

Roderick Finlayson, 1904 – 1992

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Roderick Finlayson was a member of the generation that is usually viewed (and viewed itself) as the makers of modern New Zealand literature, the generation of Frank Sargeson, Allen Curnow, Denis Glover, Charles Brasch, and A. R. D. Fairburn, among others. In some ways Finlayson's career paralleled Sargeson's, and certainly he was second only to Sargeson in his generation as a writer of short fiction. O. E. Middleton has written of a conversation with Sargeson 'in which he observed with characteristic generosity of spirit that posterity might well decide in favour of Finlayson's work', but Finlayson remains the least known of the recognised writers of his generation. He is probably known best through anthologies, and his two most anthologised stories, 'The Totara Tree' and 'Another Kind of Life', point towards what is generally considered his most significant accomplishment, his portrayal of Māori life in a Pākehā-dominated society. His Māori stories are rightly emphasised, but over a career spanning more than fifty years, including the writing of novels, short novels, and essays as well as short stories, he also explored other themes and areas of life, all contained within a consistent personal vision.

Roderick David Finlayson was born on 26 April 1904 in Devonport, near Auckland, of a Scottish father and an Irish mother. When he was two his father left the family to go to America to escape gambling debts, and he was brought up by his mother and her mother, mostly in multi-racial Ponsonby, where he experienced both his mother's close-knit Northern Irish family and their varied friends and neighbours, including Chinese and Rarotongans. His experience was further broadened through his uncle, Arthur Wilson, who managed farms in the Bay of Plenty, a man who served in Finlayson's life something of the function of Frank Sargeson's farmer uncle, Oakley Sargeson, in Sargeson's life. Finlayson spent his summers on his uncle's farms and got to know very well several Māori families at Pukehina, eventually being almost adopted by the family of Hone Ngawhika, so that he continued to visit them each summer until 1930 or 1931, even after his uncle had left the district to run his own farm near Glenbrook. In 'Beginnings' in 1965 he described how he 'found it natural ... to identify [him]self with the Maori: "I, a Pakeha, can be Maori when I wish – perhaps I am mostly Maori and can play Pakeha only when I try hard."

Finlayson's formal education, in contrast to this informal social education, pointed him towards a technological career, a direction he later repudiated. He attended Ponsonby Public School from 1908 to 1917 and then Seddon Memorial Technical College from 1918 to 1921. At the end of that time he passed the City and Guild of London Institute examination in mechanical engineering. Within a year or so he was apprenticed to Auckland architect John Anderson and worked for him while attending night school, matriculating in 1924. He furthered his formal education between 1926 and 1929 with part-time study at the School of Architecture at Auckland University College, working towards an associateship in the New Zealand Institute of Architects.

During these years of work and part-time study he developed social interests that would finally cut across his planned career. He developed radical social beliefs, including an opposition to military authority that led him to refuse compulsory military drill and an increasing identification with the victims of imperialism, including the Irish (despite his Unionist background), the Mau movement for independence in Western Samoa, and the Māori in New Zealand. At the same time his identification both with his uncle, a supporter of traditional agriculture, and with his rural Māori friends was building in him a feeling for a natural life close to the land that went right against his earlier enthusiasm for science and technology. Increasingly these sympathies led to a rejection of what he called in 'Beginnings' 'our ruthlessly technological and acquisitive society'. These feelings were expressed in passionate satires and letters to editors that were not published, only his less controversial attempts at journalism achieving print.

The tension between Finlayson's career in architecture and his radical social beliefs and his desire to express them in writing was resolved by the Great Depression. His employer's business failed in 1931, he lost his job, and he turned to trying to become a full-time writer, supplementing his income by seasonal and casual labour. He wrote to Ian Reid in 1968 in response to question about the effect of the Depression on his work that the Depression had been his 'salvation', that it had freed him from the 'bondage' of his career in architecture. Freed from the increasingly frustrating duties as an architect's assistant, he attempted to find and communicate an answer to a question that had come to bother him, as he recounted it in 'Beginnings': how could he reconcile 'the nobility of the Maori of legend and tradition, and the great mana of the ancient ariki, with the humble estate' of the Māori he knew and loved, 'descendants of the greatest of arikis, now bereft of mana and living, even though proudly and cheerfully, in poverty on wastelands, outcast and dispossessed on the fringe of the Pākehā world?' He found the answer in the

history of a hundred years of Pākehā injustice to Māori, and he attempted to express his findings in a study, 'The Maori, Transition Years and the Future'. But he could find no publisher for this work, and he turned to writing satires: 'The Tchee-trees of Sayso', an attack on New Zealand colonialism in the Pacific; and 'Twentieth Century Blues: A Social Comedy', a long allegorical attack on modern technological society. However, he still could not achieve publication.

