

James Courage, 1903 –1963

Philip Steer

James Courage is best known for his short stories and for the seven novels he wrote between 1948 and 1961. Despite living in England from the end of his secondary schooling until his death, New Zealand provided the setting for his most successful writing. Courage also took an active interest in the New Zealand literary scene, meeting and corresponding with many of its most prominent figures. His fiction reworks a variety of autobiographical scenarios, ranging from an early interest in the domestic relationships and specific New Zealand settings of his childhood, through to his later concerns with mental illness and its treatment, and homosexuality. One of his novels was banned in New Zealand because of its homosexual themes, and it is on this incident and more general questions about his homosexuality that most recent attention paid to Courage has focused.

James Francis Courage was born in Christchurch, New Zealand on 9 February 1903, the eldest of five children of Frank Hubert Courage and Zoë Frances (née Peache). James' grandfather, Frank Courage, immigrated to New Zealand in the early 1860s and purchased a sheep station, Seadown, near Amberley, North Canterbury. While there, Frank's wife, Sarah Amelia, wrote *Lights and Shadows' of Colonial Life: Twenty-Six Years in Canterbury, New Zealand* (1896), a sardonic account of colonial station life. The ire of their neighbours, upon recognising themselves in her fictionalised characters, led to the destruction of most of the original eighteen copies and Sarah Courage thus became New Zealand's first censored author. Seadown was passed onto their son, Frank Hubert, and it was there that James grew up. James' mother had lived on the wealthy Canterbury sheep station of Mt Somers prior to her marriage, and her mother continued to run the station for many years after being widowed in 1906. Courage developed a close relationship with his grandmother at Mt Somers, and she fostered in him an interest in literature and a sense of anglophilia. Analogues of his grandmother and her property recur in Courage's work as havens of acceptance and love. His parents Frank and Zoë had a short engagement and an unhappy marriage, a domestic situation echoed in Courage's recurrent representations of a taciturn and volatile father, a sensitive and delicate mother, and a curious but uncomprehending young son.

Initially educated by his mother, Courage's formal education began when his family moved to Christchurch while their homestead was rebuilt. He was enrolled at Dunelm Preparatory School in Christchurch, which he attended between 1912 and 1915. For some of this time he boarded with its headmaster, Clement Lester Wiggins, and his family in Christchurch. From Dunelm, Courage entered Christ's College in 1916. He attended the exclusive Christchurch secondary school, where his father and his mother's brothers had previously studied, until 1921. His boarding house, Flower's, fostered a culture of sporting excellence but Courage's extra-curricular activities were instead directed towards the theatre; it was also at this time that Courage began to write creatively. His academic achievements were mixed but often impressive. In his first year Courage was awarded the Tancred Prize for History; in his second he was first in Science; in his third he received a prize for his marks across English, Latin and French; the following year he was top in English. In 1920 he suffered some form of breakdown and he finished twenty-fourth out of twenty-nine in his form class; but in his final year he finished twelfth out of twenty-six.

Encouraged by his parents and grandmother, Courage left New Zealand for England in 1923. While visiting Oxford, he fell in love with the university town to the extent that he decided to study there. He entered St John's College in October 1923 and graduated with a second class in English in June 1927. While at Oxford, Courage also began to publish in various genres. His poetry appeared in the annual *Oxford Poetry* and he was a prolific music reviewer for *Isis*, an Oxford weekly. He became involved with the Oxford University Dramatic Society, and several of his plays were published in the *Oxford Outlook*, an undergraduate literary magazine. The Dramatic Society produced two of these short works, *New Country* and *Life's Too Short*, in November 1926. Courage also wrote short stories, and in August 1926 his story 'From a Balcony' was published in *The London Mercury*, a leading monthly journal. In his introduction to *Such Separate Creatures*, Charles Brasch describes these early stories as 'competent, mildly witty, and wholly conventional' (10).

After graduating, Courage lived in London for a time, studying the piano and taking occasional work as a journalist. He also spent time travelling in France, Greece and South America. For several months Courage lived in a fisherman's cottage in St. Ives, Cornwall, working on what was to become his first published novel. Financial worries contributed to his tenuous state of health, but Courage was in fact supported throughout by an allowance provided by his parents. Courage contracted tuberculosis in 1931, however, and was confined until November 1933 in a sanatorium at Mundesley,

Norfolk. It was while he was in Mundesley that his first novel, *One House* (1933), was published. Only 1100 copies were released by Victor Gollancz and, although it was reviewed in several publications including *The Times Literary Supplement*, it made little impact and today copies of it are very rare.

