

## Frank Sargeson [Norris Frank Davey], 1903 – 1982

*Lawrence Jones*

'It is not often a writer can be said to have become a symbol in his own lifetime. It is this quality of your achievement that has prompted us to remember this present occasion'. So Frank Sargeson's fellow New Zealand fiction-writers ended 'A Letter to Frank Sargeson', published in *Landfall* in March 1953 to mark his fiftieth birthday. They were affirming his status as the most significant writer of prose fiction to emerge from that generation that began in the 1930s to create a modern New Zealand Literature. They were celebrating him first as the creator of the New Zealand critical realist short story and short novel, the writer who provided the literary model with which most of those signing the letter had started. But they were also celebrating him as a symbol and a model not only for what he wrote but for where and how he wrote it. In the editorial 'Notes' to that same issue of *Landfall* Charles Brasch stated of Sargeson that 'by his courage and his gifts he showed that it was possible to be a writer and contrive to live, somehow, in New Zealand, and all later writers are in his debt'. Not only did he show by his example that it was possible to be a serious New Zealand writer without becoming an expatriate, but as mentor and encourager he fostered the careers of a whole generation of fiction writers. At least two of those who signed the letter (Janet Frame and Maurice Duggan) had even lived or were to live in the army hut behind his cottage for a time when they needed the place of refuge and the encouragement, Duggan in 1950 and again in 1958, Frame in 1955-1956. By 1953, then, Sargeson had already become recognised as a central figure in New Zealand literary history.

But Sargeson was to live on for almost thirty more years, and by the time of the special issue of *Islands* to mark his seventy-fifth birthday in March 1978 he had gone on to a second career, primarily as novelist and memoirist, and had created another distinctive body of writing very different from the classic stories of 1935-1945 by which he achieved fame and by which he is still primarily known. The story of the making of the two careers encompasses his whole life as Frank Sargeson (there was an earlier life as Norris Davey), while in the more than twenty-five years since his death his posthumous 'life' in his critical reputation has undergone its own dramatic changes, a story in itself. By the time of the volume to mark the centenary of his birth in 2003 that reputation was very different from what it had been in 1953 or in 1978. In a

sense there have been four lives, including the posthumous one, which is still in process.

## I

The person who was to become the writer Frank Sargeson was born as Norris Frank Davey in Hamilton, 23 March 1903, the second of four children. His parents had both been born in the United Kingdom and had come to New Zealand with their parents in the 1870s: Edwin John Davey from London in 1876, aged four; Rachel Sargeson from Belfast in 1879, aged ten. Married in 1897, Davey's parents were by 1903 respected citizens of Hamilton. Edwin had taken over his father's successful shop in 1900 and the same year followed him onto the borough council, while Rachel had striven to rise above her working-class origins, first as a pupil-teacher, then as a trusted assistant in a woollen goods shop, and finally as a most respectable matron. They had met first at the Methodist Church and had become leading members of that group. In 1906 for reasons of health Edwin sold his shop and, at the urging of some of his fellow churchmen, took on the job of town clerk, a post which he held until retirement.

Growing up in this family, Norris Davey had a conventional small-town, middle-class, puritan upbringing. His father was an exemplar of the puritan work ethic and an active campaigner against alcohol, gambling, and other things he considered social evils, a 'wowsler' in the terms of the time, and his mother was extremely proper, playing the traditional puritan maternal role of moral guardian. In *Once is Enough*, Sargeson characterised them as prototypical puritans. His father, he thought, 'was in fact genuinely religious and moral: he believed in an order that was not of this world'. His mother, on the other hand, he thought, believed in 'convention at a middle-class level: again and again she insisted that you must do the right thing because of what people would say or think if you didn't'. Thus his father to him was 'the pure puritan who believed that all the heavenly absolutes as he conceived them could and should be made to prevail on earth', while his mother was 'the impure puritan to whom the bargain of social convention was entirely satisfactory'. And he thought that his mother 'was indeed truly representative of the prevailing general sentiment about what life in New Zealand should be – the sentiment which powerfully shapes and dominates New Zealand life to this day'. While Sargeson had more respect for his father's form of 'pure puritanism', he thought the 'practical results' of his mother's and his father's beliefs 'were much the same'.

Outwardly the young Davey followed the conventional middle-class pattern that was expected of him. He attended Hamilton West School and then Hamilton High School, and took part in the Methodist church and Sunday school. After graduating from high school he went to work in a solicitor's office while studying law extramurally through Auckland University College, although with only mediocre results, failing several of his exams the first time he took them. But his inner life, as he later described it, was less conventional. He upset his parents by reading such 'useless' authors as Gibbon and Milton, and he upset himself by feeling sexually drawn not only to young women but, also, against all the teachings of his church, to young men, and he came to hold an unreciprocated passion for a young man who was later to marry one of the Davey sisters. Trying to deal with these contradictions, he began to formulate a kind of inchoate personal mythology in which he associated Hamilton and the flat country around it with his parents' puritanism and with their respectable social aspirations for him, while whenever he could he escaped to climb in the high country outside the plains of the Waikato which he associated with a different, freer way of life, 'the pure life of the senses . . . a pure and shameless life that was suddenly and miraculously permitted me', as he characterised it in *Once is Enough*. As he described himself there, he was unconsciously searching for a different way to be:

Unknown to myself at the time I was struggling to break from my home and small-town chrysalis case: unknown to myself I was engaged on a search for something, some person, some place – something that was secretly apprehended by my bowels no doubt, but of which my head and heart had very little knowledge as yet.

After several visits to the King Country farm of his mother's brother, Oakley Sargeson, he finally came to sense in that person and place the values for which he had been searching:

... the farm was at one and the same time a new heaven and a new earth, two separate entities that were inseparably united, a heaven that was made human by the presence of my uncle, and an earth that was transformed by his presence into a model of what the human world might be.

It was there in 1923 in his uncle's orchard that he had a premonitory epiphany pointing towards what he might do with his life, or so he interpreted it in *Once is Enough*:

Apart from passing my examinations I truly did not know what end I wanted to aim at and achieve – except for some notion, remote and tenuous yet at the same time powerful, that it must be something you could see and handle, something that was in some way related to the fruit that was hanging on the trees all around me, and as surely connected with myself as the fruit was connected with the trees and the trees with my uncle.

His 'daily life so far as it could be observed was more or less what the customs of the community ... seemed to demand', but increasingly his inner life was quite at odds with this, especially his sexual yearnings: 'all that went on covertly within me was a persistent contradiction – for which I could never find any certain relief except in violent physical activity and the exhaustion that followed it'.

In 1925, still outwardly conforming while inwardly searching, Davey experienced what Sargeson called in *Once is Enough* 'the determining crisis' of his life. When he discovered that his mother, the self-proclaimed model of moral rectitude, had read some of his private correspondence without his permission, he had a quarrel with her that led to an irreparable breach. The simile that he used in *Once is Enough* to characterise the event is a clear indication of his dualistic personal mythology, forming inchoately when he was younger, but conscious and clear-cut at the time of writing (1953):

It was as though I had been walking unsteadily along the top of a fence for years, and all would depend now on the side I came down on – and it was a mistake made by my mother rather than any deliberate choice of my own which brought me down on the side where I have remained ever since....

After an angry argument he left home to live in Auckland. He was on the way to discovering his vocation, but it would be six years of exploration and trial and error before he settled on a way of life, and ten years before he would be a regularly published author.

Living alone in Auckland in 1925-1926, Davey appeared outwardly to be following still the path laid out for him by his parents as he passed his final law exams in 1926 and went to work in a legal office. But he was at the same time exploring other options. He was engaging in what aesthetic and intellectual life Auckland then offered, attending concerts and drawing on the resources of the libraries. He was exploring other philosophies and religions. And he was beginning to face and decide what to do about his homosexual feelings. He had inherited from his grandparents a bit of land, and he sold that and drew

on that money and what he could save from his earnings to go to Europe in 1927, planning to stay a year and explore his life possibilities.

The European experience, with Davey living mostly in London but taking a long walking tour through France, Switzerland, and Italy, proved to be liberating. For the first time he entered into overtly homosexual relationships, both in London, and, briefly, in Italy. He began an ambitious program of reading at the British Museum Reading Room, and he did his first writing, some essays about his travels and an unsuccessful Joycean autobiographical novel, 'The Journal of a Suicide'. And it was in Europe that he discovered (or so, at least, the Frank Sargeson of 1953 interpreted the Norris Davey of 1927-28) that he was 'truly a New Zealander', one whose primary loyalties were not to the New Zealand of Hamilton and his parents but rather to what his uncle and his farm represented, not 'New Zealand as it is' but 'New Zealand as it might worthily have been' and as it possibly could yet be, for his uncle 'had as it were within himself the seeds of a new kind of society, one in which [Sargeson] might eventually find [himself] at home', as he said in *Once is Enough*.

However, the way ahead was still not clear. When Davey returned to New Zealand, he at first stayed with his parents in Hamilton, a situation he found impossible, and then he obtained in Wellington the kind of job of which they would approve, one with the Public Trust Office. In *Once is Enough* he described his time on that job as 'a sleep of the spirit', but on his own in Wellington he was still exploring alternatives. A strange experience with an old man in a pub who claimed belligerently that 'John Keats was the greatest poet who ever lived' quixotically moved him to begin writing again. He began with Keatsian poems which were not successful, then was moved by a reading of Keats' letters, with their vivid observations of other people, to an attempt to write the kind of fiction Keats might have done if he had lived and turned to writing prose. He completed four stories, one of which was almost accepted by the *London Mercury*, but he was disturbed to discover that his stories, viewed dispassionately, looked like imitations of Joyce's *Dubliners*. This burst of creativity was interrupted by various excursions into homosexual experience, culminating disastrously in 1929 in his being caught by the police in bed with an older man – a known homosexual whom the police were keeping under surveillance – and being charged with sexual assault. Threatened with imprisonment, Davey took the way out offered by the police and acted as a witness against the older man, denying he had had any previous homosexual experience and saying he had been misled. The result was imprisonment and hard labour for the older man and a two-year

suspended sentence and a warning for Davey. His family, probably believing the story he told to the police, paid his court costs and supported him, despite the affair having been reported in the newspapers, to the family's shame. Sargeson, probably ashamed more of his betrayal of the older man, did not mention the affair in his autobiography and never afterward referred to it publicly.

The immediate result of the court case was that, aided by his family, he went to live on his uncle's farm at Okahukura to do farm-work part-time while spending the rest of the time writing a novel. This arrangement lasted from October 1929 to March 1931, during which time Davey wrote several drafts of a novel, 'Blind Alleys', which he finally posted off for consideration by Jonathan Cape early in 1931. Meanwhile, as the Great Depression bit more deeply, Oakley Sargeson found himself in such financial trouble that he had to tell his nephew that he essentially could not afford to subsidise the younger man's writing any longer, and that if Davey were to stay on the farm he would need to work full-time to help pull them out of trouble.

Faced with this choice, Davey decided that his true vocation was as a writer and that he must devote himself to that task as much as he could. He decided to leave the farm and go to live in his parents' little holiday shack at Takapuna, on Auckland's North Shore, and there to register himself as unemployed and work part-time for subsistence on the unemployed workers' scheme (unmarried men were given only two days a week work). He could then write the rest of the time while living as frugally as possible. At first he did not tell his parents of what he was doing, but finally he informed them that he was 'improving' their holiday house, and received permission to stay.

## II

Settling in at the primitive shack, the would-be writer took on the name of Frank Sargeson (although he did not legally change his name by deed poll until 1946), effectively ending his life as Norris Davey (including the court case) and taking on a new identity that could be related to his uncle. In the next few years he evolved his own way of life, as he said in *More than Enough*, 'combining relief work, gardening and fishing into a personal habit of life which I hoped would more or less conceal (while at the same time assist), what I conceived to be the true purpose of my life'. That way of life put him in contact with people far removed from the middle-class world in which he had grown up. For a few years he was active in the Young Communist League (although he remained sceptical about Marxist dogma and programmatic literature) and he met some of Auckland's young radicals. More important for

his future writing, he met among his fellow relief workers people 'living apparently on the social fringe' who exhibited 'those courageous human qualities which tend to become more and more tenuous and obscure, the more one moves in the direction of the social centre', as he described one such person in *Once is Enough*. Such people gave him some of the subject matter and the language for his stories of the later 1930s. Then, early in 1935 he encountered the most important of these fringe people, Harry Doyle, a suspended horse-trainer whom he thought he had briefly seen and been drawn to ten years before, the man who became the love of his life. Doyle introduced him to a world of horse-racing, rooming houses, itinerant workers, and life on the streets that he had not known well before, and in his spare, indirect way of communication he eventually moved Sargeson towards the mode of writing of his classic stories, as he confessed in *More than Enough*:

... for the most part he preferred not to be explicit.... And it was this drive which had much to do with my achieving at last some literary distinction: I learned to use my imagination to assist me in becoming explicit on paper, while at the same time leaving a good deal to become intelligible to the reader only upon the condition of a halfway meeting: he must not expect much from me unless he used his imagination. And I must emphasise that in this literary matter I owe to Harry my friend more than I can say.

Sargeson arrived at this mode of writing only after some experimentation. His first completed novel, 'Blind Alleys' (also entitled in one draft 'Southern Rebels'), an attempt to depict several young rebels in a conservative small-town community, he described in *More than Enough* as 'Galsworthian' in style. When Edward Garnett, Cape's reader, suggested revisions, he made them and resubmitted the manuscript in 1932, only to have the novel refused again because of publication cutbacks caused by the Depression. He continued to revise the manuscript and submit it to other English publishers, but it never achieved acceptance. His attempts to rework it into a play floundered, and his subsequent play of boarding-house life, 'Secret Places', found neither a publisher nor a producer. He began another novel, this time in diary form, but gave it up and turned to short fiction again, but managed to place only one story, 'Life is Like That' (later reworked to become 'Three Women' and then finally 'Three Men'), published in the *Australian Woman's Mirror* in 1933. He was more successful in these years with freelance journalism, placing quite a few features in Auckland papers.

