

A tribute to Peggy Garland

Dear Peggy: letters to Margaret Garland from her New Zealand friends
Peter and Diane Beatson [eds], Massey University, 1997, \$35.

[As we were going to press, news arrived of the death of Peggy Garland in Oxford, England, on 17 April 1998 – Ed]

THIS ENTERTAINING BOOK has been published as a tribute to Peggy Garland and her capacity for friendship. Because the friends her warmth and hospitality drew to her Wellington house during her 1947-61 sojourn were people of eminence in literature and the arts, it is also a useful addition to the cultural history of New Zealand from the 1950s to the 1980s. After her return to England, her New Zealand friends kept her up to date with the gossip of the time (mostly from Wellington), with deaths and entrances, politics and the arts. Her own autobiography, unpublished except for the extracts given here, covers both her early residence and her two visits in the seventies and eighties. For many people, especially the more elderly, it will provide a nostalgic trip down memory lane with some fresh items of information to be gathered on the way.

The 'gossipy flavour' which the editors hoped to preserve is still there, if somewhat diluted, both in the extracts from the autobiography and in the letters. There would probably have been more gossip if the editors had not decided that they 'did not want to open old wounds or cause new ones'. This limitation (perhaps not entirely observed)

suggests that the full body of material, deposited in the Turnbull, will provide a rich field for future biographers.

The dramatis personae is lengthy and distinguished – Rewi Alley, Elsie Beaglehole, James Bertram, Charles Brasch, Margaret Clark, Louis Johnson, Iain Lonie, Bruce Mason, Evelyn and Frederick Page, Janet Paul, Shirley Smith, Bill Sutch and Ormond Wilson, to name only some letter writers and none of those others who populate the index. A review could easily degenerate into a roll-call; to avoid that, and without any disrespect for the others, this review will sample the book by taking the last named as a case study.

In this selection (and, one suspects, in the whole collection) Ormond Wilson is the most frequent correspondent and, perhaps unexpectedly, the one whose presence comes close to dominating the book. He is often noticed in other letters – 'Ormond boomed at me out of a concert crowd last night' (Bruce Mason); 'What an elegant man! Very good-looking, spare, his clothes hanging nicely, bright eyes.' (Sarah Garland); 'like Ghandi about to set out for a cross-India walk. Extremely lithe and agile.' (Janet Paul); 'Ormond, on the other hand, is getting dreadful, won't go out' (Cecilia Johnson); 'Ormond has been a trial ... He doubted Bill.' (Shirley Smith).

Both the range and the sharpness – at times the waspishness – of his observations and comments are notable: anything from the cultural revolution in China and the rise of Muldoon in New Zealand to the difficulties of being old and the joys of having grandchildren. Keith Sinclair is rebuked for misnaming *The Origins of the Maori Wars*; Rewi Alley is 'deluging' him with Chinese propaganda; Ron Mason is making 'pompos and very bad broadcasts'; Glover 'is drinking himself to death (though I think a long way to go)'; Randal Burdon 'has finished his last major work ... a dull and tedious affair'; Fred Page sits by him in a coffee bar only because 'he hoped I was driving home, and could give him a lift'; Erich Geiringer is much more effective on the radio 'when that unsightly mass of hair was not visible'; Bill Sutch is 'arrested in peculiar circumstances'; his son-in-law Louis Johnson has published a new book but 'I don't expect to be able to appreciate it any more than I have his others'. And much more to the same effect.

He reports on the progress of his own and his wife's books. He is especially concerned with the fortunes of the book which became *From Hongi Hika to Hone Heke*, and its ups and downs with the publishers, including Dan Davin and OUP, until finally John McIndoe took it in. 'The University academics won't touch it – it isn't in line with the official academic view that we were to blame for all Maori troubles'. He considers the Treaty of Waitangi debate to be

quite irrelevant 'to the ideas and expectations of 1840' but welcomes 'the present outburst of Maori resentment and nationalism' as 'a hopeful sign of renewed vitality.'

As he grew older his pessimism deepened and his mood grew blacker. He faced old age and the prospect of death with resignation (and sometimes despair) rather than Yeatsian rage – but he does not dwell upon it, except to hope for 'a quick exit'. He suffered a good deal from what one might call 'Darwinian despair'; this evolutionary cycle was ending and perhaps another would begin after

the cataclysm. He came to think little of his own achievements, while all the time continuing with them – his own garden and those of his friends, his autobiography as well as his historical writings. He contemplated a further memoir which would be a more personal account of his life. It was not written, but it seems likely that the full body of letters, now in the Turnbull, would fill that gap and make a very fine book.

Ormond Wilson could hardly be considered typical of his times – he was too quirky for that – but few could match him for energy, variety,

independence of thought and (in spite of his denials) usefulness. Though he is realised more fully in this book than the other letter-writers, most of them give often valuable insights into their lives and their times. It is clear that Peggy Garland had a remarkable capacity to attract affection and loyalty. That is, strangely perhaps, shown not so much by her own writing as by the admiration (and in some cases the love) she inspired in the friends she made in New Zealand. Given that they were a diverse company, this was no mean feat.

BOOK REVIEW

by John Drummond

Entertaining & informative

Opera's farthest frontier

Adrienne Simpson, Auckland, 1996, 288pp, \$44.95.

NEW ZEALAND MAY BE as distant from Europe as it is possible to be, but Adrienne Simpson's well-researched volume shows us that geography has not prevented us from enjoying an almost constant access to European opera during the past 136 years. For that we may have cause to be grateful to our proximity to Australia, for it has been Australian (and some European) touring companies that have offered us the meat in our operatic fare, at least until more recent times.

What it is immediately astonishing to discover in Adrienne Simpson's book is the extraordinary versatility, capacity for work and sheer tenacity displayed by members of the international touring opera companies in the 19th century. Performing and living conditions

were often a nightmare; travel was awkward, streets were muddy, theatres were draughty and cold, orchestral players not always up to scratch. But the members of Lyster's and Simonsen's troupes, the Pollard Liliputians, and the J.C. Williamson companies continued to deliver opera to enthusiastic houses in the main centres and in many smaller ones too.

Even at the farthest frontier our operatic fare was often up-to-date. Many operas were given here in New Zealand within five or six years of their European premieres – works such as Verdi's *Aida*, Wallace's *Lurline*, Puccini's *Madam Butterfly*, Gounod's *Faust*, Bizet's *Carmen*, and the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas (of course!). We saw Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* in Dunedin in 1864 and his *L'Africaine* eight years later in

Auckland. We enjoyed *Tannhäuser* and *The Flying Dutchman* in German as early as 1901. In a 28-day period in Dunedin in 1864 Lyster's Royal Italian and English Opera Company performed 18 different works, by Donizetti, Balfe, Wallace, Bellini, Auber, Verdi, Flotow, Rossini, Meyerbeer, Verdi, Mozart and Gounod.

Of course some of these performances would not have satisfied a purist. Often the operas were cut – occasionally butchered – and not everyone in the cast would be singing a role entirely suited to his or her voice. But in terms of access to music theatre, often great music theatre, seasons like this were amazing, and they will have had an enormous affect upon audiences. One lady complained that she wasn't receiving rent from her tenants because they were spending all their money on going to the opera.

We were lucky: quite how lucky is