When he was discharged from the sanatorium, Courage returned to New Zealand for a period of convalescence that was also to be his last visit. During this time he continued to write and established contacts within the New Zealand artistic community, forming friendships with writer D'Arcy Cresswell and pianist Frederick Page in particular. On returning to England in 1936, Courage rented a flat in London, a city he was to reside in until the end of World War II. Perhaps paradoxically, it was in London that he became immersed in the New Zealand literary scene, as a result of meeting many of the New Zealand writers visiting England at the time. Of particular importance was his encounter in 1936 with Charles Brasch, soon to become founding editor of the New Zealand literary journal *Landfall*. The two began a correspondence that lasted until Courage's death; Brasch would also publish several of Courage's short stories in *Landfall* and edit the posthumous collection of his short stories, *Such Separate Creatures* (1973). Other New Zealand acquaintances made by Courage during this period included composer Douglas Lilburn, and poets Ursula Bethell and Denis Glover.

Between 1940 and 1950, Courage worked at Wilson's Book Shop in Hampstead, becoming its manager in 1946. Courage's writing at this time was largely directed towards the theatre, which he came to consider the most difficult of all literary disciplines. His play *Private History* was one of only two new works accepted for the 1938 season of the Gate Theatre. Set in a school boarding house, it centred on a homosexual relationship between two students and the school's response. *Private History* played to packed houses throughout its run but was denied a West End production by the censor due to its treatment of homosexual themes. Another of his plays, *The Man in the Distance*, was also accepted by the Gate Theatre but was never performed because of the outbreak of the war. Due to his delicate health Courage was declared fit for non-combatant duties only and he served as a firewarden during the bombing of London.

Courage's success as a writer began at the end of the war with the acceptance of his short story, 'Uncle Adam Shot a Stag', for the 1945 edition of *English Story*, a prominent yearly anthology. Set in the early twentieth century, it concerns a visit by the young Walter Blakiston to his grandmother's Canterbury sheep station. His uncle Adam is also living there and the story

describes Adam's return from a hunting trip. Walter's uncomprehending observations of Adam's treatment of the stag allow the reader to discern the latter's erotic frustrations:

Uncle Adam stopped, bowed to the carcass, and said slowly and primly: 'May I have the pleasure? Just one small dance? Just a waltz on this happy night?' He turned to Walter in a quick startling fury. 'Too bloody proud,' he shouted, nodding at the stag. 'Do anything if you lay your soul in the dust for 'em. Otherwise, too bloody proud.' (21-22)

With 'Uncle Adam Shot a Stag,' Courage introduced the rural New Zealand setting, the Blakiston family and its tense domestic relationships, and the questions of childhood innocence, adult sexuality and mental stability that were to characterize his work over next decade.

Courage entered the New Zealand literary scene when *Landfall* published his short story, 'After the Earthquake' (December 1948). Courage's most anthologised story, it also revolves around the young Walter Blakiston. An elderly woman dies during a night marked by a sharp earthquake and Walter and his mother visit the bereaved daughter. Through Walter's persistent questions about a strange horse outside her house, the reader becomes aware that the death has freed the daughter to take a lover. At the same time, the earthquake leads Walter's father to the realisation that 'I shall probably never go back to the Old Country. It's too far away now, too long ago' (71).

The New Zealand of 'Uncle Adam Shot a Stag' and 'After the Earthquake' also provided the setting for the succession of novels Courage wrote between 1948 and 1956. The first of these, *The Fifth Child* (1948), received mixed reviews in England and New Zealand, but was popular enough to be reprinted later in the year. Of particular importance was Frank Sargeson's review in *Landfall* (March 1949). He acknowledged Courage's technical skill but found the subject matter – a wife contemplating leaving her husband and children after a fifth, unwanted pregnancy – banal. He also criticised the novel's lack of social context but concluded, 'it is a distinguished contribution to the literature of our country. There isn't a single hint of the technical ineptitude, the earnest amateurishness, that has disfigured so many of our "efforts"' (73). Courage was encouraged by the review and wrote to Sargeson, beginning a long correspondence between the two men.

His second New Zealand novel, *Desire Without Content* (1950), explores the relationships between Mrs Kendal, the widowed owner of a Canterbury

sheep station, her son Lewis, who is both intellectually disabled and suffers from paranoia, and Effie, a young woman who falls in love with and marries Lewis after coming to board with them. The strain of writing the novel while also managing the bookshop caused Courage to become depressed and eventually led to a nervous breakdown in 1950. The breakdown required him to give up his job and enter the psychiatric hospital of Napsbury in Saint Albans, London. While in hospital Courage continued to write, working on up to ten short stories and finishing the typescript of his next novel. He also persevered with theatre, dramatising *Desire Without Content*, but was unable to have it produced.