The relative failure of 'Blind Alleys' led Sargeson in the next few years to begin questioning himself 'whether there might not be an appropriate New Zealand language to deal with the material of New Zealand life' and whether language was 'merely the tool the novelist worked *with*' or 'part of the raw material of life which he worked *upon*' or 'a complex and difficult combination of both', as he later said in *More than Enough*. He began to resolve these questions and achieve a breakthrough as a writer in mid-1935 when one Saturday afternoon, deciding to write a story for the Christchurch periodical *Tomorrow*, he 'with speed and sureness never before known to [him] wrote the five hundred or so words required for 'Conversation with my Uncle'.' He described his discovery in *More than Enough* as the unexpected culmination of a long process:

... I saw a copy of *Tomorrow* and almost immediately wrote something which I could very surely recognise as quite different from anything I had written previously: but the astonishing thing was that it seemed different in an interesting and distinguishing way from any other piece of writing I had ever encountered. After years of trial and error, of failure in my attempt to write long pieces and short, novels plays stories verse essays, it looked as though I had moved (or been moved) in the direction of composing short clear sentences which, in a vivid and unexpected way, would transmit a good deal of what readers might fairly grant to be common human experience.... What especially delighted me was that despite the simplicity of my sentences, they could in a page-long sketch achieve an unexpected totality not to be compared with the meagre sum of parts.

The sketch appeared in *Tomorrow* in July 1935, and Sargeson's classic stories were under way. He had found a subject, the puritan world of his upbringing; a style and mode, based on Harry Doyle's speech; and a place of publication, one that was shared by most of the significant writers of his generation, including Denis Glover, A. R. D. Fairburn, and Allen Curnow. *Tomorrow* could not afford to pay its contributors, but it provided an audience and a place among his peers. Looking back on the five years of writing the *Tomorrow* stories in 1950, in 'Writing a Novel', he remembered the excitement of discovery:

I had decided that there was a New Zealand language appropriate to the material of New Zealand life – or if there was not, then it was up to me to create such a language. Every time I wrote a short story, I was as much excited by the thought of the advance I had made toward bringing this New Zealand language to light, as I was by the substance of the story....

As he said of this time in an interview with Michael Beveridge in *Landfall* in June 1970, 'It was almost like Wordsworth you know. "Bliss was it in that dawn .../ but to be young was very heaven!"'

For the next five years, until the government closed it in 1940, *Tomorrow* gave Sargeson a regular outlet for a variety of writings. Twenty of the stories and sketches he collected first appeared there, as did nine he did not collect. In addition there were short poems and squibs, several dramatic sketches, a series of parodies of New Zealand novels, essays and reviews, letters, brief satirical pieces, and, in 1939-1940, a satirical column, 'This Charming Country: A Monthly Causerie', by 'A Radical Man About Town'. One of the essays, appearing in November 1935, was on Sherwood Anderson, one of the primary literary sources for the stories of this time. Sargeson clearly found Anderson a kindred soul, one who wrote stories about ordinary people, revealing them sympathetically by a kind of suggestion and indirection, and one who 'has lived his life in an environment similar to our own, raw, aesthetically hostile'. Although *Tomorrow* was his most important outlet, between 1936 and 1940 Sargeson also placed stories in other papers and magazines: within New Zealand, the *Weekly News* (two), the *Auckland Star* (one), the *New Zealand Herald* (one); in Australia, the *Bulletin* (two) and *Man* (one); in the United States, *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* (three); in England, *Time and Tide* (five) and *New Writing* (one).

Periodical publication led to book publication. Eight of the early *Tomorrow* stories plus two that had not previously been published made up Sargeson's first 'book', the pamphlet *Conversation with My Uncle and Other Sketches*, which was published by Robert Lowry at the Unicorn Press, in 1936. This small publication, subsidised by Sargeson and his friends and supporters, received a surprising amount of critical attention. The most favourable came from other writers. D'Arcy Cresswell and Fairburn were both enthusiastic in *Tomorrow* in July 1936, as might have been expected, and so was E. H. McCormick reviewing it on the radio, while Robin Hyde in the *Auckland Observer* was a little cooler, finding the book slight but full of promise. Fairburn praised the writer as one 'who has been influenced by, but has not succumbed to, modern American writing', and Cresswell praised especially the evocation of sympathy through concrete detail and understatement, and made a point of praising the subversive handling of homosexuality in 'I've Lost my Pal', while McCormick said of Sargeson's handling of 'the colloquial speech of this country' that 'Here, perhaps for the first time in our history, is a literary convention which is peculiar and appropriate to New Zealand' (as he remembered it in *Islands* in March 1978). The reviewers in the daily

newspaper were briefer and more mixed in their responses, but at least the book was reviewed.

Sargeson's first major collection and the most influential of his books was *A Man and His Wife*, published by Glover at the Caxton Press in 1940, with a stapled cheap edition following in 1941, and with the Progressive Publishing Society bringing out reprints, both casebound and stapled, in 1944. The book reprinted six of the stories from *Conversation with My Uncle and Other Sketches* along with eighteen other stories, twelve of which had first appeared in *Tomorrow*. The year of publication coincided with the New Zealand Centennial, and the combination of the two events brought Sargeson considerable public recognition. One of the stories collected in the book, 'The Making of a New Zealander', he had entered in the short story section of the Centennial Literary Competition, and it shared first prize. Then at the end of the year McCormick published his Centennial literary history, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, and in it he proclaimed *A Man and His Wife* to be one of the 'signs of hope in the New Zealand of 1940'. The reviews of *A Man and His Wife* were mostly in a similar vein, although there were a few discordant notes, especially from older literary conservatives. Pat Lawlor in *New Zealand Truth* (23 December 1940) wrote of Sargeson's 'impossibly brutish concept of New Zealand life' and his 'naughty-boy-peering-into-the-sanitary-trap complex', and the younger conservative Douglas Stewart in the *Bulletin* (16 October 1940) found the book 'well worth criticising' but attacked it as corrupted by American modernism, presenting 'Proletarian New Zealand. Lefty New Zealand. Hairy New Zealand'. But in general the book received serious praise from Sargeson's peers, including Helen Shaw in the Christchurch *Press* and M. H. Holcroft in the *Southland Times* as well as the older conservative O. N. Gillespie in the *New Zealand Free Lance*. By far the most important review was by Oliver Duff, the editor, in the *New Zealand Listener* (25 October 1940). Duff clearly disagreed with many of Sargeson's views of New Zealand (as his own Centennial book, *New Zealand Now*, would show in 1941), but he had no doubt that a major writer had arrived. He entitled his review 'Look We for Another?' and said that in reading Sargeson he was 'followed through this book by a text: "Art thou he that should come/ Or look we for another?"'. The first major New Zealand writer had been Katherine Mansfield. There had been no one comparable before her and none since until the appearance of Sargeson, but now Duff was convinced that 'he that should come' had arrived. Bruce Mason, looking back on his adolescence in *Islands* in March 1978, summarised the impact *A Man and His Wife* had on him at the time. He could look out from the upstairs window and see 'the cardboard and pinex spires of the Centennial Exhibition at Rongotai' while he

held the Sargeson book in his hand, and Sargeson seemed to be answering the Centennial:

Sargeson was bold enough to say, 'Look! Listen! Mark! This is all it has amounted to. Against your growth, your progress, I place these bleak and stunted lives; against the blare of self-congratulation, the tiny music of the numb and spiritless'.

The stories that had this effect were Sargeson's contribution to what Curnow in the preface to his 1973 *Collected Poems* called 'the anti-myth about New Zealand' that his generation of writers were building in the 1930s and 1940s. In so doing, Sargeson established the conventions of the critical realist story that would dominate New Zealand fiction for the next quarter century. The characters in these stories were primarily social outsiders and losers – itinerant workers, the unemployed, lonely old men and women, children in puritan families, repressed adolescents. Against them were placed dominating puritan mothers, respectable businessmen, ministers, the pillars of bourgeois puritan society. Sargeson in a review of a novel by James Courage in *Landfall* in March 1949 said 'it is impossible for any serious novelist to finish his story without letting you know (at any rate, implicitly) that he has judged his characters', and although the judgments in these stories are very implicit, there can be no doubt that Sargeson is guiding the reader's sympathies towards the social outsiders and away from the puritans at the social centre. He generally achieves this by using a first-person point of view with a semi-articulate narrator who does not fully understand the meaning of his own experience, but who reveals in the course of his seemingly artless vernacular narration that there is something seriously wrong with 'New Zealand as it is'. Sargeson's private mythology, based on his dualistic vision with its inverted puritanism, comes through so that in 'Toothache' a grandmother, 'an old woman with only a few bits of hair hanging down . . . big and fat in her white nightgown', who is nursing a small boy with a toothache, becomes a symbol of human love and courage in the face of an indifferent universe; or in 'An Affair of the Heart' a mad old woman's obsessive love for her son becomes an image of how love can be 'such a terrible thing' and 'at the same time be so beautiful'; while in 'Conversation with My Uncle' a successful businessman in a 'hard knocker' who 'can't suppose' becomes a symbol of the living death of bourgeois respectability; and in 'Old Man's Story' the relationship between a seemingly dirty old man and a poor adolescent orphan girl becomes an image of the wonder and the vulnerability of love.

During the years of World War II Sargeson continued the mode of life he had established in the 1930s and extended the literary mode he had created. He was diagnosed with surgical tuberculosis in late 1939, and this excused him from participation in the war effort and gained him an invalid's benefit. About the war itself he had very mixed feelings. He hated the organised violence and was upset when the government closed down *Tomorrow* in May 1940 because of its critical attitude towards the conduct of the war and its outspoken support of pacifists, but he was strongly anti-fascist and was sympathetic to the plight of Russia after the German invasion in 1941. He had close friends who were pacifists, such as E. P. Dawson and Ian Hamilton (who spent much of the war in prison), but he also had friends in the military, including Glover and several young writing protégés, G. R. Gilbert and John Reece Cole. In addition he had refugee friends: Greville Texidor, another writing protégé, who was married to Werner Droscher, an anti-Nazi German; Odo Strewe, an anti-Nazi German who was interned as an 'enemy alien' for much of the war; and the great German Jewish poet Karl Wolfskehl, with whom he had a close and difficult friendship which he finally broke off because it interfered with his writing. He wrote to McCormick in July 1941 that 'The war seems to me an unrelieved horror, and the tension that comes from one moment trying to face it and the next trying to shut it out completely is bound to make a lot of us half barmy'.

For the most part he shut out the war and got on with his writing, although some of that writing shows the effects of the war on people in New Zealand: 'Letter to a Friend' shows a sensitive adolescent with pacifist sympathies discovering he cannot turn away from the war; the uncollected 'It Shows That Sinatra can be a Good Influence' in the *New Zealand Listener* for 19 January 1945 shows a cheerful, admirable young soldier on leave; 'Big Ben' depicts an English immigrant who returns to England because his wife is unhappy in New Zealand, only to encounter the war there; and 'The Hole that Jack Dug' shows a World War I veteran dreading the oncoming of the war, making a personal gesture against it, and then losing a son to it. But for the most part Sargeson's writings at this time were unrelated to the war, and were extensions of what he had accomplished in his stories of 1935-1940. As early as 1938, looking at his short stories, he decided that, as he said in *More than Enough*, he 'could not go on writing this way indefinitely', so he took a lot of notes he had for more stories and 'found that they could all be run together, as it were, rounding off a single theme and this was connected up with [his] obvious wish or desire to write something longer, to write a novel'. The work that evolved from this procedure was the short novel 'That Summer', which he completed in 1941, a mateship story drawing on his own relationship with

Harry Doyle. Much to Sargeson's disappointment, Glover did not like the work, put off by the homosexual undertone, and did not print it. But Sargeson then submitted it to John Lehmann in England. Lehmann had published some of his earlier work in *New Writing* and *Folios of New Writing*, and he accepted the short novel for publication in the very popular and highly prestigious *Penguin New Writing*, where it appeared in three instalments in 1943-1944. The Progressive Publishing Society planned a New Zealand edition of the work together with the short stories written since *A Man and His Wife*, but this project fell through because of the Society's financial failure.

Sargeson's major effort of the war years was a different kind of extension of his earlier work, a semi-autobiographical novel that he hoped would be the definitive account of growing up and revolting against that 'Grey Death, puritanism, wowserism gone most startlingly putrescent', as he described his parents' Hamilton in a letter to Dawson of 25 April 1944. His first attempt, entitled 'There's Another Day Tomorrow', was to have been a *bildungsroman* using the realist methods of the early stories, but it never got beyond note stage. By 19 July 1943 he was writing to Dawson of the planned novel as a modernist work, 'a sort of colonial *Ulysses* trying to show what European man gone to the colonies has become', with 'autobiography, woven in' as 'a demonstration of the colonial Stephen Dedalus'. On 15 November 1943, he wrote to Glover (by then in England in the Royal Navy) that he experienced a 'strange discomfort' in telling his friend of his excitement over this project, but took consolation from the thought that Joyce wrote right through World War I and 'just about ignored it completely', perhaps 'the only sensible thing that a man of his powers could do'. This ambitious project soon narrowed to Sargeson's version of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the short novel *When the Wind Blows*, which takes its protagonist from a sheltered, repressive puritan childhood and adolescence to the moment when he sees his father secretly spying on his mother's younger sister undressing, and 'once the boy understands that his father is involved in all the human frailties, the way is open for the healing of his traumatic condition', as Sargeson said to Beveridge in *Landfall* in June 1970. Excerpts from the work in progress appeared in *New Zealand New Writing* in 1944 and in *Southern Stories, Poems and Paintings in Melbourne* in 1945. Glover returned from his war service and, back at the Caxton Press, was highly impressed and published the work as a short book in 1945, while Lehmann published it in three instalments of *Penguin New Writing* in 1946-1947. Reviewers, however, were not entirely certain that Sargeson had succeeded in making the transition from the realist short story to a modernist short novel. H. Winston Rhodes in the Christchurch *Press* praised the new work, but Holcroft in the

*New Zealand Listener* (23 November 1945) regretted the loss of the realist's depiction of social environment and feared that Sargeson possibly lacked 'the creative energy for a sustained work of fiction'. The young James K. Baxter in *Canta* (7 July 1948) similarly regretted the narrowing of range in the work but insisted that Sargeson had to be granted his artistic choice, and concluded by affirming Sargeson's place: 'From a solitary and highly individual position Sargeson has come to be accepted as part of the foundation of such national culture as we seem likely to possess'.