During this time, as Finlayson recounts it in 'Beginnings', 'events led to separation from [his] Maori family, their hapu, and the place [he] began to call [his] homeland', and within a few years the seven young men he had considered his 'friends, brothers in many adventures' were 'dead or scattered'. He felt compelled to write, not didactic essays or satires, but rather stories 'as an outlet for that aroha whakamuri, that passionate recalling of time past', stories which would 'in exile let [him] live with [his] friends again, and this time give permanence to their short lives'. To do this he needed a model. At that time he was on his own as a writer, without mentor or colleague, and he turned to his reading to find that model, and discovered it in D. H. Lawrence's translation of Giovanni Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. In Verga's Sicilian society he found one like the Māori society he had known, with, as he described it in 'Beginnings', 'the same poverty, hardship and ill-health, the same upflaring of passions and sudden violence, the feuds and the festivals', a society made up of 'enduring people sustained by similar fatalism, dignity, arrogance even'. And in Lawrence's translation of Verga's prose he found the formal model he wanted, 'written in a spare style, quite without sentimentality, but strong and vivid in their simplicity'. With this model before him, he wrote 'The Wedding Gift' and 'Rui's Ship'. But he could find no publisher for these either.

Finlayson's move to becoming a published writer dated from his meeting with D'Arcy Cresswell. Some time in 1934 he heard a Cresswell radio broadcast about the evils of the modern technological world and determined that he must meet this man who had views similar to his own and discover from him how to get those views published. He looked up Cresswell, living at Castor Bay on the edge of Auckland at that time, and showed him his work. Finlayson has written in *Mate* in June 1960 how Cresswell then began what developed into a long mentorship by advising him to lay aside his satires and concentrate on stories like 'The Wedding Gift', for it 'is as true as the other writing is false'. Cresswell further helped to set Finlayson's career in motion by suggesting that he send stories to the Christchurch periodical *Tomorrow* and by introducing him to Frank Sargeson and to the little press publishers

Robert Lowry and Ron Holloway (and his wife Kay). The Holloways were to be his publishers for fifty years.

Encouraged by Cresswell (and a bit later by Sargeson), Finlayson within a year completed ten more stories. The first to appear in print was 'Wi Gets the Gospel', in *Tomorrow* for 23 June 1937, and by early in 1938 he had placed three more stories there. Partly at Sargeson's suggestion, he went to Lowry to get a collection of the stories published at his own expense (Lowry had similarly published Sargeson's first collection in 1936). In the event, Lowry began setting up the type at his Unicorn Press but then passed the job on to Holloway at the Griffin Press, and Holloway printed the book, *Brown Man's Burden*, later in the year. It contained twelve of Finlayson's stories of Māori life. All are in the mode he had developed from Verga and from the stories of another Sicilian writer, Luigi Pirandello, using a third-person narrator who takes the role almost of a sympathetic observer within the community and who uses very simple language. All deal with Māori families in the Bay of Plenty in the 1920s, ranging in tone from the tragic in 'The Wedding Gift' to the humorous in such stories as 'A Man of Good Religion'. Shadowing all the stories is a sense of Māori dispossession and the loss of a rich culture; in his 'Foreword' Finlayson points out that unlike most Pākehā stories of Māori life, these are not 'written romantically of the old-time Maori culture', but rather 'deal chiefly with the annihilation of the culture by our scientific barbarism, and the something, pathetic or humorous, that yet remains'.

