

William Arthur Satchell, 1861 – 1942

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In the busy colony of New Zealand that by 1886 had been in operation for 45 years, there was little call for literature apart from the Bible and classic writers from the motherland such as Scott and Wordsworth. As an early historian, A.S. Thomson, had put it, ditchers were more esteemed than poets. A person of aesthetic tastes like William Satchell who had not found his niche in England was likely to have problems finding it in New Zealand. However, at 26 he had the optimism and energy of youth; he was willing to work hard and believed the country would be better for his health.

At first it was hard to see much connection between the things of the old life he had cherished and the opportunities of the new, but his creative impulse persisted and by the time of his death three novels were widely acknowledged to have made an important contribution to the literature of what was by then an independent country. In 1936 writers organized their first New Zealand Author's Week. Keen to feature Satchell's work, Johannes Andersen wrote to him for biographical details. Characteristically, Satchell downplayed his efforts to the point of comedy:

Writing books has not been my business but my amusement. I was born in London. Educated at Hurstpierpoint and Rostock. I landed in New Zealand in 1886. Accountancy and secretarial work has occupied most of my time from that date to this.

William Satchell was born in 1861 in London to a family that cherished books. His civil servant father was a scholar and an original correspondent for the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Thomas counted Alfred Tennyson a friend, corresponded with Wilkie Collins and belonged to a literary group calling itself the Cheshire Cheese. Unfortunately he poured much of his book-loving energy into a publishing business for which he had little aptitude.

Satchell gained an education at a Dickensian 'Academy for Young Gentlemen' and at St John's College, Hurstpierpoint, near Brighton. A final stint at Heidelberg University nurtured his interest in the gothic masters. At nineteen he returned sans degree but complete with 'gorgeous side-whiskers, a velvet coat and smoking cap' and started managing his father's publishing

business. W. Satchell and Co. published folk tales, poetry, essays on aesthetics, and two periodicals edited by Satchell senior. The company also published William's first book under the anagrammatic pseudonym Saml. Ciall White. *Forgotten Ballads* (later listed as *Bedlam Ballads and Straitwaistcoat Stories*, Part I) contained pieces brimming with Satchell's love of comic perspective on life: 'The Phantom Ship: A Legend of the Something-or-other Main', 'Some Account of the Battle between Henry FitzLeopold Cheveril Toots and De Liegh de Clarence Brown' and the prose tale, 'The Carbuncle: A Spanish Legend'.

These pieces were illustrated by Satchell's childhood friend Allan Fea. At the academy the boys had jointly survived the ministrations of an old-fashioned headmaster and Fea had relished Satchell's impish way of erecting a pile of books in front of the Reverend when he fell asleep at his desk. The class would wait on tenterhooks for the twitch from the sleeping monster that would send the books crashing to the floor. In their twenties Fea and Satchell designed walking tours for themselves. They liked looking at dilapidated manor houses but only by moonlight when the crumbling remains could conjure Edgar Allan Poe's *House of Usher* or Thomas Hood's *Haunted House*. These were Satchell's literary models for his next book, a compilation of gothic melodrama, but *Will o' the Wisp and Other Tales in Prose and Verse* (1883) was not well received, one reviewer going so far as to hope 'never more to have to read a collection of prose tales such as those he has given us'.

Satchell, however, kept experimenting with prose as well as verse, sometimes preferring prose as the form best suited to his comic impulse. But his efforts met with little critical acclaim and gradually his optimism about making a success of himself in England was sapped. His letters to Fea reveal his state of mind. On August 8th, 1883, he wrote:

I think I was born to be a torture to myself and others. At present there is a cloud before me so thick, that of the future I can form no conjecture whatever. Everything appears to be drifting slowly away and leaving me – only the cloud thickens and blots out the last vestige of hope and faith. I believe in nothing – neither Man, nor God, nor Devil. That it is possible for me to spend my life at such work as this (I mean publishing) is an absurd proposition which I cannot entertain for a moment. Man never conceived a hell so black as the thought of this is to me.