Encouraged by Glover's response to *When the Wind Blows*, Sargeson had renewed his plan to write a long novel, writing to Dawson on 16 March 1945 that he saw the short novel as 'a kind of elongated prologue to a much longer book of more mature substance'. But he was also involved in several other projects. He had been acting as mentor to a group of young writers, including A. P. Gaskell, Gilbert, Cole, David Ballantyne, Maurice Duggan, and the more mature Texidor. To showcase the new movement that he was leading he accepted a commission from the Progressive Publishing Society to edit a volume of New Zealand short stories of the 1940s. Submissions were invited, and in early 1945 he had to wade through a quantity of unpublishable material from unknown writers, but he came up with a selection that included his protégés as well as a few writers he had not known before (and several included because of financial support or their publishing contacts), and he capped it off with a story of his own that distilled his earlier method and took suggestion and indirection as far as he could take them, 'The Hole that Jack Dug'. By the time he had put together the collection, which he hopefully entitled *Speaking for Ourselves*, the Progressive Publishing Society had withdrawn its support because of financial difficulties, but Glover picked up the project, farmed out the printing to Lowry, and published it in mid-1945 under the Caxton imprint. It was not a commercial success, but it received mildly favourable reviews and excited the young Janet Frame, who later wrote in *To the Is-land* that the stories 'overwhelmed [her] by the fact of their belonging'.

By the end of 1945, then, Sargeson was established as the leading fiction-writer of his generation, one of the founders of a modern New Zealand literature. Further recognition came in 1946 when Lehmann published in England *That Summer and Other Stories*. In addition to the title short novel, the collection included fifteen stories selected from *A Man and His Wife* and five more recent, previously uncollected stories. The book sold well and received good reviews in England, while in New Zealand James Bertram in the *New Zealand Listener* (5 September 1947) welcomed it as 'one of those books that help change directions and that – in their countries of origin at least

– can never again be forgotten’, and the young political scientist and literary critic Robert Chapman, in a long review in *Landfall* in September 1947, praised Sargeson’s moral vision and the indirection by which he presented it, seeing his work as ‘a valid and sustained symbolic dissection [that] condemns the distorted structural form that life has taken amongst us’. Not all New Zealand critics were comfortable with Sargeson’s criticism of New Zealand life. John Reid, viewing Sargeson’s work from a Christian point of view in his *Creative Writing in New Zealand: A Brief Critical History* (1946), granted that Sargeson had ‘shaped New Zealand colloquial speech into a literary medium through which the half-realised desires, the hopes and fears of a largely inarticulate people find expression’, so that the reader can recognize his stories ‘as being a faithful reproduction of certain aspects of the New Zealand character’. However, Reid felt that the stories lacked a spiritual dimension, and that with their emphasis on ‘violence, on mental aberrations, on the sordid, the cruel and bitter in life’, they had ‘a total effect of cynicism from which health is absent’.

In England, Lehmann, pleased with the sales and reviews of *That Summer and Other Stories* (there was even a French translation of *That Summer*), urged Sargeson to get on with his long novel. However, complications meanwhile had intervened at home. Early in 1945 the Takapuna Borough Council informed Sargeson that his dilapidated shack did not conform to the by-laws and must be demolished. Although he was achieving literary success, Sargeson was making little money from his writing and was living precariously on his invalid’s benefit. Now he feared he would lose his home, such as it was, and his mode of life. However, early in 1946 he persuaded his father to deed him the property (and in the process he legally changed his name to Frank Sargeson) and he set about gaining the finance to build a new (and legal) cottage. Through the intervention of McCormick, Joseph Heenan, the head of the Department of Internal Affairs, arranged for Sargeson’s invalid’s benefit to be replaced by a ‘literary pension’, and some of this was capitalised to fund the building of the new cottage. The whole process, which was not completed until June 1948, seriously interfered with Sargeson’s work on his new novel, and he did not complete the writing and typing until February 1948, dedicating the work to Glover. Unfortunately, Glover did not like the novel and would not print it, but Lehmann accepted it and it was published in England in 1949 (there was not a New Zealand edition until 1974).

When the new novel appeared as *I Saw in My Dream* (incorporating *When the Wind Blows* as the first section), it was not, as Sargeson had hoped, welcomed as the Great New Zealand Novel. It received mixed and generally

unenthusiastic reviews in England, while in New Zealand such reviewers as Lawrence Baigent in the June 1950 *Landfall*, David Hall in the *New Zealand Listener* (13 January 1950), and Dan Davin in *Here and Now* (November 1949) were more sympathetic, but saw the work as uneven, episodic, and, they hinted, rather unbalanced in its treatment of sexuality. Hall, for example found that the book did not give 'a balanced picture' of New Zealand society and that although it had 'brilliantly realistic' characters and episodes, it was not a coherent realist novel but rather 'something quite different, an attempt to purge some inner necessity of a nature by no means simple', while Baigent concluded that it 'is the work of a genuine creative artist', but that it 'fails as a novel'. Instead of being seen as the keystone of his career, the book was seen as problematic, and Sargeson's true accomplishment was seen as in his stories of 1935-1945, a judgment with which most later critics would concur. Speaking on the radio on 'Writing a Novel' in 1950, Sargeson spoke of his own experience, primarily with 'That Summer', and outlined what he thought a good New Zealand novel would do. He assumed that such a novel would be 'what is loosely called a naturalistic or realistic one', that it would deal with the 'pervadingly characteristic' feature of New Zealand life, the country's 'own particular variety of puritanism', and that in so doing it would 'seek out the threads of our lives, and show us where they all lead to'. In saying that this had not yet been done, he was implicitly admitting that his own novels had not fully succeeded in this endeavour.

Increasingly in the early and mid-1950s it appeared that Sargeson had had his say. In the interview with Beveridge in the *Landfall* of June 1970 he recalled Glover saying to him 'Remember, you'll be pre-war – you'll be completely out of it now – forget that you ever put pen to paper'. He had pretty well worked out the vein of his early stories, publishing between 1946 and 1954 only one short story (which he never collected). He had attempted to use his own life as raw material for a modernist novel in *I Saw in My Dream* to no great acclaim. Even his protégés seemed played out. Caxton had published books of short stories by Gilbert (1943), Gaskell (1947), and Cole (1949), and Lowry had published a short novel by Texidor (1949); but Gilbert could never find a publisher for the novel which Sargeson had urged him to write, while Gaskell faded out as a writer after 1950, and Cole and Texidor published no more fiction. Only Duggan and Ballantyne among the young writers he had encouraged continued to publish, and both moved in directions away from Sargeson's example, Ballantyne towards a semi-documentary realism modelled on James T. Farrell, and Duggan towards greater stylistic elaboration. In *An Angel at My Table* Frame described Sargeson's disappointment in 1955-56:

... Frank ... was often depressed by the general neglect of writers and by the fact that his own books were out of print. Fairburn was said to be ill, R.A.K. Mason was silent, and where was A.P. Gaskell? Something was sadly amiss when writers wrote one acclaimed book and never spoke again. Speaking for Ourselves, indeed! The message of silence was too depressing.

Sargeson did make several attempts at breaking new ground in the early 1950s, but neither was immediately followed up. In 1950-1951 he published in four instalments in *Landfall* an autobiographical essay, 'Up onto the Roof and Down Again', about his relationship with Oakley Sargeson, who had died suddenly and unexpectedly late in 1948, a work unlike anything he had published before in its style and method. He continued with a draft of another such essay in 1953, leading towards a full autobiography, but then put that project aside, deciding that he 'was still too young to be writing an autobiography', he later said in *More than Enough*. He moved in a rather different direction with a short novel, *I for One...*, which he began in 1949 and which finally appeared in *Landfall* in 1952 and was brought out as a small book by Caxton in 1956. It was an attempt to extend the narrative method of the early stories and 'That Summer' by continuing to use a first-person narrator who did not fully understand the meaning of what was narrated, but substituting for the usual inarticulate male working-class narrator a quite articulate female middle-class one. A. W. Stockwell, reviewing it in *Landfall* in March 1957 found it 'something new, so new it hardly seems to be the "real Sargeson" at all', and was not sure he liked it. Hall in the *New Zealand Listener* (31 August 1956) also recognized its newness but found it 'the best work that Sargeson has produced'. A couple of stories in *Landfall* in 1954 and 1955, 'The Undertaker's Story' and 'The Colonel's Daughter', also used more articulate but still unseeing narrators.

Instead of following these promising new directions, which he would pick up later, Sargeson went back to a genre that he had tried in the 1930s, drama, and wrote two plays, 'The Cradle and the Egg' and 'A Time for Sowing', but then put them aside when he could find neither a producer nor a publisher for them. Then he seemed to give up. These were, he later said in *Never Enough!*, the 'thin and sterile years of [his] fifties' when he 'suffered a paralysis of will, a failure of nerve'. His career as a writer seemed essentially over, and 'ever and again the drift of [his] interior dialogue was towards the theme of to be or not to be'.

Even the positive experiences of the early 1950s seemed to imply that Sargeson's accomplishments were all in the past, that his literary career was

becoming history. The 'Letter to Frank Sargeson' of 1953 was an obvious example, but there were several others. In 1951 when he made his first visit to the South Island to attend the Writers' Conference in Christchurch, he was honoured as one of those who had laid the foundations of modern New Zealand literature, but it was clear that it was the next, post-war generation of writers that was building upon them. Baxter, in the most significant address at the conference 'Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry' (published as a booklet by Caxton later that year), famously described the role of the New Zealand writer as being 'a cell of good living in a corrupt society', and he must have had Sargeson in mind as an exemplar, but his emphasis was on his own post-war generation and their need to build in their own way on what Sargeson and his generation had done in that role. The three accounts of the conference in *Landfall* in September 1951 were all by younger writers, and two were directly relevant to Sargeson. W. H. Oliver, the poet-historian, pointed out the differences in attitude of the 1930s writers and the post-war group but found two points on which they agreed that separated them from Lawlor and the more conservative older writers (who were also there and vociferous) – 'the need to repudiate the moralizing strictures of New Zealand's very seed breed of puritan, and the need to say openly that something substantial and necessary happened to New Zealand's writing in the not too distant past, when, perhaps, Sargeson started in fiction, Mason in poetry, and Beaglehole in history'. Thus he affirmed Sargeson's basic theme and his work, but the first was now to be taken as an obvious point of agreement and the second was already history. Chapman in his report noted the same generational divisions and made the same general point of agreement about the basic theme for prose fiction, 'the formative, constricting and distorting effect of the mores and values of New Zealand puritanism on our human scene', a theme he developed further in his 'Fiction and the Social Pattern' in *Landfall* in March 1953, the first thorough discussion of the Sargeson tradition of critical realism in relation to New Zealand society. In that essay Sargeson's role as the maker of the movement's conventions, both formal and thematic, was clear, but also clear was the passing on of the torch to younger writers.

Also in the early 1950s Sargeson was helping McCormick to put together an Oxford anthology of New Zealand stories, doing the typing and suggesting stories for inclusion. Ultimately McCormick and Sargeson disagreed about two of the choices and they resolved this only by turning the matter over to Davin at the Oxford University Press, who made the final decision, wrote the introduction, and became nominal editor. When the book was launched in Wellington in November 1953, Sargeson gave the primary speech, 'One Hundred Years of Story-telling', and picked up the theme of Chapman's essay

(which had appeared that year in the same issue of *Landfall* as the 'Letter to Frank Sargeson') to argue that just as George Eliot's novels were a reaction to her unhappy experiences of secularised puritanism in the nineteenth-century Midlands so the best New Zealand fiction was a reaction to similar, historically later, experiences: 'Given a certain kind of society, you may reasonably expect a certain kind of novelist'. In a sense he was historicising his own accomplishments, although his strongest praise was for younger writers who were continuing that criticism of puritan society, Frame and Ballantyne. The anthology itself included twenty-two stories published after 1935: two were by Sargeson and three by his contemporaries, while seventeen were by post-war writers (mostly Sargeson protégés or writers clearly in the Sargeson tradition). Sargeson's comments drew out the historical pattern implicit in the anthology, a pattern in which he was central but firmly in the past (the Sargeson stories selected, 'Last Adventure' and 'The Making of a New Zealander', were from 1937-1938).

Another historicising of Sargeson came in 1954 with the 'publication' (in fifty cyclostyled copies) of Helen Shaw's collection of critical essays on Sargeson's work, *The Puritan and the Waif*. The collection had been put together in 1950 and Shaw had tried for several years to no avail to achieve commercial publication, and so finally had to bring out the anthology herself. The essayists, in addition to Shaw herself and the English critic Walter Allen, included Cresswell, Dawson, and Rhodes among Sargeson's contemporaries and Baxter, Davin, and Erik Schwimmer among the post-war writers. Rhodes' essay – which was to be reprinted in *Landfall* in 1955 and in the anthology of work from that magazine, *Landfall Country*, in 1962 – was the fullest account to date of Sargeson's humanist vision, the 'moral climate' of his short stories. Allen affirmed Sargeson as the maker of a tradition, his classic stories 'the first works in a new national literature', but he did not like *I Saw in My Dream*. Cresswell, on the other hand, still hoped for the Great New Zealand Novel from Sargeson and thought 'his life's work ... has yet to be finished', while Davin thought that the relatively unsuccessful narrative experiments of *I Saw in My Dream* might be a first step in the attempt to 'break out of the charmed circle that closed with *That Summer*'. Although there was thus some hope for Sargeson to advance, the consensus in the volume was that his accomplishment lay back in the 1930s (or, in Baxter's case, seeing 'That Summer' as his masterpiece because it was the culmination of the work from the 1930s). Baxter was perhaps most explicit in historicising Sargeson:

Sargeson's age ... stands him in good stead; for the world of the depression years, bridging two eras, is better suited for near-

great writing than the less seedy but more disastrous one which we now live in.

Hall in reviewing the volume in *Landfall* for September 1956 thought that it, 'obviously involuntarily', implied that 'it is time we embalmed Sargeson and laid him in his monument against the great awakening'.

