 'the New Zealand national character' might be built.

Methodologically the book marks a departure from the method of study that has dominated English and Literary Studies departments for almost half a century and which involves close reading and hermeneutical forms of interpretation. Against this, Bones describes her approach as belonging among a small but growing number of Australian cultural historians such as Stephen Alomes and David Carter who typically treat literary works in terms of empirical technique and book history. She also claims that because literary scholars only concentrate on content there is gap in the scholarship that is increasingly being bridged by literary historians using 'the new empiricism'. To help justify this more statistically driven approach to literary texts, she draws on Carter's claim that 'texts are produced within a system, an economy, a field, a network, a circuit, a culture a community' and cannot be separated from that environment' (16).

Putting this method into practice has involved Bones taking each aspect of the expatriate myth and comparing it against the picture of New Zealand culture in the period 1890 to 1945 that the statistical data throws up. The statistics used cover theatre, music, book and magazine publishing, libraries and small presses. The data shows that proportionate to other countries, including Britain, New Zealand had a flourishing literature industry. In Chapter Two Bones concentrates on the history of publishing in New Zealand and one of the most fascinating facts she uncovers is that although the market in New Zealand was too small to sustain many novels being published as monographs, an enormous number did get published in serialized form. Other points of interest include the fact that many writers overcame the problem of physical

isolation through letter writing, this being an important activity that owed much to the country's highly efficient mail service.

Chapter three examines the Trans-Tasman writing relationship and that old chestnut of why the two countries literatures no longer overlap in the way they once did when Australia and New Zealand were both part of the larger colonial world. Basically the argument here is that once upon a time there was a two-way flow of writers between New Zealand and Australia that commonly saw them leaving and returning, and this continued until such time as the politics of nationalism ensured that the two literary cultures became closed off to one another, thus generating the present-day situation of a mutual lack of interest in the other's literary productions.

Chapters four and five respectively focus on the unacknowledged importance of London's publishing houses to the New Zealand writing industry, especially its novels, and the false claim perpetuated by the cultural nationalists that writers had only two choices: either literary success in London at the expense of New Zealandness (i.e. cultural cringe), or success in New Zealand at the expense of Britishness (literary nationalism). The statistics Bones supplies show that in fact many New Zealand novelists were able to develop a strong British readership while staying put in New Zealand and even sticking with New Zealand content. Her statistics also give the lie to the nationalists' claim that one had to first gain recognition overseas if one wanted to be a successful writer in New Zealand.

Chapter six examines writers who maintained a literary connection to several places at once. Bones' contention is that many New Zealand writers were mobile but this mobility did not equate to a large exodus of writers, nor was it caused by literary oppression as claimed by the proponents of the expatriate myth. Rather, the data shows that if colonial world connections and mobility were a reality for many New Zealand writers it was because around 40% of writers had originally come as migrants and travelling enabled them to maintain connections to the people and places that still informed their sense of identity. Similarly, chapter seven draws on statistical data to show that along with other countries containing a high component of British migrants, New Zealand became a modern society very rapidly and that this ensured that it did not become a cultural backwater as the nationalists have claimed. In Chapter eight Bones continues charting the fate of writers who came to London only to find that the move did not necessarily equate with literary success. As she argues, London 'offered a cornucopia of literary opportunities but not everyone knew how to take advantage of them' (139). According to her many returned to New Zealand for the same reasons that people migrated in the first place and indeed the statistics show that a writer's level of productivity did not equate to any particular location.

Many reviewers have expressed delight at what they describe as Bones' 'fresh approach' calling it provocative, and there is no doubt that the pattern of writers' movements that she uncovers throws into doubt the strength of the expatriate myth as this was expounded by an older generation of New Zealand writers and critics wedded to the idea of an authentic national literature. On the other hand, to the extent that Bones' statistics also show that many writers did indeed leave permanently because they felt out of place in New Zealand, she cannot, and to her credit does not, dismiss the expatriate idea outright. As she says, the statistics and the examples used merely present us with a more balanced and nuanced picture of early twentieth century New Zealand literature by showing it to be culturally richer than the myth would have it, and that a large number of successful writers in fact never left the country.

A slightly puzzling aspect of the book is that little recognition is given to the fact that many Australian and New Zealand literary critics today have moved on from the nationalist model that is her main target and are in fact analyzing New Zealand literature through a much broader global framework. Furthermore, contra to her claims, some are also focusing on the historical contexts in which literary texts were produced, albeit admittedly they are not using statistics and other kinds of empirical data as the mainstay of their methodology. Bones implies that literary historians like her do ‘corrective’ work. Hence her claim that she fills the gaps not being filled by literary critics, and while I agree with her that the kind of work she does in this book fills out some important gaps, I would add that they are mostly gaps pertaining to New Zealand’s literary past.

Clearly, there are limitations to the empirical approach. These can be summarized by saying that just as art historians who study art by examining it only at the level of collections and exhibitions forego the pleasure of engaging with the works of individual artists, so the empirical approach to literature foregoes the pleasures to be had from studying literature close up. There is, however, I suspect, another kind of pleasure to be had from using empirical data to dispel powerful cultural myths and this is the one that Bones partakes of exceptionally well. I say this because collecting the data and the statistics is one thing, but not everyone is able to make such compelling and convincing sense of this material as Bones. In short, *The Expatriate Myth* is an impressive and valuable work of cultural history that deserves to be read not just by New Zealand’s literary critical establishment but literary critics and literary historians in all those countries possessing a colonial past and a national literature.