He saw problems for himself in negotiating publication terms for his works and could not bear the thought of writing to order:

Again it is impossible for me to cringe to editors & publishers & reviewers, so that my writings may eventually appear in the pages of a magazine. I do not possess such awful energy as this necessitates; and I do not want to see them in print unless I can see them side by side. Another thing, I cannot write by contract or make a purpose of writing; my pen will not move unless my heart moves too. My stories are all the thought of an instant, and the fevered work of a few hours. While I am engaged upon them, I think of nothing else, and for many hours before and after they are written, they are to me true – truer than anything on earth. I think then that it will not be possible to live on the work of my brain, because in the first place I could not produce enough to keep me from starving; and in the second I see no chance of a beginning – although I do distinctly see a chance of an ending.

What then am I to do ‘crawling between earth and heaven’? I, who am fitted for nothing save to make for myself a hell in a vain search for heaven. Every scrap of business I do, every business letter I write is like a cold iron laid upon my soul; so that I sometimes wonder, they, to whom I write, do not perceive that it is a shriek of agony that comes to them, instead of a letter about books. Books! Do you know I am beginning to loathe them. I, who still could not exist without the comfort they bring me. Do you think it is likely that I who so dislike a business which comes nearer to me than any other possibly could come, could exist in the midst of any other? You will know that it is utterly impossible.

The beauties of the natural world always had the power to engage his deepest attention and make him feel happy, even though the thought of sharing his feelings with a wider audience than Fea made him deeply uneasy. On August 28th, 1883 he wrote:

I ... was in the midst of a rather dramatic scene ... when something, not a voice, whispered to me – ‘There is something the matter in the west.’ I huddled my papers away and raced as fast as I could go to the west heath. The sky was all dripping with wet gold! And from the horizon to the zenith the heavens were rocking with strange light. I was obliged to clap my hands and laugh it was so beautiful. For hours I roamed about, watching it from little hills and little hollows. Whenever I came to any person walking alone I had to restrain myself from going up and clasping his hand, and saying, – ‘will you come with me to this palace in the sky?’

Satchell was happy for Fea to criticise selected examples of his work and tried to be self critical, as his September 1884 letter shows:

Well you know me, I am conceited, crotchety, sometimes (perhaps always) idiotic in my letters, stiff as a weathercock, and as high as the clouds, but I think I have often descended as deep in self contempt as I have risen in self glory.

In the same letter he asked for Fea's promise to destroy all his letters. Insisting at first that vanity was not involved, he made an abrupt volte-face:

Yet here am I apologizing to you, and wiping the muck off in handfuls and explaining it scientifically all to prevent you from laughing at my tumble – which is perfect human nature. Well make the most of me. You get a good many samples at times.

A couple of months later his father took the publishing business away from Satchell who was already suffering ill-health and disappointment from his many rejections. Eighty-seven periodicals to which he had sent material in the previous year had not deigned to reply. He began to think of emigrating to New Zealand and by 1886 was ready to go, having up-skilled himself with a fortnight's sojourn at a farmhouse 'picking up any knowledge which may be going about'. This mainly related to timber felling and the farming of cattle. He advertised for and found a partner, Elmer Brown, and they left on S.S. Arawa on May 21.

Glad to escape the monotony of the voyage, Satchell responded to New Zealand's beauty and wildness immediately. Writing to Fea, he contrasted England's lingering twilights with the new country's descent of darkness: 'Our day becomes extinct, our night rushes down brilliant as a diamond.' In the midst of loss ('We have no thousand and one winter tints, reds and browns, and greys and greens') he recognised a different kind of beauty: 'Our forests are always green, dark and somber-looking outside, but inside a wonder'.

Hearing through a prominent businessman, John Lundon, of land and prospects aplenty in the north, Satchell decided to try his luck in the Hokianga district. The mile-wide river with large millable trees along its banks had attracted settlers from early times and by the time of Satchell's arrival in 1886 the population numbered 2,364 Māori and 572 Europeans, of whom 201 had Māori wives. In the Waima valley the only other Europeans were the local schoolteacher and his wife. Here Satchell rented a block of land under the impression that he would later be able to purchase it. From his tent, 'pitched in

a small glade in the midst of virgin forest', he gloried in his new surroundings: 'Through the open mouth of the tent I can see the stars shining on the mountain as they never shine at home, and hear the wild cattle trumpeting in the recesses of the forest'. That year, thousands of apple trees were distributed by the Agriculture Department and people in the district were being encouraged to grow oranges so Satchell and Brown began clearing 'a few acres for orange trees, our intention being to plant in glades of several acres in extent, and not, as is too generally the case here, to remove the whole forest with fire.'