This historicising of Sargeson was oddly confirmed in 1954 when he was invited to Dunedin by the University of Otago Literary Society to give a talk. In the discussion afterwards a student put him in the historical past next to Mansfield, in making the provocative statement that there had been two great tragedies of New Zealand literature, Mansfield and Sargeson. As he told Beveridge years later in *Landfall* in June 1970, Sargeson knew immediately what she meant: he and Mansfield were the originators of the two primary traditions in the New Zealand short story, and both had been imitated by lesser writers, possibly closing off other possibilities. Like Mansfield he was an influence, but not a living, changing writer. It seemed that Sargeson was ready to be filed away as part of New Zealand literary history. However, McCormick, in his *New Zealand Literature: A Survey (1959)*, the first full-length history of New Zealand literature, was not ready to relegate him to the past. Reviewing his work from *Conversation with my Uncle* to *I for One*, he saw a pattern of development in which the mode of early stories reached a peak with *That Summer*, 'Sargeson's most satisfying story, beautifully proportioned and nearly always convincing'. He thought *I Saw in my Dream* was an interesting failure because it lacked 'any unifying theme except the gripping struggle of the hero, Henry-Dave, who is too negative a figure to excite interest, much less compassion', but that *I For One* 'opened up new territory' with its 'multiple complexities and subtle ironies', and he concluded that 'Of no writer can more be expected'.

### III

Then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s there were some signs that there might be some imaginative life left, although nothing visible immediately came of them. In 1958, inspired by an eccentric acquaintance who he thought would make a wonderful subject for a picaresque novel, Sargeson began on *Memoirs of a Peon*, which he thought might at least be his 'literary last will and testament', he told Beveridge, 'perhaps the last thing [he] would ever write'. He completed the novel in 1961 but then failed in a long search for a publisher and put it aside. His energies instead were put into drama, for a producer, Christopher Cathcart, aided by the painter Colin McCahon as set designer, had taken up his plays and established a group in Auckland, the

New Independent Theatre, to present them. 'A Time for Sowing' was presented in 1961, 'The Cradle and the Egg' in 1962, and Sargeson threw himself into the effort to set up an indigenous literary theatre. The group did produce a few other New Zealand plays, but then the venture foundered. This failure, instead of being the final blow to Sargeson's literary career, led to a renewal, as he told Beveridge: 'It all collapsed and with a marvellous feeling of relief I started writing again'. He immediately wrote three new stories, one of which ('Just Trespassing, Thanks') won the Katherine Mansfield Award in 1965. Then the floodgates opened and in the years 1964-1976 he published eleven books and, as he said in *Never Enough!*, 'became a professional writer in the most exact sense of the word'.

Some of these new publications were collections of previous work. In 1964 Caxton published *Wrestling with the Angel*, which collected the two plays. More importantly, the same year saw the publication in New Zealand by Blackwood and Janet Paul of the *Collected Stories 1935-1963*, edited by Bill Pearson, a book which Sargeson had been trying to bring out for a decade. Despite that finishing date in the title, the volume was basically a collection of the classic stories from 1935-1945, including 'That Summer' (the first New Zealand publication of a major work that had first appeared in *Penguin New Writing* twenty-one years before) – forty stories and sketches and the short novel, including all the works from his previous three collections plus four previously uncollected stories from the 1940s and three from the 1950s. Pearson's introduction summed up Sargeson's role as a pioneer who 'cleared some tracks' that other writers 'might confidently follow' and his dualistic humanist vision as one that saw in provincial New Zealand 'a conflict between the beauty of the human spirit and some doctrine or dogma that inhibits it and constricts its expression'.

The publication of the collected stories cheered Sargeson immensely, making his work available to New Zealand readers as it had not been for twenty years, but the most exciting publishing developments were in England. Some of Sargeson's young New Zealand friends in London had put publisher Martin Green onto his recent work (Green had as a schoolboy in the 1940s been excited by Sargeson's earlier work in *Penguin New Writing*), and in 1965 Green's firm, MacGibbon and Kee, brought out the English edition of the *Collected Stories* (and in the next few years there was a German translation of the volume and a Bulgarian translation of selected stories from it). More important for Sargeson, they brought out *Memoirs of a Peon*, at last in print, four years after its completion. No longer a 'literary last will and testament',

the novel became the first in a sequence of a different kind of fiction from Sargeson, indicative of a different stance in relation to a changed society.

That stance related to social change. In the late 1950s Sargeson had found his world invaded by the new post-war, suburban affluent society. Takapuna was no longer a sleepy holiday village but was now a part of Auckland's suburbia; 'the day of village stagnation was over, now for suburban glory, highrise tarseal and supermarket', he wrote in *Never Enough!* The dominant symbol of this change appeared at his front gate, for Esmonde Road, the back road on which his cottage was built, became in 1959 a primary feeder road to the new Auckland Harbour Bridge, and that bridge had made it possible for Takapuna to become a dormitory suburb for Auckland. Sargeson, who had never learned to drive a car (his one attempt in the 1920s had ended in his running into a shop veranda post), was now subjected to what he called in *Never Enough!* 'the pop grind and clatter, rattle thunder pop and swish of a vast assortment of air-defiling vehicles' that moved according to the commuter rhythms of an urban work week he had long before foresworn. This new world had bred its own rebels, the young beatniks and dropouts very different from the rebels of his generation, and they became a more benign invasion which bemused him, as they used his army hut for various purposes, often sexual, and seemed to find in him an anachronism much more interesting than the world of their parents.

As Glover had predicted, Sargeson was 'completely out of it' in this new post-war world, but he came to find that that was a useful position. At first he had felt only alienated, but now he found that his distance from his society in age and attitude gave him a comic and ironic perspective very different from the controlled intensity with which he had viewed the earlier puritan society in his classic stories, and this perspective was central to the three strategies he was to pursue for the rest of his career: (1) he could view as an ironic spectacle this new affluent society which had somehow developed from the old puritan one; (2) he could view that past society as something distant and finished, no longer a threat, to be understood and even laughed at; or (3), he could focus on survivors from that puritan past beached on the shore of a brave new affluent world they did not understand, and enjoy the spectacle of the incongruity. Common to all three strategies was a change in method, replacing the semi-articulate first-person narrators of the classic stories with an articulate, sometimes too articulate, narrator, whether first-person character or third-person narrative persona. And so he found himself feeling what he called in *Never Enough!* 'a sudden interior pressure of a whole new

mass and range of material for writing which [he] had never foreseen except perhaps very sketchily’.

*Memoirs of a Peon* was the first expression of these new strategies and this new method, a humorous retrospective account of amorous misadventures in the puritan New Zealand of the 1920s told by a loquacious would-be Casanova whose prose style was a pastiche of eighteenth-century literary prose and who just failed to see the irony of his situation. The short stories of 1964-1965 extended the strategies and methods further. ‘Just Trespassing, Thanks’ deals with the interplay between the older narrator, as survivor of the puritan past, and his young beatnik invaders, while ‘City and Suburban’ deals ironically with the holiday adventures of an over-articulate and unhappy accountant caught up in an affluent suburban way of life that he does not really like and with a consumerist wife whose material tastes and sexual demands upset him. The third of the stories, ‘Beau’, published in *Mate* in June 1965, became the opener in what would be a sequence about Mrs Hinchingshorn’s boarding house, the refuge of a motley group of survivors from the past who were as ironically out of place in contemporary Auckland as was the house itself. The same month in *Landfall*, Sargeson published an obituary for Texidor and an essay in the ‘Beginnings’ series that Brasch had initiated, drawing on ‘Up onto the Roof and down Again’ and his unpublished radio talk of 1950, ‘On Writing a Novel’, and ending the essay with a memory of his disappointment when he had finished *That Summer* in 1942 and ‘it had turned out to be a very short novel’, a situation that he had since rectified with *Memoirs of a Peon*. In a sense the essay, along with the *Collected Stories*, marked the formal closure of his first career, as he finally set out in earnest on his second one.

With the publication of three books and a group of stories in two years, Sargeson was suddenly back on the literary scene. The collection of previous work along with the appearance of new work meant that he could not only be celebrated for the accomplishment of his classic stories but could also be seen as a writer still active and growing. The appearance of the *Collected Stories* became the occasion for the first. Geoffrey Moorhouse in the *Guardian* spoke for the English reviewers (and was later quoted on the jacket of *Sargeson*) in stating that ‘if Katherine Mansfield first put New Zealand on the literary map . . . Frank Sargeson must rank as his country’s first real cartographer’. In New Zealand, *Landfall* in June 1964 printed E. A. Horsman’s positive review essay, ‘The Art of Frank Sargeson’, along with Sargeson’s autobiographical essay on his beginnings as a writer and his eulogy for Texidor (who had recently died in Australia), as well as Brasch’s editorial note

celebrating the writer whose work 'is more deeply rooted in New Zealand and at the same time more fully wrought than any other work this country has yet seen'.

The response to Sargeson's newer work was more mixed. *Wrestling with the Angel* drew a sharply negative review from D. F. McKenzie in *Landfall* for September 1965. McKenzie compared 'The Cradle and the Egg' most unfavourably to Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, insisting that the highest critical standards should be applied, and said he found it 'disturbing that criticism of [Sargeson's] work . . . can use terms that might appear in an appreciation of Shakespeare. We must surely put away the micrometer and pull out the yardstick'. This review brought a spirited reply from Bruce Mason in *Landfall* for March 1966 that it was unjust to compare Beckett's work created within 'the solid dramatic framework' of European theatre with Sargeson's effort 'in a country without a dramatic framework'. In the same issue of *Landfall* as Mason's essay was R. A. Copland's review of *Memoirs of a Peon*. Copland saw immediately that Sargeson had changed his strategy utterly from the classic stories and thought that the change was only a qualified success, but that Sargeson had opened new possibilities for himself: 'It is as though a new career were beginning'. In a 1968 *Landfall* article, 'The Goodly Roof: Some Thoughts on the Fiction of Frank Sargeson', he developed these ideas, demonstrating what the expansive new style revealed about the intentional 'stoop' to the stance of semi-articulate narrators in the earlier stories.

And for Sargeson that new career was finally beginning. In *Landfall* for June 1966 he had an essay in homage to Henry Lawson (and C. K. Stead published a poem in homage to *Memoirs of a Peon*). In the next issue Sargeson had another of the Mrs Hinchings stories, 'Charity Begins at Home', and with two further stories in *Landfall* in 1967 and 1969, 'A Final Cure' and 'an International Occasion', he completed the sequence. In the same years he published in *Landfall* two 'conversations': 'An Imaginary Conversation: William Yate and Samuel Butler' (1966), an exercise in historical imagination in relation to homosexuality, and 'Conversation in a Train' (1967), a critical discussion of Bill Pearson's novel, *Coal Flat*, which he thought a major work in the critical realist tradition. But the central works of these years were two new novels, *The Hangover* (1967) and *Joy of the Worm* (1969), published by MacGibbon and Kee in London. In the first, a young man dominated by an old-fashioned puritan mother is driven to multiple homicide by the temptations, intellectual and sexual, of the university and the counter-culture in the new Auckland, carrying out a strange re-enactment in a different

key of 'A Good Boy' from 1936, the story told this time not by the young man but by an ironic, distant third-person narrator, an observer and manipulator of symbols, his account supplemented by the journal of one of the characters and the monologues of most of them. In the second, the comically over-sexed and over-intellectual Bohuns, father and son, make their eccentric ways through puritan, provincial rural New Zealand of 1913 to 1920, the story told by an ironic third-person narrator, supplemented by the letters of the main characters in the eighteenth-century epistolary mode.

Sargeson received almost no royalties from his new novels, but he was writing and he was being published and attention was being paid to him. In 1969 the first substantial book on him was published, by Rhodes, in the American Twayne's World Author Series, enshrining the view of him by Sargeson's own generation of writers. Rhodes set Sargeson's work within a biographical framework, but he depended primarily on Sargeson's own selective accounts in 'Beginnings', 'On Writing a Novel' and 'Up onto the Roof and Down Again', both in the published *Landfall* version and in the longer typescript version which later went into *Once is Enough*. Thus he included nothing of Sargeson's homosexuality (as a theme in his life and in his writings), his arrest (referring only to a 'breakdown' in 1929), or his subsequent name change (Conrad Bollinger in the *New Zealand Listener* of 20 February 1970 commented a bit knowingly on Rhodes' 'nicely judged reticence'). The first half of the book is taken up with the early life and the stories of 1935-45, in which he expanded on the discussion in his 1954 essay, but the second half is devoted to a full discussion of the later writings: *I Saw in My Dream* as a Modernist novel, *I for One* as a further move to new narrative method, the plays as dramatic experiments, *The Memoirs of a Peon* as a double-edged ironic satire, with a final note on *The Hangover*. Thus he took full account of the 'second career' up to the time of writing, seeing the later Sargeson as 'an unorthodox creator of new and unexpected fictions', fictions that were different in method from the early stories but which were related to them as part of a coherent and consistent critique of New Zealand life.

The visibility of the new Sargeson was marked by the *Landfall* for March 1970 in which there was the interview with Beveridge (continued in June 1970), a review-essay on the Rhodes book by Howard McNaughton, a review-essay on *The Hangover* and *Joy of the Worm* by Terry Sturm, a poem on Sargeson by Brasch, and an extract from Sargeson's 'new novel', which would become 'A Game of Hide and Seek', while in the second part of the interview Sargeson confided that he was working on 'another thing', about 'a thoroughly good person', which would become 'Man of England Now'. As

Sturm's essay showed, Sargeson had some enthusiastic readers of his new mode. Hall in the *New Zealand Listener* (3 December 1965) had seen *Memoirs of a Peon* as 'a rich exercise in irony', finding that the new distance from his material suited Sargeson well, and Phillip Wilson in the same magazine five years later (17 April 1970) found *Joy of the Worm* to be the 'most mellow' of Sargeson's books, possibly 'an artistic masterpiece'. In England William Trevor in the *Guardian Weekly* (14 August 1969) praised its 'inquisitiveness about people' and its 'humour that is, beneath a velvety surface, as hard as the reality which inspires it', while Jonathan Raban in the *New Statesman* (8 August 1969) described the book as 'an idiosyncratic masterpiece, elegant, formal, deliciously ironic'. But this new mode was not to all tastes: Kenneth Graham in the *Listener* (7 August 1969) found the book 'elusive and strange' and did not like it, 'despite its rumours of authorial talent from far off'. In New Zealand J. B. Ower in *Landfall* for December 1972 published perhaps the only critique of Sargeson based on Northrop Frye's archetypal-psychoanalytic theory (Ower had taught in Canada), 'Wizard's Brew: Frank Sargeson's "Memoirs of a Peon"'. The novel, with its abundance of characters, events, and images provided the critic with material for a field day as he applied Frye's categories to find that it was a semi-picaresque satiric anti-*bildungsroman* in which Michael Newhouse's failure to find psychic integration in early twentieth-century New Zealand society allowed for both a Menippean satire on that society and a presentation of the hero's 'unwholesome psyche' limited by an 'infantile hedonism'. The critic's language and his imposition of a theoretical structure on the book anticipated the later post-structuralist critiques of Sargeson's work.