Printed in a small edition of 250 copies, the book did not receive widespread attention, but the reviews were generally favourable. Allan Irvine, for example, in the *Weekly News* (14 September 1938) found the stories revealed 'an intimate knowledge of the life of present-day Maori', and 'Kotare' in the *New Zealand Herald* (8 October 1938) praised the 'genuine insight into the minds of the young Maori man and girl formed on civilization's gifts of jazz and gramophone and radio'. Frank Gadd in *Tomorrow* on 12 October 1938 found the stories written out of 'a deep respect' for Māori rather than out of condescension, but he thought that Finlayson was best at showing Māori from the outside and should not have attempted inner views, for he doubted 'the ability of any European to faithfully portray the workings of a native mind'.

The story that eventually received most attention was 'The Totara Tree', in which, although the Māori community wins a local victory over the Electricity Department in saving the birth tree of an old woman, the eroding away of Māori culture in the face of 'an alien and material society' is implicit in the contrast between the attitudes of the oldest generation, who go back to the

Land Wars and hold traditional Māori values, and the two or three younger generations in the community, who have taken on some Pākehā values. The story achieved a kind of fame when Finlayson entered it in the short story section of the Centennial Literary Competition in 1940, and it won third place. John Lehmann published it in England in his *Folios of New Writing* in 1940 and again in the highly popular *Penguin New Writing* in 1941, and it was subsequently anthologised several times in Australia and England and became a standard New Zealand anthology piece, and has been translated into Russian, Polish, Romanian, and German.

The critical attitude towards Pākehā society implicit in the story Finlayson made quite explicit in 1940 in his unofficial Centennial publication, *Our Life in this Land*. In the 'Foreword' to *Brown Man's Burden* Finlayson had contrasted the Māori to New Zealand's 'European inhabitants, who lack a true right to the land they live in, having, as yet, no deep love of its familiar and unprofitable aspects, no intimate understanding of its nature as the Maori had', people in whom 'the machine age and modern education have at once removed the means and killed the desire for identity with the soil, which is the pride and birth-right of the native'. *Our Life in this Land* develops that critique of Pākehā culture along lines explicitly based on Cresswell's writing, treating the history of 100 years of European occupation of New Zealand as a long fall from the virtues of the pioneers, who were temporarily isolated from the corruptions of European culture and truly faced the land, to the vices of modern capitalist society made by 'men, intoxicated with the modern spirit, [who] had eyes only for the possession of the resources of the land and were ruthless in their exploitation of those resources'. World War II Finlayson described as the inevitable result of capitalism and modern technology, a divinely ordained destruction and purgation of a decadent society.

During these years of intense literary activity, Finlayson had married, in 1936, moved to Weymouth, on the shores of the Manukau Harbour, and had begun a family that eventually included three sons and three daughters. He established a way of life in which part-time and temporary jobs, the income from freelance writings, and the rent from a building he had inherited from his mother met the family's basic economic needs and left him some time for his own writing. After the publication of *Our Life in this Land*, he returned to short stories, some picking up the themes of that essay, others continuing on from *Brown Man's Burden*. 'Uncle Alf Says Goodbye to the Troops', a bitterly antiwar story, appeared in *Tomorrow* in March 1940, not long before the Government closed down the journal for its critical attitude towards the war effort, while 'A Farmer and His Horse', a story on the Sargeson model about a

man whose feelings are so blocked that they can come out only in relation to his horse, appeared in *Folios of New Writing* in Autumn 1941, and 'Two Friends', a Māori tragedy similar to 'The Wedding Gift', appeared in Australia in July 1942. But Finlayson seems to have been unable to place many of these new stories in periodicals, and they appeared in another 250-copy edition with the Griffin Press as *Sweet Beulah Land* later in 1942.

Of the fifteen stories in this second collection, the bitterly ironic title story deals with the sale of Māori land to the government, and the following four show the now landless Māori working in Chinese market gardens near Auckland and sinking into gambling, alcohol, infanticide and suicide. The other stories all deal with Pākehā society, rural or urban, always critically. Some, like 'I Broke the Butter Dish' or 'Pray to God' are didactic in their attacks on technological agriculture, while another group deals bitterly with the home-front effects of war, both World War I and II, and the remainder focus on unhappy human relations. The collection was little noticed, but there was a sharp unsigned review (probably by editor Oliver Duff) in the *New Zealand Listener* (18 June 1943) in which the writer found a note of authentic New Zealand in the stories but remarked that the collection has 'Frank Sargeson ... written all over it', and went on to say that Finlayson 'neither sees so clearly nor probes so deeply, but either derives from him or has used the same models; a little less successfully'.