The wild cattle, when not trumpeting in the recesses of the forest, treated such ventures with scant respect. Despite the added assistance of his cousin Frank Tomlinson and brother Tom who followed in 1887, the farming enterprise, like many others in the district, failed to prosper. Satchell's expectation of gaining freehold title to his land had, like so many others, foundered on the rock of Māori tribal ownership. The Crown grant Satchell had confidently anticipated did not eventuate and he discovered after much capital and labour intensive development of the land that his landlord had no legal title.

However this did not prevent Satchell marrying. In 1889 he wed Susan Bryers, the seventeen-year-old granddaughter of London-born pioneer Joseph Bryers and Kohu Whareumu, a highborn Māori. Susan's parents were storekeepers at Rawene, a prominent role when there were few shops and supplies not always easy to come by. Although very little information of a personal nature survives, the marriage was a long and apparently happy one with a final tally of nine children.

In 1891 Satchell and his partner abandoned their enterprise. Brown went to Australia and Tom returned to England but Satchell stayed on in the Hokianga. He built a hall for the local settlers and started a cricket club in Rawene for which the team dressed, according to his daughter Edith, in 'cream flannels, all with beards in the French fashion'. But these were depression years during which many enterprises collapsed, properties suffered mortgagee sales and in some years more people left the country than arrived in it. Satchell worked as a storekeeper for a time and may also have put his hand to the gumfield spear if the intimate knowledge demonstrated in his novel, *The Land of the Lost*, is any indication. But worry affected his health to the point where he could not continue with heavy manual labour. In 1892 the Satchells moved to Auckland and their second child was born.

Prospects stayed middling, so the following year Susan and the children returned to the Hokianga. Satchell's 'C.P.O. Auckland' address could indicate his having joined the hundreds of other unemployed in the parks, but he was not about to give up. The man whose 'highest ambition' had once been 'not to become famous or write books, but to dream' started writing again – this time with the hard-nosed intention of making a living. He was drawn to drama, which he believed carried the possibility of great literature, and he expressed surprise to Allan Fea (1 December 1893) that 'no really great author has turned his attention to the stage in modern times'. He thought audiences would respond to plays dealing with modern subjects in a modern manner and tried his hand at a four-act tragedy though even before completing it he had concluded that making it a tragedy was a mistake. He also wrote a short novel set in New Zealand entitled 'The Cadet' and the libretto of a comic opera named 'The Girls of Girton'. For all these he sought publication in England but without success. Meanwhile, as he told Fea, his debts were mounting:

The stories I have sent home to my brother do not go off. Nobody will take up the poems. I am head over ears in debt and there is no employment of a permanent nature to be had. I have lately been employed on a novel, but I have now so little confidence in myself as a writer that the offer of work of almost any character, and at any rate of remuneration, would be sufficient to lure me from literature forever.

Satchell had now been living in the colony for seven years. He had worked hard as a 'small capitalist' and an 'industrious man' and felt the country owed him something. He wrote to the former Governor and Premier, Sir George Grey, recalling the injustice he had suffered over his land claim and enclosed two typescript poems: 'Hinemoa', based on the version in Grey's *Maori Legends*, and 'Hemeroma', presenting an unusual perspective, 'the advent of the white man from the point of view of the aboriginal'. Whatever Grey thought of the drama, which was 'an account of the dreadful tragedy which is now being enacted under our eyes, and which we are entirely powerless to prevent', he did not reply and 'Hemeroma' has since been lost.