These years of great literary productivity Sargeson said in *Never Enough!* were 'the happiest years of [his] life', but not so much because of his writing but because he spent them taking care of Harry Doyle. Doyle had been in and out of Sargeson's cottage for over thirty years, never staying long because he was always moving on from job to job, but when he needed nursing care he became a full-time resident. From 1967 to 1971 Sargeson cared for his invalid friend and lover, nursing him, bathing him, cooking and cleaning for him (beautifully fictionalised in 'Charity Begins at Home'), placing his twice-weekly bets for him. The task was made easier because Sargeson had inherited some money (and a refrigerator) from an ancient aunt, which meant that he could have a special room for Harry built on his cottage. This arrangement lasted until April 1971, when Harry was transferred to a war veterans' rest home, where he died suddenly in May 1971. The event threw Sargeson into a depression – 'a misery of cold and damp, winds off the Antarctic ice' was how he described it in *Never Enough!* But, he said in the same book, the loss of

Harry drove him back to memories of the other most significant relationship of his life, that with his long-dead uncle Oakley: 'Two key figures who had long inhabited my private context-country were now removed from reach'. So he dedicated himself to his most personal recapturing of the past, and worked to complete his long-deferred memoirs. *Once is Enough*, incorporating 'Up onto the Roof and Down Again' and 'Third Class Country' (completed in draft in 1953, but not published until an extract appeared in *Landfall* in December 1971), was published in New Zealand and England in 1973. It was soon followed by *More than Enough* (1975), written after Harry Doyle's death, and the trilogy of autobiographical memoirs was completed with *Never Enough!* in 1977.

At the same time, Sargeson was continuing with his fiction. His works of 1969-1970, 'A Game of Hide and Seek' and 'Man of England Now', were collected along with the earlier *I for One*. . . in a volume of short novels, *Man of England Now*, published in England and New Zealand in 1972. Also in 1972 was an eccentrically humorous story, 'The Power of Thought (an encouraging fable)', published in *Landfall* in September under the pseudonym 'R. M. Shaw' because the editor, Robin Dudding, thought the story worthy of publication but not worthy of Sargeson's name. The short novel *Sunset Village*, another comedy of the aged in contemporary Auckland, followed in 1976, an excerpt having previously appeared in *Islands* for Autumn 1974. As part of the Sargeson revival, an augmented New Zealand edition of the *Collected Stories* appeared in 1973 and New Zealand reprints of *I Saw in my Dream* and *Memoirs of a Peon* in 1974. *I Saw in My Dream* appeared in the Auckland University Press series of historical reprints, 'New Zealand Fiction', but this was actually the first New Zealand publication of a novel that had appeared in England twenty-five years before. The full introduction by Winston Rhodes called attention to Sargeson's 'considerable achievement as a novelist, as well as a writer of short stories, traced the history of his earlier attempts to write a novel, and discussed the move to a more impressionistic method in the novel, not always successful, but resulting in a 'remarkable if not flawless achievement'.

This continued outpouring of books drew respectful, if sometimes, puzzled reviews in England and New Zealand. In New Zealand the autobiographical volumes were immediately welcomed as significant additions to the work of a major writer: 'perhaps the fullest examination we have of the making of a New Zealander', was Kevin Cunningham's summing up of *Once is Enough* in *Islands* for Summer 1973; 'the one New Zealand autobiography that is also a complex work of art' that transformed 'the stuff of everyday living, and a few

deeply held affections, into a human comedy that is timeless in instinct and motive, but so exact in scale and accent to our local, conditioned place' was Bertram's judgment of the three volumes in *Islands* for March 1978. There were shorter but similarly positive reviews in the English weeklies. But about the later fiction there was not so much agreement. Lauris Edmond in *Islands* for Summer 1973 looked at the later stories in terms of Sargeson's own criterion of the implicit judgements made upon the characters. To her they were not the 'right judgements' when Sargeson ventured into dealing with heterosexual experience, especially of women, finding that such stories as 'An International Occasion' and 'Charity Begins at Home' exhibited 'some distorted or fragmented view of sexual love with disturbing frequency'. She noted the 'mellowing of style' but concluded that it did not 'consistently reflect a corresponding increase of understanding in areas of experience where an earlier reserve [had] warned him not to venture'. In contrast, Lawrence Jones, reviewing *Man of England Now* in the initial issue of *Islands* in 1972 likewise viewed the three short novels in the volume from the standpoint of Sargeson's implicit judgements on his characters and found them warm and compassionate, especially in their treatment of different sexualities, moving from pathos in 'I for One' to a sympathetic comedy in 'A Game of Hide and Seek'. Baxter, in perhaps his last review in the *New Zealand Listener* (10 September 1972), praised the 'Edwardian' style of *Man of England Now* as appropriate for the book's materials, but in England although Miles Donald in the *New Statesman* (12 May 1972) found the style delightful, D.A.N. Jones in the *Listener* (11 May 1972) found distasteful 'the smiling equanimity which the three stories contemplate disintegration and decay'. Similarly with *Sunset Village*, Bertram found that in it, as in the other books of his 'magnificently fertile decade', Sargeson had 'confounded earlier critics of his limited technique and range'. Bertram especially appreciated the 'informal narrator's voice', but Ian Fraser in the *New Zealand Book World* (September 1976) complained that 'the new authorial persona is intolerably intrusive and garrulous', and in England Julian Barnes in the *New Statesman* (9 April 1976) asked if the garrulousness was 'a neat piece of mimesis or a sign that Frank Sargeson, the doyen of New Zealand letters, is seizing up'.

Whatever the critical disagreement about *Sunset Village*, Sargeson was increasingly celebrated as 'the doyen of New Zealand letters'. In 1974 he received the New Zealand Literary Fund's Scholarship in Letters and an honorary doctorate in literature from the University of Auckland. Two short books on him appeared in 1976, R. A. Copland's critical account in the 'New Zealand Writers and Their Work' series, and Dennis McEldowney's illustrated biography *Frank Sargeson in His Time*. In his graceful book, the text of which

he modestly says is simply 'to give ... a context' to the rich collection of illustrations, McEldowney drew on the first two volumes of the autobiography and on his long friendship with Sargeson to give an admiring portrait, one that, like Rhodes' account, omitted any reference to homosexuality in the life and works, but one that for the first time put in print the name change from Norris Davey to Frank Sargeson. Both the text and the illustrations were especially notable for what they showed of Sargeson's publishing history and of his economic struggles. Sargeson's economic struggles were given a slightly different sense in Ian Reid's *Fiction and the Great Depression: Australia and New Zealand 1930-1950*, where he was contrasted to Australian writers in his not treating the Depression in his fiction or in his life as a spur to Marxist analysis. In the stories his concern was not in 'anatomizing the body politic' but in dealing with 'the simple individualized situation'; the stories 'probe into the area of personal relationships rather than that of economic and political issues'. Concerning his personal writing life, he wrote to Reid that the Depression gave him time and opportunity to write: 'Insofar as I show myself a tolerable literary artist, it was the slump made it possible'. The definitive tribute was *Islands* for March 1978, the seventy-fifth birthday gift to Sargeson, including reviews of *Sunset Village*, the autobiography, and Copland's and McEldowney's books, supplementing forty 'Tributes, Memoirs and Commentaries' by friends, fellow-writers, and critics, and an anthology of fourteen memorable passages from his work, ranging from 'Conversation with my Uncle' to an excerpt from a work in progress. A further indication of Sargeson's status was the making of television versions of two of the classic early stories, 'A Great Day' and 'Old Man's Story', in 1976-1977. A different kind of tribute was the appearance of a character clearly based on him in Graeme Lay's novel, *The Mentor*, in 1978. Sargeson's iconic status in this regard had already been shown in Janet Frame's use of a Sargeson-like main character in *Daughter Buffalo* in 1972, and was to continue after his death: Stead was to have a Sargesonian figure (as well as a Frame-like one) in *All Visitors Ashore* in 1984, while Stuart Hoar in his 1990 play, *Exiles*, clearly based his characters on Sargeson, Fairburn, Wolfskehl, and some of the others of the Auckland literary group, and Riemke Ensing in her 1995 poetic sequence *Dear Mr Sargeson* found she had to 'have it out' with the spirit of Sargeson, whose tradition was so different from her own, and recorded facing his spirit in his cottage. A more practical tribute came in 1978 in the form of the only royalty check Sargeson ever received from his publishers in England for the five books published there from 1972 to 1977.

In these years of literary activity Sargeson maintained an active social life. Some of his older friends he lost to death: in 1973 Brasch, who had been

giving him financial support since 1950, and to whom he had dedicated *Once is Enough*; in the same year, William Plomer, who since the late 1930s had been his advocate with English publishers and editors; in 1974 Duggan. But Sargeson maintained his correspondence with a host of other writers and old friends such as Stead, Frame, and Roderick Finlayson as well as more recent friends such as Phillip Wilson and Lay. More intimately, he thought he had found in 'M', a Northland farmer who delivered his firewood (and in 'M's horse-racing friend Clarrie), 'replacements' for his uncle and for Harry Doyle, and in 1973 he began an assiduous courting of 'M' that led to his making financial contributions to the feckless farmer for some years. 'M's farm and its kauri tree provide a symbolic close to *Never Enough!*, but ultimately Sargeson was disappointed by the object of his affections, who married a young wife and did not reciprocate the writer's feelings. Sargeson's revenge came in his last piece of fiction, the short novel 'En Route' (published with another short novel by Edith Campion as *Tandem* in 1979), a comic portrait of an old farmer based on 'M' besieged by a couple of lascivious older women.

But the years were catching up with Sargeson. He lost the sight in one eye because of bleeding of the retina, and then was hit by rheumatism, diabetes, congestive heart failure, senile dementia, and finally in 1980 a stroke and in 1981 cancer of the prostate. Writing became an impossibility, although, appropriately, he did complete two last pieces of writing for *Islands*: in November 1979 a review of a new edition of *Tidal Creek* by his surviving contemporary, Finlayson; and in October 1980 a review welcoming the first book of one of his most talented successors in New Zealand short fiction, Owen Marshall. Sargeson's gardening was curtailed and then ceased, and he was no longer able to take good care of his cottage. Friends tried to help, but as his health got worse he finally had to be placed in a geriatric ward in December 1981. In hospital he deteriorated rapidly and died 1 March 1982.

Between 1981 and 1984 there was a gathering up and reprinting of much of Sargeson's writing of the previous forty-five years. Penguin, his new New Zealand publisher, brought out in 1981 the three autobiographical volumes in a single book, now entitled *Sargeson*. The next year they brought out a new edition of the *Collected Stories*, minus Pearson's introduction but with one story added. In 1983 Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press brought out a long-planned collection of Sargeson's critical prose, *Conversation in a Train and Other Critical Writing*, collecting his best reviews, critical essays, speeches, radio talks, and interviews, ranging from the 1935 essay on Sherwood Anderson to the review of Marshall in 1980. In 1984 Penguin brought out a one-volume reprint of *The Hangover* and *Joy of the*

*Worm*, the first New Zealand printing of both, and Anthony Stones in *Celebration* brought together in an anthology, with an introduction by Lehmann, all of the New Zealand writing that had appeared in *Penguin New Writing*, and two thirds of it was by Sargeson, dominated by 'That Summer' and 'When the Wind Blows'. The reviews of these books focused on the Sargeson tradition, although with differing emphases. W. S. Broughton in *Landfall* 152 (December 1984), welcomed *Conversation in a Train* as a 'necessary part of the Sargeson canon' showing how much he was 'involved in the close, small community of writers who were attempting to bring words, a place and a people into a new conjunction for the first time'; on the other hand, Fergus Barrowman in the *New Zealand Listener* (16 June 1984) praised it and the reprint of the two later novels because they would help to correct 'the sadly skewed image of Sargeson's achievement that seems to be prevalent' that puts the early stories above the later writing. C. K. Stead in the *Times Literary Supplement* (12 April 1985) rehearsed the consensus view of Sargeson for his British readers, describing how the early stories 'made him seem supremely the realist writer, the recorder of rough. Down-to-earth, monosyllabic Kiwi verities', but he then went on to say, suggestively if impressionistically, that especially in the later work 'as well as the responsible realist, there was also a witty and anarchic sprite who wished to be done with mundane truth and morals'. Ian Wedde more idiosyncratically took the reviewing of the *Stories* and *Sargeson* as the occasion for a meditation on the way Sargeson depicted 'Frank's secret army' of 'those who live away from the social centre' as representing values superior to the 'monodeistic orthodoxy' of a 'dead social centre' dedicated to building a society on the unsustainable exploitation of the land. Anticipating the kind of deflation of the consensus view of Sargeson that was to become more common in the years after his death, A. K. Grant, reviewing *Conversation in a Train and Other Critical Writing* in the *New Outlook* (May-June 1984), referred ironically to 'the guru-like status which Sargeson acquired as a fiction-writer, telling us what we didn't want to know but assumed to be true because it was so unpleasant'.

In the next eight years there was an institutionalisation of Sargeson's heritage. The royalties from his writings and from his final Authors' Fund payment together with his cottage and land went to his long-time friend Christine Cole Catley, as beneficiary and literary executor, and she used them to set up the Frank Sargeson Trust, which has preserved his cottage as a literary museum and, aided by government and private donations, set up a residential Sargeson Writers' Fellowship in a rebuilt stables in Albert Park in central Auckland. The first Fellow was appropriately Janet Frame in 1987. In 1990 Sargeson's ashes were belatedly scattered in the remaining part of the

garden of the refurbished cottage. A sign was erected outside the cottage proclaiming Sargeson's cultural role as his literary friends and followers saw it: 'Here a truly New Zealand literature had its beginnings'.

