

The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English

Reviewed by Paul Millar

The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English. Edited by Terry Sturm. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998.

When the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* appeared in 1991 it offered, in 750 pages, an inclusive, genre-based history of New Zealand literature from colonial times to 1986. Seven years on, a new edition has expanded to 890 pages and advanced the period covered to 1996.

Updating many of the sections has evidently been a mammoth task. John Thomson's bibliographic essay, which has become for me an indispensable resource, accommodates the rising tide of authors by increasing the number of entries on individuals from 140 to 162 (although Iain Lonie is still omitted). The demands on Lawrence Jones have been even greater. To revise his essay, he has waded through another 250 novels. In the process he finds much additional evidence of extreme diversification of theme and mode in the genre since the 1970s (before then, he argues, critical realism and impressionism were vehicles for a critical depiction of New Zealand society). His comments about the difficulty of containing such a varied body of work within one story demand a radical revision of the way the novel has thus far been studied.

A close comparison of volumes supports general editor Terry Sturm's comment that the 'inclusion of new material from the later 1980s onwards...often required a considerable reshaping of the narratives of particular genres from as far back as the 1960s'. Changes extend to both design and content: the typeface is cleaner and clearer; divisions within each section indicated by major and minor headings (with the major headings included in the Contents page) make navigating the book easier; the importance of end notes is acknowledged by placing them after relevant sections rather than collected at the back; and a larger font makes the index more useable.

The most significant editorial decision of this new edition has been the addition of a section dealing with literary scholarship, criticism and theory by University of Canterbury academic Mark Williams. As a rule, reviewers of the second edition have touched lightly on the work of the original contributors and focussed most closely on Williams' essay. And inevitably they, being fellow scholars and critics, have documented errors or perceived gaps in his account. Yet a second reading has done little to alter my admiration for the way his essay charts, with a clarity that belies the complexity of the task, key moments and significant movements in the critical discourse surrounding New Zealand literature. Williams' late addition has, I think, earned him a disproportionate amount of scrutiny and, unlike the original contributors, he has not had the luxury of an opportunity to review his work in response to the criticisms it initially generated.

Then again, some of the original contributors do not appear to have seen Sturm's 'reshaping' as a licence to indulge in revision. In comparing the two editions I have been disappointed to discover the number of instances where contributors have made scant use of the opportunity to amend or edit their work in response to the range of considered reviews. As Lawrence Bourke noted, 'part of the Oxford's reward and challenge is that the essays continually invite debate' (*CRNLE Reviews Journal* 1, 1993: 132). The quality of debate invited by that first edition was perhaps the greatest litmus test of its worth. Bourke was one of a number of scholars (among them Vincent O'Sullivan in *New Zealand Books*, 1.2, July 1991; and Alex Calder and W. H. New in *Landfall* 181, March 1992) to scrutinise the first 'Oxford'. Their overall response was of approval, but each also drew on their expertise in specific areas to suggest improvements. To give one example, O'Sullivan commented that

since to remark the quality of prose and the ends to which language is put are recognised by [Peter Gibbons] as part of his brief, it seems a pity there is no mention of Rutherford's expository clarity, of Ronald Syme's mandarin wit; nothing of James Bertram and Geoffrey Cox carrying journalism that further distance into 'literature'; or most surprisingly, Mansfield's New Zealand notebooks as the country's fullest record of an emerging feminine voice.

The greater pity is that in the second edition, despite many opportunities to expand in key areas, such omissions remain.

One contributor who does engage, at least in passing, with O'Sullivan's critique is Elizabeth Caffin in her essay on 'Poetry: 1945-1990's'. O'Sullivan was concerned by Caffin's 'neat' categories that worked to marginalise poets like Brian Turner who gets 'rather poor marks for not standing in line.' Caffin's riposte, on page 511, quotes O'Sullivan's tribute to Turner's *Beyond* (1992)—describing him as one of the 'compassionate sceptics who value things as they are, who insist on saying so as directly as they can'—then re-phrases it as 'a quite unfashionable preference for simple statement'. Moving on to deal with recent trends in poetry, Caffin implies a division between Auckland and Wellington poets that 'neatly' inverts the situation in the 1950s when the young poets of the 'Wellington Group' resisted Allen Curnow's canonising authority. Now, Caffin suggests, Auckland poets like Michele Leggott are producing original work and Wellington has moved to a position of orthodoxy centred around a 'Manhire School'. It is the stuff good debates are made of, yet I cannot shake the nagging sense that her divisions have as much to do with comparisons between publishing houses as between poets.

While certain essays are more directly relevant to my own interests, my greatest pleasure this time around has come from reading Betty Gilderdale's admirable essay on children's literature. Like her own books (which are firmly grounded in the fundamentals of the genre) it is lively and imaginative. And I have even found something to debate: as a recent convert to Hairy Maclary I feel that Gilderdale could do better than classify Lynley Dodds's work as simply 'picture books'. Dodds's illustrations have an essential New Zealandness. They perfectly represent our small towns, right down to the fence designs, hebe borders, and the blue-tile frontage of Samuel Stone's butcher's shop. And the tree Scarface Claw gets trapped in is the best drawing of a pohutukawa I have come across. To quote Denis Glover's 'Home Thoughts', these pictures make me 'think of what may yet be seen / in Johnsonville or Geraldine.' Like Dodds's artwork, the *History* is strongest when it faithfully represents the local and specific.

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