

Montague Harry Holcroft, 1902 – 1993

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Born in Rangiora on the South Island of New Zealand on 14 May 1902, Montague Harry Holcroft was the son of a grocer and his wife and the second of three boys. When his father's business failed in 1917, he was forced to leave school and begin his working life in the office of a biscuit factory. Two years later he abandoned his desk in search of adventure, working on farms throughout New Zealand before crossing the Tasman Sea to Sydney, Australia in the company of his friend Mark Lund. Here he returned to office work and married his first wife, Eileen McLean, shortly before his 21st birthday. Within three years the marriage ended and Holcroft returned to New Zealand. However, during his sojourn in Sydney his emerging passion for writing had borne fruit in stories published in several major Australian magazines.

With aspirations to become a successful fiction writer, he submitted a manuscript to London publisher John Long. *Beyond the Breakers* appeared in 1928. After a brief interlude on the staff of a failing Christchurch newspaper, he departed for London in late 1928 with a second novel stowed among his luggage. Despite having stories accepted by a number of British magazines, London proved unsympathetic to his efforts, even after a second novel, *The Flameless Fire*, appeared in 1929. After visiting France and North Africa, and with the Depression beginning to bite, Holcroft elected to again return to New Zealand. In Wellington in July 1931 he married Aralia Jaslie Seldon Dale. His new wife supported his art, encouraged no doubt by the publication of *Brazilian Daughter* (1931). Several further novels were drafted and stories continued to be accepted by Australian and New Zealand magazines and newspapers. However, a new form of writing began to take precedence after J. H. E. Schroder of the Christchurch *Press* began to accept Holcroft's first meditations on culture and history, essays which were to eventually spawn his first significant contribution to New Zealand letters, *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand* (1940). With a growing family (he was to have two children with his second wife), the need to earn a living wage amid the depths of the Depression forced him to expand his repertoire further. While a fourth and then a fifth novel went the rounds of publishers unsuccessfully he turned his hand to children's fiction and lecturing in addition to short fiction and magazine articles. Eventually, in 1936 his efforts bore fruit with the offer of a position with the *Southland Times*, published in Invercargill in the extreme south of the South Island. He was to remain with the paper for

twelve years, during which time he rose to be editor. At the same time, while abandoning his ambition to write fiction, he cemented his reputation as an essayist of considerable originality and insight.

In 1940 he won the essay prize in that year's New Zealand Centennial Literary Competition with *The Deepening Stream* published by the Caxton Press. Its reflections on the development of New Zealand culture in the face of physical isolation from the mainsprings of art and literature were developed in two further collections, *The Waiting Hills* (1943) and *Encircling Seas* (1946). The latter won the Hubert Church Award in 1947, and all three were republished in 1950 as *Discovered Isles*. Among other ideas, in the second of these volumes Holcroft argued for government support for the publication of good New Zealand writing, an idea taken up by the local branch of PEN, under whom it bore fruit in 1946 with the setting up of the State Literary Fund. A sense of Holcroft's way of thinking in these essays may be garnered from the following extract from *Encircling Seas*. Holcroft asks, 'Is it true, then, that contact with the wilderness has induced, not a spiritual humility, but a strong sense of superiority?' Answering his own question he replies:

Our ancestors saw the forest as an impediment to be removed. They acknowledged its vastness and took pride in the vigour with which they attacked it, carved out their paths and settlements, and introduced the framework of a transplanted civilization. Behind them was the power of an age growing up to industrialism (Holcroft 1946: 28).

Several more volumes of essays appeared during the 1940s, but by 1948 the drudgery of daily journalism drove him to again resign and take a chance with freelance work. At the same time he became involved with the founding of the New Zealand branch of UNESCO, an involvement which led him to visit France and the Middle East. *Lebanon* (1949) is the result of his attendance at a UNESCO conference in Beirut.

The role of freelance writer proved difficult in the small literary economy of New Zealand and under growing financial pressure he was forced in 1949 to take up the unexpected offer of the editorship of the *New Zealand Listener*, a post he was to hold for the following two decades. In doing so, Holcroft entered a period of professional stability and domestic difficulty. His wife refused to follow him to Wellington, leading to their separation and eventual divorce. As editor of the country's premier weekly, however, he found some compensation in being able to put into practice at least some of the ideas he had toyed with as an essayist. His predecessor Oliver Duff had developed the

National Broadcasting Service magazine into an independent and vigorous supporter of arts and culture, publishing reviews and contributions from poets and short story writers. Holcroft later recalled that he

...shared Duff's view that a short story gives a desirable literary flavour to a broadcasting journal ... My principal motive, however, was a conviction that the official journal of the Broadcasting Service had a duty to foster imaginative writing. By doing, so it not only helped the NZBS to play its part as the country's largest patron of the arts: it also helped to find a market, and therefore encouragement, for writers who later would form a pool of talent the NZBS itself would be glad to draw on for talks, short stories and drama. (Holcroft 1969: 25)

Holcroft estimated that he had published more than 700 stories in his eighteen years as editor, often the early work of writers who later went on to gain considerable reputations: O. E. Middleton, Amelia Batistich, Maurice Duggan, Janet Frame, Roderick Finlayson, Joy Cowley, Albert Wendt, and Maurice Shadbolt, to name just a few. Established and unknown poets were also supported, including Allen Curnow, Denis Glover, Alistair Campbell, James K. Baxter, Hone Tuwhare, Kendrick Smithyman, Ruth Gilbert, Fleur Adcock, Ruth France, Marilyn Duckworth, Louis Johnson, and Barry Mitcalfe. While bemoaning the loss of new writers discovered by the *Listener* to overseas publications, he conceded that the magazine's role as a nursery for new talent – and paying out more to writers each year than the New Zealand Government's Literary Fund – was vital, even if it meant at times publishing work which some regarded as less than first class.