With the stories of *Sweet Beulah Land* Finlayson seemed to have exhausted most of his material about Māori life, and he turned for material to his experiences on his uncle's farm. There was only one more Māori story for some years, 'The Everlasting Miracle', a humorous story like 'A Man of Good Religion', which appeared in the *New Zealand Listener* in July 1944 and then was collected into Sargeson's anthology of stories of the 1940s, *Speaking for Ourselves*, in 1945. That story is set near Tidal Creek, which is the locale of Uncle Ted's farm, the setting of most of Finlayson's stories between 1944 and 1946. Nine of these were published in the Sydney *Bulletin* between August 1944 and December 1946, while one appeared in the *New Zealand Listener* in 1944 and one in the New Zealand little magazine *Arena* in 1946. These seem on the surface to be simply humorous rural sketches of the sort that had long been a staple of *Bulletin* fiction, but they have in common the characters of Uncle Ted, based on Finlayson's uncle, and Ted's nephew Jake, visiting from the big city, based on the young Finlayson before he was converted to an alternative lifestyle, and the interaction between these two raises recurrent themes about the virtues of a natural life and the evils of modern technology and capitalist farming. In 1948 Finlayson brought together revised versions of

these stories plus 'The Everlasting Miracle' and nine previously unpublished ones, arranged as an episodic novel, *Tidal Creek*, published by Angus & Robertson in Sydney.

Tidal Creek holds together only minimally as a novel, with the separate episodes arranged along the two strings of Jake's two long visits to Tidal Creek, one when he is thirteen, the other when he is twenty. Many of the humorous episodes relate only loosely to either plot or theme, but the overall impression of the book is consonant with the attitudes expressed in *Our Life in this Land*. Sargeson in a positive review in the *New Zealand Listener* of 22 July 1949 noted this and found underlying the anecdotes of the book 'a larger pattern of things – a pattern which, if you examine it closely enough may be found to reveal simple clues to the essentials of the good life for men upon this earth'. Robert Chapman in a long and thoughtful review in *Landfall* for March 1950 was more critical, finding that the novel is 'primarily an anecdotal tour round the eccentricities, and in its better places, the morphology, of a neighbourhood of habits and attitudes and a landscape that the author patently respects', but that it is valuable more for what it 'semi-consciously' reveals about New Zealand society. Chapman saw Uncle Ted less as an exemplar of the virtues of the natural life and more as 'a symbol manqué', a partly-understood example of the kind of man alone that New Zealand's provincial, puritan society throws up as an unconscious rebel', a figure who can be interpreted as an implicit criticism of that society. Finlayson, Chapman concluded, 'walks simply and honestly towards this complexity and then skirts it', so that the book suggests more than it ever consistently develops.

Rather like Sargeson, Finlayson in post-war New Zealand, as it began to develop towards an affluent urban-suburban society, had difficulty adjusting his writing to the social changes. He tried to continue the Uncle Ted series, but gave it up after one further story in *Arena* in March 1949. He attempted a few more Māori stories with some success. Some were like his earlier Māori stories: 'Rui's Ship', in the *Bulletin* of 22 January 1947 was one of his earliest unpublished stories reworked, and 'Johnny Wairua's Wonderland', in the *Bulletin* for 26 March 1947 was a humorous story like some in *Brown Man's Burden*. But the best were several attempts to deal with contemporary urban Māori aspiring to be 'modern' and middle class: 'Like the Pakeha', which first appeared as 'Blood Ties' in the *Bulletin* of 16 March 1949, and 'A Little Gift for Harry', in *Landfall* of December 1952. But these were not followed up. Finlayson's main concern in his writing of the late 1940s and early 1950s was sexual love, usually seen as unhappy, sometimes disastrous, as male desire for sexual adventure clashes with female desires for material possessions,

respectability, and security, as in such *Bulletin* stories as 'A Nice Little Nest of Eggs' (30 April 1947) and 'The Girl at the Golden Gate' (29 December 1948). A related group of stories in these years dealt with ageing males, among which 'The Bulls' in *Landfall* for March 1956, was by far the best, becoming a frequently anthologised story.