Nonetheless Satchell did begin to find a market for his work – not in London but in the Antipodes. Magazines such as *The New Zealand Graphic*, *Auckland Star* and *New Zealand Herald* took his articles, stories and poems, while publication in the vernacular-loving Sydney *Bulletin* encouraged him to write more authentically of pioneer experience. The *Bulletin* also welcomed

his observations of different cultural attitudes emerging among Europeans in their new surroundings:

What Australasian hospitality may be like is shown by the adventure of an English lady who told the writer that, while travelling on one of the rivers of Northern Maoriland, she called in at a settler's homestead for a glass of water; and, though an entire stranger, remained a guest in the family for six weeks. Imagine such a scene occurring in England. The warm-blooded 'colonial' stepping as a matter of course from his punt; the cold, superior star of the footman as he directs him to the servants' entrance; or the red and wrathful rudeness of the proprietor of the mansion instructing him on the law of trespass, and commending him to the waters of the river! ... The Englishman of to-day ... is swollen by conceit beyond all tolerance. Somebody will stick a bayonet in him one of these days, and the gas will escape in a hurry.

Satchell's new-found marketability could not make him enough to live on, so in January 1895 when the Thames-Coromandel goldfields entered their second boom period, he became a stockbroker. Before the year was out he was able to bring Susan and the children back to Auckland. The boom lasted until 1899, enabling Satchell to buy a large house at Grange Rd in Mt Eden. Apart from 'a wonderful lot of furniture' and a servant, the children remembered this time of plenty as including two aviaries, a fernery and a collection of moths and butterflies as well as the exuberant flower garden Satchell created wherever he lived. The children also fondly remembered the puppet theatre made by their parents, William painting the scenery and Susan dressing the dolls.

Satchell's book of verse, *Patriotic and Other Poems* was published in 1900. The first seven poems dealt with the Boer War in which New Zealand soldiers were supporting British and Canadian troops. More significant were the bush ballads: in particular, 'The Ballad of Stuttering Jim', a confessional tale of how in the New Zealand bush only the fittest – or least scrupulous – survive, to be tortured thereafter with guilt and remorse. The book was well received and a year later Satchell founded a weekly literary paper, *The Maorilander*, covering 'matters of colonial interest'. The first editorial (8 February 1901) offered an outlet for writers 'of a literature striving to assert itself in a new land'. In fact, for the seven issues that appeared, Satchell was the main contributor. As an advertising gimmick he put twenty one-pound notes in separate envelopes and distributed them among twenty willing people. To win a pound readers

had to ask everybody they met, 'Have you one?' until they hit upon someone holding one of the envelopes.

The Maoriland was an astonishing demonstration of Satchell's optimism and energy and was followed in quick succession by three of his four novels: *The Land of the Lost* in 1902, *The Toll of the Bush* in 1905 and *The Elixir of Life* in 1907. All were published in England.

In *The Land of the Lost* Satchell looked back to his time in Hokianga, showing how deeply he had absorbed its atmosphere, particularly of the gumfields. At the beginning of the novel, he describes a 'lonely inn' standing in a roadside hollow in the midst of a gumfield, seven miles from any other building. 'In every direction the field stretches itself out to the horizon' and although covered with the 'pretty white flowers' of manuka this only serves to give it an overall grey look:

The brilliant sunlight is powerless to redeem the colourlessness so created, and the effect is that of a wide sea of vegetation withered by the fierce beams of the sun. Beneath this dreary-looking carpet is concealed the precious gum.

Atmosphere permeates the novel, influencing the nature of minor characters that seem authentic even though their location-specific lives make authenticity hard to assess. One of these is Jess Olive, who witnessed his wife and child being killed by a falling tree and suffered thereafter a morbid fear of darkness. As King of the Diggers, he symbolizes the mystique of the bush, a kind of moral order that cannot be violated without retribution. Another thinly drawn but relatively convincing character is Bart. Sunk into alcoholism, he is cynical when sober, pleasant when drunk and too far gone to repent. As one scarred by the gumfields he admonishes the 'new chum' Clifford who thinks that gum-digging can be as respectable as anything else:

This is where all the wrecks of the earth are thrown up to rot – and you talk about respectability! Every inch of this north country is poisoned with dead hopes, and it will never be any good till the gum is gone out of it.'