#### IV

In the more than a quarter century since his death Sargeson's posthumous reputation has undergone a series of transmutations, with Michael King's *Frank Sargeson: A Life* in 1995 perhaps the most influential factor. Just before his death a group of international discussions of his work summarized the consensus view of him as an icon of New Zealand literary nationalism. Bruce King in his *The New English Literatures: Cultural Nationalism in a Changing World* in 1980 devoted a chapter to Sargeson as the representative New Zealand writer of his generation – 'New Zealand: Frank Sargeson and Colloquial Realism'. King saw Sargeson's development as following 'a pattern often noticeable in Commonwealth writers: rebellion against a stodgy middle-class background, expatriation, discovery abroad that one is not British, return to the native land both as a critic of its colonial bourgeoisie and with a new awareness of it as home'. He traced Sargeson's work 'towards creating a fictional style appropriate for his country', but he also discussed the limitations of both the subject matter and the style 'shown by his 'difficulty in expanding his fiction to larger forms', and he discussed *I Saw in My Dream* as a not entirely successful but necessary attempt to move beyond those limitations. Walter Allen in his *The Short Story in English* in 1981 likewise devoted a section to Sargeson, the only New Zealand author other than Mansfield represented, praised him as 'a liberator for the New Zealand writers who followed after him' and declared 'Old Man's Story' to be 'by any standard ... one of the finest stories of our time'. The American, Murray S. Martin, in 'Speaking through the Inarticulate: The Art of Frank Sargeson' (1981), and the Canadian, W. H. New, in 'Frank Sargeson as a Social Story-teller' (1982) focused on Sargeson's use of the vernacular narrator as a means of implying a critique of a constricted society. Published after his death but written before it, *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Short Story*, edited by Cherry Hankin (1982), had a primarily negative Leavisite critique of the stories by David Norton to balance Helen Shaw's more traditional (and general) positive view, while Lawrence Jones in the essay on the stories of the 'Sons of Sargeson', A.P. Gaskell and O.E. Middleton, defined the nature of the Sargeson tradition and described how it influenced the two writers.

The eulogies upon Sargeson's death afforded further occasions for summing up his career. The collection in *Landfall* 192 (June 1982) indicates the range of responses: a reader's appreciation from Travis Wilson, a fellow-

writer's account from Roderick Finlayson of Sargeson's concern to lay the foundations of a national literature, a friend's account of the man from Helen Shaw, a critic's account from Winston Rhodes, stressing both Sargeson's 'idiosyncratic angle of vision' and his capacity to produce,' especially in his later years, something that tended to give a whole new perspective to his work'. Rhodes' point was picked up by Jones, writing from the literary historian's point of view in celebrating Sargeson's two careers, that of the writer of the classic short stories from 1935 to 1945, and the 'post-Sargeson Sargeson' of the memoirs and novels (1964-79). In the same issue, Patrick Evans, discussing "Maurice Duggan's and the Provincial Dilemma' cites Sargeson as the central New Zealand provincial writer, typical in his concerns but with 'an unusual self-awareness and discipline'. The *New Zealand Listener's* farewell (27 March 1982) was a moving elegy by Stead, 'A Warm Wind from the East', and a brief memoir by McEldowney, celebrating Sargeson as 'an example, a witness, an evangelist' of a better way of life and stating that although he admired the earlier stories he had 'greater relish in the gusto and panache of the later work'. Trevor James in his eulogy-essay in the *London Magazine* (published by Lehmann) praised Sargeson's ability in the early stories to 'map out the social reality of a society that had lost its way', but similarly declared the novels 'the heart of his writing' in the way that they expressed his humanist vision in depicting 'a consumer society more radically estranged from the land and Sargeson's "ordinary man" than anything in his previous experience'.

The first issue of the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* in 1983 had a eulogy-essay by Jones and an essay on 'Recent Fiction and the Sargeson Tradition' by Peter Simpson. Simpson stated the critical task: 'Now that his life's work is complete its monumental character is already, somehow, more apparent and presents to readers and critics a formidable and urgent challenge to assimilate and make sense of'. He hoped for 'some much needed fresh perspectives on the subject'. Jones' essay focused on Sargeson's contrast between his provincial, puritanical society, 'New Zealand as it is', and his version of 'the Pilgrim dream', 'New Zealand as it might worthily have been', with the emphasis on *Sargeson* as the essential text. The special New Zealand issue of *Ariel* in 1985, edited by Stead, got on with the task that Simpson defined by historicising Sargeson. Simpson himself, in an essay on recent new Zealand literary criticism saw *Conversation in a Train* as expressing 'the intensely centripetal energies of New Zealand writing' during the provincial period (1935-65), of its time and 'all in the family' of those writers, pushing their anti-puritan attitudes to an almost hysterical tone', exemplifying their 'oppositional pattern' in relation to New Zealand society.

Simpson assumed the value of what they did, but saw the need to historicise them, see them in relation to their context, different from ours, if they are to be a usable tradition, as Sargeson himself seemed to see later in his life. The provincial view of Sargeson he saw as no longer adequate: 'It is time to stop thinking of Sargeson as a "national" writer and as a "realist"'. Jones discussed *Sargeson* as one of a group of autobiographies by provincial New Zealand writers, telling his version of the 'one story' of the struggle of the artist to make a place in a puritan society, from the provincial writer's dualistic perspective, reconciling the two provincial modes of narrative, the impressionistic and the realistic. In 1987 he gathered this essay in *Barbed Wire & Mirrors: Essays on New Zealand Prose* in a section on 'Man alone, the Artist, and Literary History', and gathered his other essays and reviews concerning Sargeson in a section entitled 'Frank Sargeson and the Making of the Tradition'. That Sargeson tradition was a constant presence in Mark Williams' *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*. Williams argued that the New Zealand fiction of the 1980s was not so much a rejection of the Sargeson tradition as a modification and extension of it, in an Eliotesque view of tradition: 'to invoke the idea of tradition is to insist – not dogmatically or in a spirit of nationalist assertion – that the accumulation of writing in a given place over time exerts a shaping influence on succeeding generations of writers'. In the New Zealand tradition as a whole the 'existing order of works is constantly being re-valued by new works. But the whole exists as an evolving form of the English language, to which various linguistic communities have contributed'.

However, not all of the writing on Sargeson between 1982 and 1995 was in praise of his humanistic tradition. Joost Daalder in a review of Copland's book on Sargeson in *New Quarterly Cave* in 1977 (issue 3) had commented that Copland had failed to deal with the problem of Sargeson's moral values, 'hardly those shared by New Zealand society at large, and at times disturbing even to those (one would think) who do not share the values of New Zealand society', and he picked up this theme in two articles in 1985-86. In 'What Happens in Sargeson's "That Summer": A Study of Romantic Mateship', he found implicit in the presentation of Bill's 'platonic' love for the homosexual Terry a 'division between love and sex' that seemed 'curiously unhealthy', while in a close reading of some of the early stories in 'Violence in the Stories of Frank Sargeson' he found a 'warped sense of values' in Sargeson's implicit judgements on violent acts. Daalder was using traditional New Critical methods to arrive at a different reading of Sargeson, but the more revolutionary attitude to Sargeson and his tradition came in the first issue of *And* in August 1983 with its oppositional use of post-structural theories and methods in the discussion of New Zealand literature(s) and its mission of

deconstructing the 'vertical', 'reality'-based assumptions of the cultural nationalists. Its tone was set by the cover, a still from the western film *The Man from God's Country* showing two cowboys entering a room with guns drawn, with the subtitle 'READY' and the caption 'coming in'. The crucial essay for re-interpreting Sargeson was Simon During's 'Towards a Revision of Local Critical Habits' in that first issue of *And*. Aiming to introduce theory-based 'over-readings' of the work of Sargeson and his generation, During focused on one story, 'The Hole that Jack Dug', to show what such readings could reveal, especially in the story's 'textual unconscious', beyond the consensus view of Sargeson as the provincial humanist-realist. Utilising primarily the tools of deconstruction, reader-response theory, and psychoanalysis, During demonstrated that 'one can interpret the story in ways which produce a number of textual unconsciousnesses each working at a different level': there are Tom the narrator's 'repressed homosexual inclinations' towards Jack; there is text's unconscious revelation that the Jack it wishes to valorise at his wife's expense can be seen as implicitly victimising her; there is the way the story sets up a role for the implied reader that glosses over any implicit contradictions. From this over-reading of the story During was able to suggest that Sargeson's texts are best seen as 'modernist realist rather than sentimental, international realist', expressions of a sensibility in which there is a 'tension between the realist and modernist desires'.

The section of During's essay dealing with the over-reading of 'The Hole that Jack Dug' was reprinted in *Span* for April 1986, flanked by readings by Daalder and Simpson. Daalder's contribution, "'The Hole ...' as Romantic", was an excerpt from a paper, 'Frank Sargeson's Romantic Short Stories: an Approach', and read the story as a Romantic idealisation of Jack as a Pākehā noble savage, digging a hole as a protest against his wife's materialism and bourgeois conformity. Simpson's contribution, "'The Hole ...' as Literary Parable: a Note", was an excerpt from a SPACLALS paper, 'Telling Stories: The Critical Fictions of Frank Sargeson and Allen Curnow', and read the story as 'an indirect critical manifesto' in *Speaking for Ourselves* in which Jack becomes a representative of visionary art opposed to the bourgeois literary taste of his wife and the somewhat simpleminded realism of Tom, the narrator. Four years later in the *Landfall* for March 1990 Kai Jensen, in 'Holes, Wholeness and Holiness in Frank Sargeson's Writing', set out to 'join the others digging away in Jack's hole', but focusing especially on 'sexual politics and gay sexuality' in relation to 'the discourse of masculinity in New Zealand literature at the time the story was written and published'. For him the story, taking on added complexity from Sargeson's status as 'the (gay) patriarch of

New Zealand literature' in a homophobic society, presents the hole that Jack digs as 'a version of "wholeness", even holiness, a place where words and action merge, a site of ecstatic masculinity'.

Between 1983 and 1995 a number of critics did subject Sargeson's other writings, in addition to 'The Hole that Jack Dug', to the post-structural over-readings that During desired, and challenged the view of him as the humanist-realist critic of New Zealand society helping to create a new truly national literature. Stevan Eldred Grigg, in 'A Bourgeois Blue? Nationalism and Letters for the 1920s to the 1950s' in *Landfall* for September 1987, applied a neo-Marxist analysis not to specific literary texts but rather to the entire *Phoenix-Caxton-Tomorrow* movement. From that perspective, the cultural nationalists who thought of themselves as literary pioneers and radical social critics, outsiders attacking in bourgeois New Zealand society 'a betrayal of what life in New Zealand should be', were actually disaffected bourgeois Pākehā males who were blind to the actual life of Māori and of the New Zealand working class and who in their masculinism blamed women for the puritan culture that they so disliked. Sargeson, despite his antibourgeois stance, was still middle-class: 'Sargeson was able to profit from the affluence of the Waikato storekeepers he disdained'. He and other writers of his generation were self-deceived: 'although most of them thought they were exposing the failures of the status quo, they were actually obscuring many of the real problems', creating literary stereotypes of the rural "man alone" as the true new Zealander, when the 'identikit "New Zealander" who emerged from the literature from the 1920s to the 1950s was a puppet revealing more of the obsessions of middle class Pākehā males than it did of the lives or dreams of working class people, women and Maoris'. Writers such as Sargeson 'imagined they were liberals or people of the left, but failing to think out the implications of their nationalism and the real demands of socialism, even liberalism, they ended up willy nilly supporting the status quo burdening readers with inappropriate myths, muddying rather than clarifying consciousness'. Their stereotype of the true New Zealander 'has been a dead weight on the imagination of two generations'. In extreme Marxist terms Eldred-Grigg set up the outline of the post-structuralist revisionist case against Sargeson and his generation.

In the same year as Eldred-Grigg's essay, in Canada literary historian W. H. New in his *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand* (1987) placed Sargeson's stories comparatively within the context of Canadian and New Zealand short fiction seen from what might be called a stylistic post-colonial perspective to arrive at a less extreme

revisionist view. He looked at the stories not so much for their representation of their post-colonial society as for their acting out, in language and structure, the attempt to move beyond the inherited conventions of the parent culture and use that culture's language 'to reclaim speech for oneself'. He found Sargeson's value not in his critical realism but in the postcolonial 'subversive implications of [his] linguistic forms', both in his early and his late styles, something that he thought the 'sons of Sargeson' had missed, as they took New Zealand fiction into 'the doldrums' of social realism after World War II. In a short article three years later, 'Joining Ands and Butting Out: On Reading Sargeson', he supplemented During's reading of 'The Hole that Jack Dug' by focusing on the narrative framing of Jack's story and on the narrator's language to show how Jack is interpreted by Tom and by his wife but finally remains free and undefined.

Approaching the stories from a somewhat different feminist postcolonial perspective, Lydia Wevers also found value in Sargeson's stories themselves but not in what the 'sons of Sargeson' made of them. In an article in the September 1985 *Meanjin*, 'Changing Directions: The Short Story in New Zealand' outlining for Australian readers what was happening in the New Zealand short story, she sketched out the 'Great New Zealand Tradition' founded by Sargeson, the tradition of male, Pākehā, vernacular humanist realism, and then focused on how it was 'currently under challenge both from post-modernism, and from women and Māori writers who have little use for the apparent literary connection between (white) maleness and New Zealandness'. The 'transforming energy' in the short story was in the hands of these rebels, the mostly male postmodernists and the women and Māori writers who were neither post-modern nor in the Sargeson tradition. Wevers' more comprehensive discussion of the New Zealand short story came in her section of the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* (1991, second edition 1998). Her discussion of Sargeson, substantially the same in both editions, places Sargeson firmly in his sociohistorical and political context and subtly defines his major contribution not as his social realism but in his 'politically educative destabilising of the narrative and narrator' in stories written in 'a provincial realist idiom deeply familiar to his audience'. Such stories 'made ... demands on his readers, by forcing them into political recognitions of stereotype and attitude as they represent themselves in vernacular speech'. To Wevers, the vernacular stories of 1935-45 were the essential Sargeson, and she dismissed the later stories in a brief paragraph, for it was the earlier ones that 'remained the location of new Zealand realist fiction for a long time'. But that 'location', which had been fruitful for Sargeson, was not so for his male followers, who 'narrowed down the broad critique of

social institutions and systems that is the subtext of Sargeson's narratives to the war, and to the game-playing preoccupations of the New Zealand male'. Instead of destabilizing social assumptions, they affirmed the assumptions of the traditional New Zealand Pākehā male. In a more overtly postcolonial summary of her argument for Australian readers in the September 1993 *Southerly*, she described Sargeson's stories as 'exemplary of metaphoricised space that speaks for cultural identity', and used 'The Hole that Jack Dug' as her critical metaphor: 'What goes into the making of a New Zealander is signified in the narrow space Sargeson's sketches hardly inhabit, a disturbing small text, a hole just dug in the larger narratives around us, both apart from and part of a narrative which has had many other names, including Culture and Imperialism, the Penguin or the Oxford history of New Zealand, a short story but getting longer.' In that small space the 1930s and 1940s New Zealand male's sense of his cultural identity is contained, but there is no space for Māori or women, or for the larger postcolonial narratives of New Zealand.