Finlayson's most important writing of the 1950s was in his short novel, *The Schooner Comes to Atia*, published by the Griffin Press in 1952. It gathers together themes of sexual love and ageing and focuses them on two unhappily married middle-aged men on a South Pacific island (Finlayson had visited Rarotonga in 1931 and 1934 and his wife was born there). Hartman, an Australian missionary, projects his mid-life crisis sexual frustration on a servant girl and then 'accidentally' shoots her lover when he comes across them together; Chapham, the New Zealand Resident Agent of little energy and less competence, ends up suppressing evidence in order to keep the affair officially an accident. Both men effectively ruin their lives. The novel got some moderately favourable critical attention. Sargeson in *Here and Now* in November-December 1953 found Hartman 'a tragic epitome of a way of life which many New Zealanders are in the habit of taking for granted', a puritan totally incapable of dealing with his own sexuality, but he thought that the rest of the novel seemed flat by comparison. Kendrick Smithyman in *Arena* no. 37 in 1954 found that Finlayson's anti-puritan 'conception far outruns the realisation'. Sarah Campion in *Landfall* in March 1954 found the book to lack intensity so that it ends as 'muddle' rather than as 'tragedy'.

Three commitments Finlayson took on in the second half of the 1950s much restricted his writing of fiction for adults for some years. The first was his undertaking to write educational material for children on Māori life. He was commissioned by School Publications to write first a series of short pieces on Māori and Pākehā children attending the same school for the *School Journal*, and then an ambitious series of School Bulletins on the history of Māori life in New Zealand from the 1820s to the 1920s. The plan he adopted for the history was to trace one fictional family through several generations, showing the changes in their lives, with an overall pattern of loss as Pākehā dominance grew, but ending with hopes of recovery and a new synthesis. He published six of these Bulletins between 1955 and 1960: *The Coming of the Musket*, dealing with the 1820s and 1830s when muskets gained from traders first began to appear in Māori warfare; *The Coming of the Pakeha*, dealing with the 1830s and early 1840s, when traders and missionaries arrived and the Treaty of Waitangi was signed; *The Golden Years*, dealing with the later 1840s through the early 1860s, years of successful agriculture but ending in

the Land Wars; *The Return of the Fugitives*, dealing with the aftermath of the Land Wars in the 1860s and 1870s, the confiscation of lands and the decline into poverty; *Changes in the Pa*, dealing with modernisation and the Young Māori movement from the 1890s through World War I; and *The New Harvest*, dealing with the 1920s and the attempts to build a way of life combining the modern with Māori tradition. In 1965 all six were gathered up with an introduction as a novel for children, *The Springing Fern*. In the 1970s the sequence was reprinted with new illustrations. In 1958 Finlayson published a further commission, a booklet *The Maoris of New Zealand*, for the Oxford University Press 'Peoples of the World' series.

The second commitment that took Finlayson away from writing for adults was his job in the print room of the Auckland City Council, which he held from 1957 to 1965, when he resigned to have more time for writing. Once he had time again, like Sargeson he experienced a rebirth of his writing in his 1960s and 1970s. One of the first fruits was his autobiographical essay in the 'Beginnings' series in *Landfall* in March 1966. There was also a new group of stories of Māori life. One, 'The Swamp the Sea the Sky', written in 1965 but not published until 1989, looks back to the Bay of Plenty in the 1920s and is a Hardy-esque tragedy of jealousy. But most of the new stories of Māori life deal with the great changes of the 1960s. 'The New House', in *Arena* in June 1966, contrasts a sterile life in a new house in a suburb to the old communal way of life. 'Another Kind of Life', in *Arena* in July 1971, shows the sadness of an urban Māori man who has lost his language and his relationship to his home kainga. 'Great Times Ahead', in the *New Zealand Listener* for 5 February 1973, is a bitterly ironic reversal of that situation, a rural Māori going to Auckland for the first time in years (his memory of his childhood visit was of the sadness of the Māori waiting outside the Land Court) and finding himself unable to relate to urban Māori and finally being beaten and robbed. The three stories as a group imply serious reservations about the 'great times ahead' for all New Zealand, but especially for Māori.