Again, with his dying words, he plays spokesman for the gumdiggers: 'In the Land of the Lost a man has no relatives, and that is the only advantage it possesses. No death-bed relentings for me... give me a drink and let me die as I have lived.' We are never told why Bart needed to escape his relatives or why his baronetcy has retreated to nickname only, but his incontrovertible

degradation on the gumfields contributes to Satchell's fully imagined atmosphere of time and place and this is enough to stamp Bart upon the reader's mind.

In all his novels Satchell indulged his lifelong romance with romance. The principal characters provided a platform for generalized creations either good or bad. Young well-born hero Hugh Clifford arrives at the gumfield from Hawkes Bay, a more settled, lawful part of the country, where his honour has been unfairly impugned. Working as a gumdigger, he falls in love with Esther, a colonial daughter of the settlement, but is recognised as a relative by the evil publican, Cuthbert Upmore, who decides to remove the obstacle to his own inheritance by removing him. The course of true love does not, of course, run smooth. Esther, though not in love, is already betrothed. The plot twists and turns, and only when the hero has been suitably tested and found worthy does love triumphs.

These characters and their story recall literary conventions from the land Satchell had left behind. Their dialogue is often stilted or artificially witty and there is a Hardy-esque quality to some of the writing, creating an expectation of tragedy which does not eventuate. As for the Māori residents, who already possessed ease with the land and with one another, Satchell represents them in this novel mainly as figures of fun, exploiting them for his comedic impulse. However, the novel's faults do not negate its strengths or the extent of Satchell's achievement. Alone among his contemporaries and those who had gone before, he saw the possibility of using the local, unvarnished as it was, as a basis for imaginative work that dealt with enduring realities.

In *The Toll of the Bush*, the sense of a moral order being challenged by the onslaught of civilization becomes central to the plot; in fact the story has elements of an archetypal fairytale with the central character Geoffrey Hernshaw and to a lesser extent his brother Robert experiencing Questing, Call to Adventure, Refusal of Call, Mentor's Voice, Supreme Ordeal, Resurrection and Return with Elixir.

Many characters in *Toll of the Bush* have their counterparts in *Land of the Lost*, most obviously Geoffrey, the New Chum whose status plummets in the frontier society he has joined. He falls in love with Eve, the colonial daughter, has to deal with a rival for her hand and finally triumphs. Geoffrey, however, and other characters with *Land of the Lost* echoes, possess more complex personalities and play more complex roles in the later novel. Eve, for instance, explores questions of science-versus-religion current in Satchell's time, while

Geoffrey is a Hamlet-like character, tortured by irresolution. Wickener, whose wife's infidelity has set him on the path of coldly calculated revenge, is allowed flashes of decency and entertains the reader as a jester, while Fletcher, the fanatical revivalist, has made his goal the conversion of all Māori in his parish. Bart's counterpart, Sven Andersen, is capable of acts of redemption, while Jess Olive is reincarnated as crippled Mark Gird, whose death, according to local legend, will free the bush to take another victim.

This time the local focus is on poor bush settlers like the Andersens and the Girds, whose slab huts in tiny clearings are 'dwarfed ... by the immensity of the virgin landscape'. The idea that the bush exacts retribution for man's desecration becomes the driving force for the plot. Increasingly the main characters measure their values by it: Geoffrey's enjoyment of a woolshed dance is marred by the leafy decorations which remind him of 'the acrid smell that dwells in the dense bush, where the light is dim and a deathly stillness prevails', but for courage he looks to the old-time bushmen, whalers and missionaries whose strength of purpose was molded by 'giant forces of nature'. Eve sees the bush as 'paradise' and dreads its destruction at the hands of civilization.

Geoffrey and Eve's Supreme Ordeal comes in the form of a raging bush fire. Lost in the forest and tormented by hunger, they are faced with trackless bush: 'For hours it was impossible to estimate their progress, no opening, even of a hand's-breadth, permitting them a view of the country they were traversing...' As for the supple-jack, 'Casting its black canes from tree to tree, scrambling across the ground, turning and twisting snake-like on itself, this hellish vine added the final touch of horror to the scene'. Finally however it is the bush that enables Eve and Geoffrey to declare their love and be reconciled to whatever fate will bring.