In addition, through the regular publication of book reviews Holcroft encouraged the growth of a body of indigenous critical work, which in turn stimulated serious literary endeavour on the part of local writers. However, he was not always sympathetic to such efforts, famously dismissing the first issue of the quarterly *Numbers* with an editorial headed 'Lisping by Numbers' (16 July 1954). Poet and critic James K. Baxter responded in the magazine's fourth number (October 1955) with 'The Critic as Schoolmaster', a condemnation of the *Listener's* maintenance of cultural standards. Holcroft himself later defended *Numbers* against a charge of obscenity, as he did for Nabokov's *Lolita*. Then in 1964 he took a conservative stance in an editorial on the Literary Fund's refusal to support an allegedly obscene issue of the *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook*. Again, Baxter, joined by the *Yearbook's* editor Louis Johnson, among others, vigorously engaged Holcroft in the *Listener's* correspondence pages.

Holcroft used his editorials to comment on all aspects of New Zealand and world affairs, applying his erudition to an enormous range of matters from the mundane via the whimsical to the most refined of cultural concerns. The best of these were collected into two volumes: in 1960 as *The Eye of the Lizard*, being a selection from his first decade in the job; and in 1989 as *A Voice in the Village*, drawn by Michael King from the full span of Holcroft's editorship and arranged under such headings as 'Village Attitudes', 'Intimations of Mortality', 'The Company of Women', 'Moments in History', and 'Literary Arenas'. As King commented in his 'Foreword', in his editorials 'Holcroft relentlessly applied sanity, a sense of history and ethics to the issues and events of his time, producing as he did so the finest canon of editorials in the history of New Zealand journalism' (Holcroft 1989: 2).

After several years of living alone in Wellington, Holcroft moved to the beach-side community of Paekakariki. Here a relationship with Lorna Lund blossomed until, with her divorce from Holcroft's friend Mark Lund finalised, they were able to marry in September 1962. Following his retirement from the *Listener* in 1969 his contribution to New Zealand's intellectual life was acknowledged with his elevation to an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) the following year, an acknowledgement which was further confirmed by the award of an honorary doctorate by Victoria University of Wellington in 1976. Holcroft returned briefly to the *Listener's* helm during 1972-73, after his chosen successor Alexander McLeod departed prematurely. During this period, he and his wife Lorna moved inland to a small house outside the rural village of Sanson.

During the 1970s and 1980s Holcroft continued to indulge his preference for personal narrative. As well as an idiosyncratic history of the car in New Zealand (written from the perspective of someone who had never mastered the art of driving), and a local history of the area in which he now resided, he also turned again to autobiography. His autobiographical essay *Dance of the Seasons* had appeared in 1952. Its chronology was re-surveyed in *The Way of a Writer* (1984), the cover of which shows Holcroft sitting at his typewriter in his study in Sanson, his library forming a backdrop. His last published novel, *Brazilian Daughter*, and two collections of essays published in the 1940s, *Timeless World* and *Creative Problems in New Zealand*, are given pride of place among the assembled books, indicating perhaps where he regarded his best work to reside. *The Way of a Writer* ends in 1949, the year he took up the editorship of the *Listener*. He continues the story in *A Sea of Words*, published in 1986 and covering his life to the publication of the 1984 volume.

In the process he reappraises his years at the *Listener* previously dealt with in his memoir *Reluctant Editor: The "Listener" Years, 1949-67* (1969). His *The Grieving Time* (1989) gives a painfully honest account of personal loss and bereavement following the death of his wife Lorna. His last published work, a thoughtful collection of essays entitled *The Village Transformed: Aspects of Change in New Zealand, 1900-1990*, appeared from an academic press in 1990, the year of New Zealand's sesquicentenary.

Monte Holcroft died in September 1993. The previous year the elderly widower had made a final shift of accommodation, from the plains of the Manawatu to those of Canterbury and his birthplace of Rangiora. He is best remembered today for his eighteen-year editorship of the *Listener*, his most sustained and high profile position. His efforts in that role and elsewhere as an essayist and editorialist constitute the foundation for these genres in New Zealand letters. He chronicled a lifetime of rapid and dramatic change in all aspects of life in New Zealand: social, cultural, political and economic. His eloquence, depth of insight and strength of opinion, tempered by humour and a liberal and generous nature, have left us a body of work which merits further and more detailed investigation.

LINKS

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)
[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)
[New Zealand Literature File](#)

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The papers of Monte Holcroft are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library of the National Library of New Zealand, Ms-Group-0652. They comprise correspondence, literary drafts and manuscripts (including unpublished novels), financial papers of *Arena*, newspaper clippings, and other items.