However, the focus of Finlayson's writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s was not fiction but another commissioned project, his book-length study of D'Arcy Cresswell for the Twayne's World Author Series, which appeared in 1972. Not the usual mix of biography and literary criticism one would expect from the series, this is a disciple's lucid but enthusiastic setting out of the work of his master, as Finlayson states at the beginning:

It is, indeed, part of my purpose to show the importance of Cresswell's view of the modern world, and to hope to arouse

enough interest in his work, both the poetry and the other writings, to justify its presentation anew.

Drawing on Cresswell's published work, much of it difficult to find and some of it self-published, and on his letters and unpublished manuscripts, Finlayson sketches out a clear, coherent, and almost entirely uncritical developmental summary of Cresswell's work that, as H. Winston Rhodes said in a review of the book in the *New Zealand Monthly Review* (February 1973), 'explains and interprets Cresswell better than the latter was ever able to do'.

When this labour of love was completed, Finlayson returned to fiction with a collection of three novellas, *Other Lovers*, published in 1976. In this sympathetic, straightforward account of three pairs of 'lovers' standing outside the usual middle-class patterns, Finlayson rehearsed some of his favourite themes. 'Frankie & Lena' shows the 1930s rural puritan community's destruction of an ageing outcast itinerant worker and an abused adolescent girl who runs away from her terrible home to travel with him. 'Tom & Sue' uses the alternating first-person points of view of a young man who wants his sexual freedom and irresponsibility and a young woman who loves him and wants continuity, as they overcome their different expectations and come together in a relationship in a 1960s rural community. 'Jim & Miri' deals with the doomed relationship between a young Pākehā male working for a land developer who wants to obtain Māori land and a Māori girl from the group the developer wants to exploit. The book received positive reviews from Rhodes in the *New Zealand Monthly Review* (October 1976), from Elizabeth Caffin in the *New Zealand Listener* (2 October 1976), and from Tom Fitzgibbon in *World Literature Written in English* (November 1977).

In the 1970s, again like Sargeson, Finlayson had some of his earlier fiction reprinted and given greater attention than before. The Auckland University New Zealand Fiction series brought out *Brown Man's Burden* and later stories, edited and introduced by Bill Pearson, in 1973. It collected all but one of the stories in the original *Brown Man's Burden* and supplemented them with most of the later stories of Māori life up to and including 'Great Times Ahead', while Pearson's introduction provided a full and sympathetic biographical and critical account. This comprehensive collection of the stories of Māori life received respectful notice from reviewers, most notably Terry Sturm in *Landfall* for September 1974, who saw the stories as unified by an 'imaginative pre-occupation' that had continuing relevance to New Zealand society – a concern 'with the nature and values of Māori culture, and its subjection to the acute disintegrating pressures of Pākehā cultural

domination'. Friend, neighbour, and fellow short-story-writer, Middleton anticipated the reprint with a sympathetic interview with Finlayson in the *New Zealand Listener* (9 July 1973). In the same issue was a letter to the editor from Finlayson, a defence of fellow-writer Noel Hilliard's editorial opposing abortion. Finlayson agreed with Hilliard that the *mauri*, the life principle recognised by Māori, forbade abortion, and concluded that 'It is only if we are willing to learn from what your correspondents dismiss as outworn "Polynesian attitudes" that we will be able to rebuild a somewhat sane community'. In a review in the same magazine on 12 January 1974 David Hill, although he found the stories somewhat dated, praised Finlayson's 'fidelity and total lack of patronage towards his characters'.

In 1979 the Auckland University Fiction series added a second volume, a new edition of *Tidal Creek*, revised and expanded to include some of the Uncle Ted material written after the publication of the first edition, edited and introduced by Dennis McEldowney. Once again the reprint invited a re-examination of Finlayson's work. Vincent O'Sullivan took the occasion of the new edition to interview Finlayson in his Weymouth home, incorporating it into a sympathetic article on the man and his philosophy in the *New Zealand Listener* (22 September 1979). Sargeson, who had reviewed the first edition, 'reviewed' this one in one of his last published pieces, in *Islands* for November 1979, in which, after welcoming the reappearance of the book and indicating his affection for it, he took the occasion to write about his own 'honorary uncle', a retired farmer who was his neighbour near the tidal creek in Takapuna and with whom he happily had worked and enjoyed the land. John Muirhead, who in 1975 had published in *World Literature Written in English* the most substantial critical essay on Finlayson's work, wrote a full and sympathetic review in the *New Zealand Listener* (12 January 1980), seeing 'this very fine novel' as a kind of elegy for Uncle Ted as a natural man, and incidentally seeing the parallels between Finlayson's Uncle Arthur and Sargeson's maternal uncle who was so important to his life. In 1985 McEldowney produced a facsimile reprint of *Our Life in this Land*.

