

## The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature

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[The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature](#).

Edited by [Roger Robinson](#) and [Nelson Wattie](#).

Melbourne: [Oxford University Press](#), 1998.

Some 92 years separate this new companion to New Zealand writing from the first poetry anthology, entitled [New Zealand Verse](#) and edited by [W.F. Alexander](#) and [A.E. Currie](#), published in 1906. In the introduction to their anthology, termed by the editors an 'invitation to a volume of minor poetry', [Alexander](#) and [Currie](#) memorably characterized New Zealand as 'a little island country... forgotten by the world because it has never come much into the world's mind'. Moreover, they asserted, the reading public should not expect too much from the poets they gathered together: 'It may be admitted at the outset that there is nothing very great to be disclosed herein... There is a time that may be looked for, when New Zealand will be assigned a place among the nations not only on accounts of its exports of wool and gold, or for richness and worth in horses and footballers, but also by reason of its contributors to art and science... That time has not yet arrived.' The small country was still making its literature.

Apologetic in their hesitant introductions, [Alexander](#) and [Currie](#) could not yet conceive of a body of New Zealand writing, let alone a corpus of work that might ever have its own detailed and discursive Companion. Juxtaposing the two texts is no wish to call up a simple and sentimental gaze over the literary achievements in New Zealand this century. There is a real sense in which this sumptuous volume, following on quickly from the second edition of [The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English](#), marks a real milestone in the history of literature in New Zealand, for it achieves its primary aim—providing a wealth of information for the interested reader and the active researcher—in a substantial fashion. The two Oxford volumes together now constitute a serious source of reference that covers many problematic gaps that previously faced the worker on New Zealand writing.

In their introduction [Robinson](#) and [Wattie](#) note their desire to create a book which is 'friendly as well as reliable, which makes established and unfamiliar facts readily accessible, which is quick and simple to use as well as alluring to browse at leisure.' The Companion is all of those things. The major writers

among the 680 discussed: [Mansfield](#), [Curnow](#), [Sargeson](#), [Hyde](#), [Baxter](#), [Frame](#), [Grace](#), [Hulme](#) et al., all have comprehensive individual entries for their works. Overall, some 110 titles are discussed, and it is to the credit of both the individual contributors and the editors that the overlaps between the different entries don't cause any problems. These entries are the heart of the book, but the thematic and historical material ([Alexander](#) and [Currie](#) might be pleased to know that both gold and sport are discussed here, but—alas—not horses or wool) give the volume a sometimes unexpected twist for the casual browser. There are also comprehensive entries on Maori and Pacific writing and culture, the latter in particular usefully expanding the whole concept of 'New Zealand'. [Robinson](#) and [Wattie](#) choose to view 'companion' in the sense of companionship, and the lack of any striving for comprehensiveness aids the reading experience when it becomes clear that the major figures are all here.

There is nothing to do but dive in. I started with the entry on Ireland, which is an excellent piece of condensed writing by [Richard Corballis](#) (I actually found myself consulting the list of contributors fairly frequently), good on the differing religious backgrounds of immigrants and the strong vein of Irish-New Zealand writing that runs from [Jessie Mackay](#), through [Eileen Duggan](#) and [Roderick Finlayson](#), to [Maurice Duggan](#) and [James K. Baxter](#) ([Curnow](#) is dragged in on the way too, [Corballis](#) rightly picking up on the Yeatsian stance of the younger poet). All the writers of the 1930s, who were my next port of call, are dealt with well, and it is very useful to have a separate entry on a text like [A.R.D. Fairburn](#)'s long 1938 poem '[Dominion](#)'. A lot of work has been done by the various contributors in tracking down the genesis of individual poems or volumes, and this will be invaluable to future researchers. Beforehand, it was often impossible to know *where* to start to look for basic biographical or documentary evidence. Now, that problem recedes. The sometimes complicated publishing history of [Mansfield](#)'s stories, for example, are here readily available and easy to access.

There are some examples of superb writing here. [Ken Arvidson](#)'s entry on [E.H. McCormick](#) is a treasure of comment and information, an essay in itself. Entries by [MacDonald Jackson](#) also display his skills in both conveying information and writing with flexibility and a sense of style. And there are the talking points and moments of fun as well. Postmodernism is in here, but not postcolonialism ([Currie](#) is in, but not [Alexander](#)). [Geoffrey de Montalk](#), we are told, is 'the only New Zealand writer to date to have laid claim to a European throne'. There are plenty of examples such as these to offset the reputation of New Zealand writing that [Robinson](#) and [Wattie](#) characterize in their introduction as one of 'an unremitting dourness'. Yet I sense that it is the thoroughness of

the material gathered in this Companion, the attention to detail and the quality of the writing that will prove to be the base of its legacy.