The novel resonates with brooding doubt about the value of civilization but although the author sees the passing of the bush as 'tragedy', he also hails it as the forerunner to pastoral prosperity and an enriched society: Geoffrey's financial future will be secured as co-owner of a sheep and cattle station, while intellectual conversation will become more valued and available. Both these novels endeavoured to awaken in people a more compassionate and environmentally friendly sense of moral order which respected nature and valued love above narrow social or religious convention. This was Satchell's vision for a new sense of identity in a new land.

Land of the Lost was received with indifference in New Zealand where it was too early for European settlers to appreciate their history in the new land, and local gumdiggers were not perceived as material for novels. It was not reissued until 1938. Satchell's brother Tom, who was by then settled in Japan as a journalist with the *Japan Herald*, thought it 'very good but I think you can do better'. He advised him to keep away from sentimentality and to disregard plot except where it led to 'development of character'. After *Toll of the Bush* appeared, Satchell received a letter from Medora Adam, also from Japan: 'No one before you, I think, has had the courage to put such a hero into a book and let him live, and retain the breadth of mind bestowed upon him by his author.' The *Daily Mail* acclaimed it as 'the best novel to appear for ten years'. But the novel has only once been reprinted, in 1985.

After several years of prosperity, Satchell lost money in share-broking or perhaps through gold speculation and in 1906 the family moved to cheaper accommodation on the then undeveloped North Shore. A year later his third novel, *The Elixir of Life* was published.

A lesser work than Satchell's previous two novels, *The Elixir of Life* nonetheless contains some interesting elements. Picking up on his own experience from his voyage out to New Zealand in 1886, Satchell consigned his characters to the S.S. Waima bound for the colony. One of the saloon passengers is the New Zealand Minister for Immigration, seen talking to a young man who has just come up from the steerage. The ship's doctor observes, 'They represent, I suppose, the top and bottom of our little society, but less than 25 years ago the Cabinet Minister was himself an assisted emigrant.' When the propeller breaks and the boat drifts in the ocean currents, the barriers separating class from class begin to weaken, 'A "negro-minstrel" troupe from steerage had performed with success in the saloon and been urgently asked to repeat the visit.'

Once again Satchell promulgates his view that the valuing of love above 'man's puny conventions' of marriage or engagement does not necessarily mean everything ending in tragedy. Marooning his characters on an island, Satchell explores issues around establishing a new source of authority. The Minister of Immigration has to concede that in the circumstances a Mr Street from steerage is the man for the job.

In the grip of utopian euphoria, the ship's doctor and his friend inject themselves with a magic serum. Instantly immune to every kind of disease, they begin to work through the implications of immortality, quickly concluding

it is 'distinctly not a thing for the other fellow'. Nonetheless they include their lovers in the privilege – or horror as they have begun to think of it. The novel ends with love triumphant but the consequences of immortality yet to play out.

In 1909 Satchell completed a play, 'The Divided Note', but this was not produced. As secretary of the Auckland Horticultural Society he augmented his income with auditing and accounting work, and two years later the family moved to a property on the North Shore with a five-acre orchard and poultry farm.

By then Satchell had begun work on *The Greenstone Door*. For this, his most ambitious novel, his imagination was fully engaged by the theme of civilization inexorably replacing tribalism, with law and love the only things that could make it morally bearable. He diligently travelled the Waikato area and researched major events of the times including the character and living circumstances of Sir George Grey who was to be the heroine's guardian.

Once again romantic aspects combine with a gloomier realism. The first nine chapters dealing with the protagonist Cedric Tregarthen's childhood among Māori are unrelentingly romantic. However, for childhood innocence conveyed in first person, the style seems not out of place. As Cedric grows he develops strong loyalties connecting him indelibly with Māori – love and respect for his guardian, the Pākehā-Māori trader Purcell, an oath of brotherhood with Rangiora, son of a powerful chief, and affection for his foster sister Puhi-Huia. Though Satchell convincingly demonstrates his long familiarity with Māori custom and culture, Māori speech is represented by metaphors reassuringly familiar to European readers rather than being authentically Māori. Steeped in compassion and a desire for tolerance, the novel documents a time of optimism in the story of Māori and Pākehā evolution:

The age of the musket had passed away. Cattle and horses, agricultural implements and seed were now the things dear to and desired of the chiefs... A profound peace – the first for centuries – had settled on the land. The people had advanced sufficiently far into civilization to perceive its grandeur and beauty, yet not so far that they had lost confidence in themselves and their possibilities. An enthusiasm had sprung up for the things and ideas of the white people.'