Enshrined in the *Oxford History*, Wevers' account of Sargeson became one of the 'official' revisions of his image and his place in New Zealand literary history. Patrick Evans in his contemporaneous *Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (1990), written in a 'spirit of soft-structuralism', provided another more radical 'official' revision. Evans argued that the Sargeson who had been described as 'a symbol in his own lifetime' was a 'product' as well as an individual, a product of the situation of the time, but also a product of his own making, one who deliberately 'set about contriving' to be mythologised, a figure who came to stand for 'a tradition that does not require Sargeson to explain its existence'. The literary community needed such a symbol and such a myth and he happily cooperated in fitting the bill: 'The complicated mixture of chance, war, ability and contrivance effectively advantaged Sargeson and his way of writing over other modes that were validly practised at the time, so that the retrospective view does what *Speaking for Ourselves* invites it to do: it places him firmly at the centre of what is seen.' A fiction that was really 'an expression ... of discomfort with the local' came to be 'treated as if in some way it expressed nationalism' and as 'the basis of a realistic prose tradition'. Meanwhile, with Sargeson's help, Robin Hyde, who offered 'a clear alternative to what we have come to think of as the Sargeson tradition', was pushed aside, leaving the path open for the 'linear' development of a New Zealand prose fiction that was 'a fragment of the monolithic and essentially masculinist society it came from'. From this perspective he discussed *I Saw in My Dream* as Sargeson's failed attempt to get out of the corner he had written himself into, and the later fiction as a more successful idiosyncratic escape into

language from the limitations of vernacular realism and the 'provincial dilemma' of being stuck in exposing a dull and sterile society to itself. As for the 'sons of Sargeson' with their 'innocent realism', they were relegated to a long footnote.

Evans' demolition of the traditional view of Sargeson seemed to summarise the revisionist downplaying of the accomplishments of the *Phoenix-Caxton-Tomorrow* generation that was endemic to the 1980s and early 1990s. However, in 1995 Michael King's *Frank Sargeson: A Life* opened up discussion anew by revealing fresh material that could be used in a variety of ways. Chris Bourke in a review of the book in the *New Zealand Listener* (18 November 1995) quoted King as saying there was 'a critical swing away from the canon' and saying that 'Sargeson, Curnow Glover, the Caxton people' needed to be seen 'in the context of their times', implying that some of the critics were not doing that. As historian-biographer, King restricted himself to his stated aim – 'to recreate the life of the subject and to locate that life in the context of the time and place in which it was lived' – and did not attempt critical discussions of Sargeson's work in the book. He summarised the responses of reviewers and critics to Sargeson's work published during his lifetime but did not attempt to deal with the posthumous reputation, ending the book with a brief account of the Sargeson Trust and the scattering of the writer's ashes. Evans' book appeared only in a footnote in which King called Evans' account of Sargeson's attitude to Robin Hyde and domestic duties 'preposterous'. However, his own sense of Sargeson's place in New Zealand's literary history was announced in his Prologue, in which he referred to his subject as the man 'who turned his country's literature in a new direction', and in his epigraph from a letter from Janet Frame to Sargeson in 1978 in which she used Sargeson's own images of an orchard to describe the results of his 'Great Irrigation Scheme of New Zealand literature'.

The crucial discovery in King's book was that of Norris Davey's arrest and conviction in 1929 for indecent assault. For King it 'and the long shadow it cast on the rest of his life' was Sargeson's true 'determining crisis', that which moved him to leave Norris Davey behind and become Frank Sargeson. More than anything else in the book, King's account of that sequence of events opened up new discussion of the man and his work. In reviewing King's book in the December 1995 *New Zealand Books*, Vincent O'Sullivan commented that Sargeson's homosexuality and the related personal lifestyle choices that he made 'imposed a template on what he thought appropriate in depicting the country he was both immersed in and at odds with'. Thus it was 'extraordinary' that his 'personal fable became the assumed fable of his

country ... the belief for so long that his was the appropriate, even the necessary, style to best represent what in fact was so much more diverse than that style could embrace’.

Even before King’s book was published, Kai Jensen ‘outed’ Sargeson in his ‘Frank at Last’ in the collection *Opening the Book: New Essays on New Zealand Writing* (1995), in which he concluded that ‘His sexual orientation is the “thrilling wire” which unites and invigorates Sargeson’s whole corpus’. Jensen was drawing on his close reading of *Sargeson* and possibly on what he had heard was coming out in King’s biography, to which he looked forward in a footnote. By the time of the writing the last draft of his *Whole Men the Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature*, Jensen had received from King ‘a number of revelatory passages from the proofs of his biography’, and he saw that ‘Given Sargeson’s prominence as the founder of New Zealand masculinist fiction, the revelations in King’s biography require some revision of our literary history’. Looking at Sargeson’s situation as a closeted homosexual at the centre of a homophobic masculinist literary movement, Jensen could re-read the early stories, pick out their frequently homosexual sub-text and sense that their ‘intriguing effect of “knowingness”’, their tension between what is explicit and what is teasingly implicit, was at least partly a result of that situation. He could even conclude, with some irony that ‘Sargeson’s closeted sexuality ... is a national literary treasure, the largest gem in the masculinist crown’. The next year, in his ‘Frank Sargeson: Apostle of Love’ in the *Landfall* for Spring 1996, Mark Williams changed the emphasis. Williams acknowledged that Sargeson’s sense that ‘one cannot choose the object of one’s love’ was sharpened by his position as ‘as a homosexual in a homophobic society’, but thought Sargeson in such stories as ‘An Affair of the Heart’ or ‘Old Man’s Story’ or ‘A Man and his Wife’ broadened the implications of that sense far beyond sexual orientation. The question of homosexual love was subsumed into the broader theme of ‘love and various impediments to its free expression’. In this reading violence can be the result when ‘society’s need for restraint meets the human need to express the love which refused to be restrained’. Sargeson the puritanical anti-puritan ‘opposed a society that had narrowed and corrupted the puritan vision .... in terms of a moral and metaphysical understanding that is steeped in Protestant Christianity’. The stories gain their power and tension from an implicit sense that Christianity’s ‘informing ideal of Love as an underlying principle of creation has survived the death of the God with which it so long co-existed’.

In *Span* for April 1997, Mark Houlahan in his ‘Outings with Frank: New Aspects of Frank Sargeson’s Life and Texts’, commenting on King and

Jensen among others, considered that the 'paradigm shift' in criticism of the *Phoenix-Caxton-Tomorrow* generation that During had called for in 1983 'has, in effect, taken place' and had become the new orthodoxy. He was amused that 'fifteen years after his death, the old father, the old fertiliser of New Zealand literature, is still in business'. And in the immediately following years the 'business' continued. In that same year, Peter Wells in the introduction to the anthology *Best Mates Gay Writing in Aoteroa New Zealand*, was keen to claim Sargeson as one of a group of closet gay or bisexual writers, including Brasch and James Courage and McCormick, who had contributed to the 'pushing the boundaries of New Zealand culture forward' in the 1930s and 1940s despite writing in a 'homophobic environment' that forced them to live 'lives of great contradictions'. Unlike the revisionist post-structuralist historians, Wells did not attempt to deconstruct the accomplishments of the *Phoenix-Caxton-Tomorrow* generation; rather he tried to show that their work towards 'the creation of a confident new Zealand identity' was related to their sexual situation, 'all part of a desire to create a new country of the soul – a wider embrace of humanity which lies at the utopian heart of any new society'. He read Sargeson's early stories (he and his co-editor Rex Pilgrim included 'The Hole that Jack Dug' and 'The Making of a New Zealander' in the anthology) as carrying a homosexual sub-text that those looking for it could see but at the same time other readers could work 'on a much simpler level', performing 'a worthwhile nationalist function' in 'raising the national argot to an artform' and a political function in engaging sympathy for the out-of-work loners and losers of society.

In several articles John Newton pushed further the argument about the significance of Sargeson's sexual orientation. In the *Landfall* for March 2000, in his 'Homophobia and the Social Pattern: Sargeson's Queer Nation', he drew on the Queer Theory of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to attempt to relate Sargeson's work to his culture's homophobia. His aim in the essay was 'to read homophobia as a quilting point which pins cultural nationalism to its social horizon' in order to 'reinstate a history which is more than just literary, and thus to recognize the fiction of Frank Sargeson ... as the remarkable load-bearing structure that it is'. In a subtle argument that deals with such things as Sargeson's differentiation of himself from D'Arcy Cresswell and his construction of a homosexual sub-text in *That Summer*, he showed how Sargeson as a gay man dealt with living and writing in a masculinist puritan culture and a masculinist literary sub-culture that shared a hegemonic homophobia. For Sargeson the writer the answer was through subtle handling of the first person point of view and language to construct an overt cultural nationalist implied reader and a latent 'second implied reader who is able to

enjoy a knowing, queer reading alert to the ingenuousness of the first'. Thus the cultural nationalist reader can unite his high-culture humanism with the implicit values of the naïve good-bloke narrator, while the knowing homosexual reader can enjoy indulging a 'camp laughter, at the expense of a nationalist realism so immersed in its parochial [homophobic] assumptions' as to be deaf to the full implications of the text and the homosexual reader's response to it. His answer to the question of 'how to reintegrate a queer reading of Sargeson with a revisionist reading of the larger mid-century project' of cultural nationalism, was to show how Sargeson 'anchors' the project 'for exactly the same reason that he also subverts it': he supports its aspirations for a national culture and its rejection of puritanism (and probably its misogynist masculinism) and he appears to operate within the boundaries of its homophobia, but on a different level he subverts that homophobia. The sexual orientation that Sargeson so assiduously kept beneath the public surface in his life and in his early stories ironically became for a critic such as Newton his saving grace, differentiating him from most of his fellow cultural nationalists. Sargeson's writing was 'crucial, not just for what for he is able to tell us about cultural nationalism, or even what he tells us about the making of gay writing, but for the subtle things his stories continue to tell us about gay history – about life as a gay man in the narrow provincial culture that Sargeson negotiated'. In a follow-up essay in *New Literatures Review* in 2002, "Shepherds who call each other darling": Writing around Homophobia in Sargeson and Glover', Newton developed another aspect of his argument in focusing on Sargeson's relations through correspondence with his publisher, friend, and fellow cultural nationalist writer Denis Glover. In a shrewd reading of the tone of the correspondence, he showed how when Glover knew Sargeson was gay and Sargeson knew Glover was homophobic, in their 'attempt to negotiate an idiom commensurate with normative masculinity, they elaborate between them a Byzantine rhetoric of simulation and parody, disclaimer and disavowal'. He also showed how 'the anxieties which swirl around homophobia emerge as a formidable force of inhibition and misrecognition' in their responses to each other's work. In looking at the early 'Sings Harry' poems 'Sargeson reads Glover's work through the paranoid keyhole of his own closeted predicament'; similarly, in relation to *That Summer* and *I Saw in my Dream*, neither of which Glover chose to publish, 'the nearer that homoeroticism comes to breaking through the homosocial decorum of Sargeson's prose, the more anxiously and intemperately [Glover] responds'.

All of these critics focusing on Sargeson's sexuality and the 1929 crisis that King outed were of During's generation or younger, and most of them had cut

their critical teeth on post-structuralism and were suspicious of the claims made for the cultural nationalist generation. In the same issue of *Landfall* in which Newton published the first of his Sargeson essays, Dennis McEldowney took part in a symposium 'Bookmarking the Century', and nominated as the outstanding literary event of the century for him appearance of *Landfall* in 1947; he also listed a number of other landmarks of cultural nationalism, including 'Glover singing Harry' and 'Sargeson conversing with his uncle', but commented that he did not expect to see them featuring in the list of younger contributors: 'They would be too obvious, or redefined out of existence'. He went on to state that 'Redefining, relitigating, renegotiating and finally extinguishing is the job of the young, rightly so', but that was not his job, and he would 'fall back on one of the old staples'. He spoke for many older critics and writers, including King himself, who simply absorbed the now public matter of Sargeson's sexual orientation into the traditional view of him as cultural nationalist icon with a compassionate humanist vision. This view was encouraged by Bruce Sheridan's television documentary, 'Perfectly Frank', based on King's book and involving him as interviewer-narrator. Davey's homosexuality, his arrest, and his conviction were treated straightforwardly as part of the formative experience that fitted him to become Frank Sargeson. The film focused on Norris Davey becoming Frank Sargeson and on Sargeson's first career, skipping most of the second career and moving from the early stories almost directly into his role as mentor-encourager of younger New Zealand writers. At intervals through the film there was a discussion on Sargeson in that role, held in the Sargeson cottage and involving McEldowney, Stead, and Kevin Ireland, who had known him since the 1950s, and Graeme Lay who came to know him from the 1970s. Stead in his written accounts of Sargeson and his work, while he has made clear that the cultural nationalism that excited him when he was young 'belongs to its time, and that time is past' ('The Function of Criticism' in *Book Self*, 2008), has felt no need to apply newer critical theories to Sargeson. When he reviewed King's biography in the *Landfall* of Autumn 1996, it was from the standpoint of someone who had known Sargeson and could view King's account in light of his own experience of the man. In his 2006 Hocken Lecture, reprinted in *Book Self*, he reminisced about the Sargeson he knew when he was young, especially the man of 1955 who provided the basis for his Melior Farbro in *All Visitors Ashore*. When he wrote an essay on *Memoirs of a Peon* (in *Kin of Place*, 2002), it was from the standpoint of one who knew Sargeson when he was writing it and who understood from his friendship with the man that 'At the centre of his personality, his life-experience, his being was homosexuality'. He could sense that Sargeson 'had escaped from the trap of fictional subjectivity' in that novel by writing from the standpoint of the actively heterosexual

Michael Newhouse, whose starting place was one of Sargeson's old friends. But he also could see that the escape did not really work, that 'to represent a convincing heterosexual Casanova was beyond him'. This is not criticism based on high theory, but on personal knowledge and a personal response to a text.