Right up to the late 1980s Finlayson continued to publish short fiction. Most of these stories such as 'The Little Witch', broadcast on Radio New Zealand in 1975, deal with the kinds of misunderstanding between men and woman found in much of Finlayson's fiction, some being set in Auckland, some in the Pacific Islands. In *Islands* for July 1984 he published a set of three 'stories' gathered as 'Memories of Old Ponsonby', tales of his mother and grandmother and his upbringing in an Irish family. These were accompanied by a brief essay on the man and his work by McEldowney. Finlayson's last

published story, which appeared in *Metro* in 1987, is a quietly ironic tale of a young musician growing marijuana in the garden of a kindly widowed pensioner. That last story provided the title for Finlayson's final book, *In Georgina's Shady Garden and Other Stories*, published by his old friends the Holloways at the Griffin Press in 1988 with an 'Editor's Note' by Kay Holloway. It collected six of the stories of the 1970 and 1980s together with four previously uncollected ones from the thirty years before, all love stories of a sort. In 1990 Finlayson was President of Honour of the New Zealand Centre of PEN, and in 1990 and 1991 his achievement as a writer was officially recognized by Manukau City, within whose boundaries he had lived for over fifty years. He died on 2 August, 1992, and is buried beneath a gravestone that identifies him simply as 'Writer', a role that had been central to his life for sixty years.

Immediately following Finlayson's death, Middleton published in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 9 a brief memoir of his long-time friend. About the same time Theresia Liemlienio Marshall published her pamphlet, *Underneath, Around and Up 'The Totara Tree'*, a rambling discussion of Finlayson's publications and their reputation. She focused especially on Finlayson's relation to the *Sydney Bulletin*, which under the literary editorship of Douglas Steward published between 1943 and 1954 a number of his stories and frequently mentioned him in critical articles and reviews and considered that too little attention had been paid to him in New Zealand.

In the years since his death Finlayson's work has received little critical attention, mostly in literary histories and reference books, such as Lawrence Jones' articles on Finlayson and on *Brown Man's Burden* in the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* and Lydia Wever's brief account in the short story section of the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*. As Wever's account shows, the stories of Māori life continue to be seen as Finlayson's most important work. Despite the revisionism of some recent literary histories, Finlayson's place remains much the same as it has been since J. C. Reid's discussion of him in *Creative Writing in New Zealand: A Brief Critical History* in 1946 – that of a secondary figure important mainly for his realistic, sympathetic, unsentimental presentation of Māori life. E. H. McCormick had omitted Finlayson from his 1940 history, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, and Sargeson had written to him to urge that he correct this omission; McCormick did that with a full account in his *New Zealand Literature: A Survey* in 1959, where he praised Finlayson's 'impartiality and compassion' in the treatment of his Māori characters and his 'massive integrity' in his attitudes, but commented that 'Finlayson's work is often so

good, occasionally so profound, that one is puzzled by its failure to amount, in the total, to something more impressive'. Finlayson's later writing did not seem to bring any shift in this consensus view, a situation that McEldowney summarised in 1984 when he said that Finlayson 'was and remains the least known of the thirties' writers, a fact which partly reflects the generally slighter nature of his talent, but even more his modest and unassertive temperament'. But McEldowney was confident that 'as New Zealand writing moves away from [the] simple certainties' of his work 'the place held by Roderick Finlayson, and by no one else exactly, becomes more apparent'. That is probably true, for no other writer of his generation had exactly his concerns and qualities, but that place, although unique, is likely to remain a relatively modest one.

LINKS

[New Zealand Literature File — University of Auckland Library](#)

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