Romantic love is locked into the plot when Cedric goes to live in Auckland and meets twelve-year-old Helenora, a heroine in the usual Satchell mold.

Intrigue is introduced with Helenora's desire to avenge her mother's dumping by a man to whom she was engaged – that man, by 'strange' coincidence, being Cedric's father. Oblivious to his danger, Cedric declares his love to the intelligent, spoilt little girl and makes her the focus of his life.

But relations between Māori and Pākehā are deteriorating, with Europeans wanting more and more land from Māori increasingly reluctant to sell. When war breaks out, Cedric, Rangiora and Purcell have to take sides. Rangiora's way is clear. Purcell, who has married a Māori slave, sees no conflict in procuring arms for 'his people'. Cedric is torn between childhood loyalties and his new belief that European knowledge is superior and those who carry it forward must inevitably prevail. The novel explores the challenge to moral order that has come with the Europeans, and puts forward the view that sometimes things reach a point where nothing can be resolved except by war. Throughout the novel Purcell stands for humanity and tolerance, compassion and wisdom. He is a man at peace with himself and with the life he has chosen, helping to bring peace and prosperity among Māori. His tragic flaw is 'bad citizenship': through his failure to uphold the law at a critical juncture, a business associate who embezzled funds becomes the instrument of his death. He is Satchell's one attempt at a tragic figure.

Although Satchell plainly felt that modernity should prevail, he spells out the cost. The Māori-identified characters, Purcell, Rangiora and Puhi-Huia, who have accompanied the reader through the optimistic transition period all die, and the future is, according to the destinies Satchell metes out to the characters, given to people like Purcell's corrupt executioner. Cedric's final unconvincing coming together with Helenora cannot compensate for what has been lost. Satchell's pessimism has become deep indeed.

A similar fate awaited the efflorescence of his own career, *The Greenstone Door*. World War I broke out at the time of its publication in 1914 and it passed unnoticed for years. Satchell wrote newspaper articles while his sons fought in France and Palestine but he lost heart for novel-writing. He took on more and more work as an accountant and auditor, including an eleven-year stint with a timber company in Thames.

Gradually the story of *The Greenstone Door* became a romance in itself. After twelve years a young musician wrote to the author:

To read 'The Greenstone Door' is an epoch in one's life and the occasion for deepest interest and keenest delight. Naturally the

book is NOT forgotten and never will be. None of the great classics in music, art and literature ever could be. New Zealand and New Zealanders owe more to you than they can ever repay and readers from the other side of the world are indebted to you for bringing something very big and lasting into their lives.

Nine years later, in 1935, a new edition appeared. Five or six more impressions appeared in rapid succession and the work began to assume the mantle of a New Zealand classic, while in 1938 *The Land of the Lost* was reprinted. People wanted to know more about the author in their midst who had sneaked into prominence, but Satchell was a retiring man and publicity had come too late to assist him to write. Despite having designed an early pinhole camera he hated having the camera turned upon himself. Offered the 'I am an accountant' routine, journalist Pat Lawlor said he never found it more difficult to interview anybody than the 'mysterious little octogenarian of Auckland'.

In 1936 the timber company went out of business. A year later Susan Satchell died. The outbreak of World War II again affected Satchell's book sales – these in any case only returned him 3d per copy. Finally Pat Lawlor requested a Civil List Pension for Satchell in recognition of his work as a novelist. This was granted in 1939. Only then did he relent on the photograph, allowing a studio photographer to take one portrait at his own expense in 1942. On October 21st of that year he died.

For modern readers Satchell's romanticism detracts from his work, but his novels remain enjoyable and illuminating. In his depictions of nineteenth-century New Zealand, his observations on the transition period, his range of Māori characters and his insistence that history however local and apparently insignificant can be rewarding material for fiction, Satchell pioneered the serious novel in New Zealand and influenced those who followed.

LINKS

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[New Zealand Literature File](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

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