The annual Frank Sargeson Memorial lectures at the University of Waikato, initiated on the centenary of Sargeson's birth in 2003, have provided occasions for others to reminisce about the man they knew. King in the first lecture, *A Conversation with My Uncle: Frank Sargeson and Hamilton*, discussed the importance of Davey's first twenty-two years in the town, making clear that Davey 'did not like Hamilton and that he deliberately turned his back on the town', but that, as Oamaru did with Janet Frame or Wellington did with Katherine Mansfield, it 'left an indelible imprint on [his] life and work', as can be seen in many of the early stories and in *I Saw in My Dream* and *Once is Enough*. In the third lecture in 2005, *Mr Sargeson at Home: A glimpse at the domestic arrangements & literary carry-on at 154 Esmonde Road, Takapuna*, Ireland shared his memories of his visits to Sargeson's cottage, beginning when he was a young neighbour. He had known of Sargeson's homosexuality (and had reassured his worried father that Sargeson was a 'gerontophile') but had not known of the 1929 conviction ('which retrospectively explained Sargeson's otherwise mysterious /obsessive fear of the law'). His account focused especially on the time of Janet Frame's stay in Sargeson's garden hut in 1955-56, both the care and encouragement Sargeson gave her and, more especially, 'the terrible toll that nursing Janet took on Frank' as he perceived it. He ended with an account of his last meetings with Sargeson, in the flesh and then in spirit at the 1990 ashes ceremony which he commemorated with a poem, 'Ash Tuesday' with its evocative final image suggesting Sargeson's role as literary godfather:

... here we were,  
 casting you like seed  
 upon the ground.

Ireland had made clear his view that 'Frank thought of himself as a writer who happened to be a homosexual, but he didn't consider himself therefore to be a homosexual writer'. Peter Wells, in the fourth lecture in 2006, *The Hole in the Hedge: Landscape and the Fragility of Memory*, on the other hand, recounted how Sargeson was to him, as a gay young man aspiring to be a writer, a 'key role model'. He spoke of how he came to see Sargeson's cottage, with its hedge with the hole in it and with its wonderful overgrown

garden, as his 'greenwood', his 'attempt to create a self-supporting kingdom, both an attempt to cut himself off, but also to provide something nourishing in and of itself'. From this perspective, the sacrifice to the demands of harbour bridge traffic of Sargeson's hedge and of his neighbour's symbolic pohutukawa tree with a phoenix palm growing within was evidence not so much of the 'diminution of Sargeson's status in New Zealand' as of Pākehā society's lack of respect for its sacred places and 'the fragile ecosystem of memory' and its failure to be really at home in its landscape.

That 'diminution' or at least renegotiation of Sargeson's status in New Zealand was evident in the post-1995 literary histories. Stuart Murray's chapter on Sargeson in his *Never a Soul at Home: New Zealand Literary Nationalism and the 1930s*, 'Frank Sargeson: the Takapuna Imagination' was a renegotiation, an insistence that 'his work does not possess the clean edges of the local that a later critical nationalism celebrated'. The process of renegotiation began with his early 1990s thesis on 'Nationalism and Internationalism in the Literature of New Zealand'. In 1992 he published "'A New Tramp Abroad": Sargeson in Europe' in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 8 (dated 1990, but published 1992) which demonstrated that Sargeson's account of his 1927-28 journey written at the time differed markedly from the account in *Once is Enough* both in style and attitude. While the later account emphasized Sargeson's discovery in Europe that he was really a New Zealander, the earlier account did not indicate that and was much more Eurocentric in its attitude and Georgian and derivative in its style. When King's biography appeared in 1995, Murray was in the process of converting his thesis into a book. Paired with O'Sullivan's review of King's book in the December 1995 *New Zealand Books* is Murray's 'work in progress' note entitled 'National Revolutionary'. In it he indicated a need to get beyond the 1970s view of Sargeson as 'the revolutionary nationalist of the 1930s, the constructor of a specific New Zealand form of prose, capturing the specifics of New Zealand speech', the projection of 'a blinkered narrow nationalism' on the stories, to a view that recognized 'the multi-faceted nature of 1930 nationalism in New Zealand'. He was concerned that 'current moves to celebrate the nature of Sargeson's homosexuality in his work run the risk of simply replacing one ideology with another'. His 1998 chapter developed these concerns, showing that Sargeson's 1930s work related to English 1930s writing, especially its 'proletarian pastoralism', that Sargeson right through the 1930s had his eye on a validating success in England, and that the image of him as a 'national' writer was a creation of the writers and critics of his and the next generation, a kind of mythology to which he consciously contributed in his autobiography. Viewed from this perspective, his

homosexuality was another of the tensions and complications involved in his difficult negotiations with New Zealand.

The year following Murray's book there was a conference in Dunedin on 'Sargeson, Hyde and the Beginnings of New Zealand Fiction'. The very topic implied a change in status in that Sargeson was paired with Robin Hyde, to whose work he condescended and who was not considered a significant novelist until the feminist revival of her work in the 1980s. The issue of the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* dedicated to conference papers (16 – dated 1998 but published in 2000) was introduced by Chris Prentice, who concluded that the 'overall effect' of the conference 'was one of problematising any secure notion of singular or even dual fictional foundations, and the terms of the theme itself: beginnings, and literary nationalism'. Michael King, speaking about the writing of the Sargeson biography, opened the conference. The published papers showed a range of approaches and attitudes. In a paper as idiosyncratic as its title, 'The Oil on the Salad: Or, "Being Frank about Frank": The Conjunction of Judicial Legalisms and the "Sodomite Rule" in Frank Sargeson's Life and in *The Hangover*', Bruce Harding focused on the discourse concerning Sargeson's sexual orientation and its effects. He saw Sargeson's 1929 crisis experience as the source of his existential ethic, the 'compassion of a "fallen" person towards other imperfect beings and behaviour'. He drew on psychoanalytic, sociological, legal and even Talmudic views of legalism and its effect on 'deviant' behaviour in his reading of Sargeson's short novel as 'an extraordinarily sensitive portrayal of the psychodynamics of some one distorted by an oppressive ideology of social conformity', a portrayal that he thought had its origin in Sargeson's 1929 experience of his society's rigidly legalistic treatment of homosexuality. Lydia Wevers in her 'Speaking for Ourselves in 1945' placed Sargeson's anthology and his contribution to it, 'The Hole that Jack Dug', in the context of World War II and its immediate aftermath. In that context, 'literary nationalism seems both a misplaced and a crucial concern, a tight little shell awash in a storm of unmanageable proportions, trying to preserve its sense of self in a world where nationalism has been an unimaginably destructive force, where the task of the nation state, as Ernest Renan put it fifty years before, has vitally become *l'oubli*, the task of forgetting, if it is to survive at all'. As for Sargeson's story, it became a war story, 'conflating the war and the family', 'a micro-narrative of the pathology of nationalism *in extremis*'. Lawrence Jones in his 'Frank Sargeson and the Great New Zealand Novel' traced against the background of the quest for the Great New Zealand Novel, Sargeson's ultimately unsuccessful attempts from 1938 to 1949 to write the definitive New Zealand anti-puritan

novel. His problems included both his sense of the inferior nature of the social material with which he had to work and, to Glover and to his critics, the question of whether a representative New Zealand social novel could be written from a homosexual point of view. Jones' Sargeson Memorial Lecture of 2004, *The Wrong Bus: The 'Sons of Sargeson': Dan Davin and the Search for the Great New Zealand Novel, 1943-56*, was a continuation of his conference paper, showing how Sargeson encouraged his literary 'sons' to accomplish what he had not done, and how they too fell short of the goal (while, ironically, a better novel than any of them, including Sargeson, had written, *Owls do Cry*, was emerging from Janet Frame, working in Sargeson's garden hut in 1955-56 while he in his cottage was bemoaning the seeming failure).

In his *Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture 1932-1945* (2003), Jones wrote an empirical literary history, 'not overly revisionist or anti-revisionist ... consciously theorized only to the extent that it loosely incorporates Harry Levin's view of "literature as an institution"'. In it he discussed Sargeson in relation to the major themes and concerns of the *Phoenix-Caxton-Tomorrow* writers: the finding or making of outlets for publication, the turn from English to American literary models such as Sherwood Anderson in prose fiction, the 'land and the people' theme, attitudes to Māori (a minor theme in Sargeson), the Centennial (especially in relation to 'The Making of a New Zealander'), puritanism and the anti-puritan revolt (Sargeson's central theme in the period), the 'residual Romanticism' of the implicit values from which Puritanism was criticised, the Depression, the international crises of the 1930s and World War II (especially in relation to 'The Hole that Jack Dug'). The Sargeson of 1932-1945 (his 'first career'), discussed among his peers in different, thematically-organised chapters, emerged as the movement's primary writer of fiction and innovator of fictional forms, 'the 'laureate of anti-puritanism', directly implicated in the movement's major accomplishments and in its blindnesses, especially its masculinist misogyny.

The Sargeson that emerged from Patrick Evans' *The Long Forgetting: Post-colonial Literary Culture in New Zealand* (2007) was a much smaller, less significant figure. Evans' approach is implicit in his title, which came from the same Ernest Renan text to which Wevers had referred, but interpreted it in quite a different way – literature as an aid in the Pākehā 'forgetting' of the brutal truth of colonialism. Using the critical tools of psychoanalysis, neo-Marxism, feminism and gender studies and queer theory, and deconstruction from a post-colonial perspective, Evans saw in all Pākehā literature from the

beginning ways of normalising, rationalising and aestheticising the processes and results of colonial capitalism's ruthless takeover of Māori Aotearoa, the making of it into a Pacific outpost of the European-American global system. Sargeson and his generation, who thought they were in revolt against colonial New Zealand society, were merely part of 'a recent stage in the unfolding of a much larger pattern, and ... part of a much longer process'. If 'cultural nationalism is an expression of a continuing colonialism, much more easily understood as unwittingly developing what had been before than in its own rather messianic terms as something extraordinary, the work of a generation of unprecedented gifts', then Sargeson was merely one of a group of self-deceiving and self-mythologising masculinist apologists for Pākehā settler colonialism, given a bit greater insight by his homosexuality. Evans pushed During's, Jensen's and Newton's Sargeson further in a post-colonial direction:

Lit by queer theory, Sargeson's earlier stories show up as messages in a bottle, indications that he knew back then what was beyond his heterosexual contemporaries – that cultural nationalism involved issues of masculinity, and that heterosexuality, particularly the maintenance of that heterosexuality, was a crucial part of its definition.

Evans summarised that 'the great icons of our cultural nationalism have been knocked off their pedestals one by one since the *And-Antic* interruption of 1984', and that the shards of Sargeson were down there in the dust with the fragments of Curnow, Glover, Fairburn and the others.

The posthumous reputation of Sargeson, then, has taken some strange turns. Its situation in the first decade of the twenty-first century was perhaps epitomised by *An Affair of the Heart: A Celebration of Frank Sargeson's Centenary* (2003), edited by Graeme Lay and Stephen Stratford. On the one hand, the volume was definitely a celebration. It contained warm memories of the man and the writer by those who knew him. There were poems: Stead's 'A Warm Wind from the East', Ireland's 'Ash Tuesday', Janet Frame's 'Letter from Lake Bombaszeen', all elegising Sargeson. There were reminiscences by Michael King, Janet Wilson, Jean Alison Bartlett, and Owen Marshall from the literary community, and by George Haydn and Nigel Cook: the first was involved in designing and building Sargeson's cottage; the second, whose relationship went back to Sargeson's visits to Oakley Sargeson's farm, was involved in extending Sargeson's cottage and in building the writers' residence at the Sargeson Centre in Princes Street, where the Buddle Findlay Sargeson Fellows stay. And there was Sargeson's prose: 'An Affair of the Heart' from 1936, two excerpts from the autobiography, still fresh and moving.

The presence of Sargeson was strongly felt. He was alive in memory and words. But at the same time the book reminded readers implicitly of how much the world had changed in the generation since his death, and how little his influence was felt in the contemporary literary world. There were fifteen selections from Sargeson Fellows, and they mostly described a world he had never known, not puritan or even post-puritan New Zealand, but a world of casual international travel (contrasted to his description of his once-in-a-lifetime European trip of 1927-28, which is included), of sexual freedom and self-indulgence, of a consumer society with Exfoliant Douce and cafes with exotic foods, and America's Cup hoopla. In contrast to his staunchly masculinist literary society, ten of the fifteen works were by women. The bridge between these mostly post-modern fictions and Sargeson's world was provided by Maurice Gee, to whom Sargeson had sent encouraging letters in the 1950s: an excerpt from *The Scornful Moon: A Moralists Tale*, an historical-political novel of the Sargeson world of the 1930s, with its underground homosexual sub-society hidden from the narrator until the end, with the plot turning on events inspired by D'Arcy Cresswell's 'Wanganui affair', which Sargeson would have known. The method of telling was also recognisably related to Sargeson's, with the structural irony of the naive narrator who fails to see the full meaning of what he is telling, and with that narrator based on an old literary antagonist, Pat Lawlor. But that is all 'history', as is Sargeson and his work. How future writers and readers will respond to a necessarily historicised Sargeson when the people who knew him are not still around will undoubtedly be different, and will change with changes in intellectual and literary fashions. When there is no longer the Oedipal need for younger and middle-aged writers and critics to extinguish the reputations of those particular literary fathers and grandfathers (rather, the next generation will probably be the target of a new generation of critics), the attitudes will probably soften; Sargeson and his generation are now in a place analogous to that of Tennyson in the 1920s, and probably their reputations, like Tennyson's, will shift as they are more completely historicised. The last word has not been said; the fourth life will continue, but in terms different from its starting place.

## LINKS

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