Both immediately prior to and during his treatment at Napsbury, Courage continued to meet New Zealand writers. In 1949 he met academic and writer Bill Pearson, who was studying in London at the time and with whom he got on well; in 1951, Pearson introduced Courage to short story writer Maurice Duggan, which did not go as well. He also met poet Basil Dowling and short story writer A.P. Gaskell. Courage was writing his next novel, *Fires in the Distance*, at this time and it was published in 1952. It relates a visit by Paul to the Donovans, who are family friends, during the weeks prior to his departure for England to pursue his medical studies. Questions of sexuality are at the forefront of the novel: the parents are unhappily married, Mrs Donovan makes a clumsy pass at Paul, and attractions form between Paul and both of the eldest children, Kathie and Leo.

Courage's fourth New Zealand novel, *The Young Have Secrets* (1954), was turned down by his regular publisher, Constable. Released by Jonathan Cape, however, it proved to be his most successful and has remained highest in critical esteem since. Set against the backdrop of World War I, the story concerns ten-year-old Walter Blakiston and his experiences while boarding with Mr Garnett, the master of his preparatory school. Also in the household are Garnett's cantankerous wife and their adult daughter, Muriel. Muriel has two sisters, Rose and Hilda, and a brother Mark. Through confessions made by each of the central characters to the uncomprehending Walter, the reader becomes aware that all three sisters loved the same man, Geoffrey Macauley, and that Hilda was able to marry him only after actions by Muriel turned him away from his first love, Rose. As these familial tensions come to a head, so does Walter's own questioning of adult sexuality.

Courage's final New Zealand novel was *The Call Home* (1956). In it, the widowed Norman Grant returns to New Zealand after a breakdown. There he finds healing among his family and in the company of another widow, Louise

Morton. John Lee argues in *'A Private History': Towards a Biography of James Courage, Expatriate New Zealand Writer* (2001) that, 'With the success of his previous book, Courage was probably at the height of his standing in New Zealand writing at this time' (93). Yet, it was at this time that he reached the verge of another breakdown and underwent shock therapy for a period.

Courage's seventh novel, like his first, had an English setting. *A Way of Love* (1959) also proved to be his most controversial for New Zealand readers. Set in the London gay community, its first person narrative (an unusual device for Courage) describes the course of a homosexual relationship between middle-aged architect Bruce Quantock and young student Philip Dill. It received a largely negative response in England and New Zealand, including a particularly vitriolic review by M.K. Joseph in *Landfall* (June 1959). He described it as 'a quietly ruthless exposure of the pretensions of homosexuality, and a sad book, despite its appearance of an urbane and sensual exterior' (179). In 1961, the New Zealand Police brought the novel before the Inter-Departmental Committee responsible for the censorship of indecent publications. The Committee decided to ban the novel from libraries and bookstores 'on grounds of indecency, and because it lacked redeeming literary merit' (Lee 2001 104), an action that aroused little comment amongst the New Zealand literary community. Because of the prevailing moral climate, and despite his failing health, Courage decided at this time against returning to New Zealand.

Courage's last novel was published in the same year that his previous one was banned in New Zealand. *The Visit to Penmorton* (1961) is set in Cornwall, reminiscent of his 1930s sojourn in St. Ives, and it examines aspects of Freudian psychotherapy that he had experienced firsthand during the previous decade. The novel was to be his last published work of any sort; Courage died in England of a heart attack in 1963. His will stipulated that his ashes be returned to New Zealand and scattered in Amberley, Christchurch. It also appointed his sister, Patricia Fanshawe, to be his literary executor.

Courage was and has remained a marginal figure in New Zealand literature. His work, with its nostalgia for the Old Country and depiction of upper-class characters, was out of keeping with the literary nationalism that began to coalesce in the 1930s and has exerted such influence on later critics. It is primarily because of several frequently anthologised short stories that he has been remembered. Those critics who have addressed his novels have generally praised their technical accomplishment and psychological

insight. In more recent years, however, renewed interest in Courage has centred on his homosexuality following the publication of the anthology *Best Mates: Gay Writing in Aotearoa New Zealand* (1997). In their introduction, editors Peter Wells and Rex Pilgrim identified *A Way of Love* as New Zealand's first gay novel and praised it as a 'breakthrough novel' for 'the silvery consciousness of the narrator, his insistence on honesty about his emotions and actions' (21). They left a symbolic blank page under his name, however, because Courage's executor had denied permission to include Courage in the anthology. Fanshawe claimed he had not publicly identified himself as homosexual; in response, Wells and Pilgrim argued that he was 'now being nurtured into a deeper silence and covert oblivion' (14). In 1998 the New Zealand Society of Authors (PEN New Zealand) inaugurated an annual 'Courage Day,'. In commemoration of the banning of *A Way of Love*, to highlight concerns about freedom of expression. These signs of interest in Courage's work and debates about their interpretation suggest that his reputation is likely to keep growing.

LINKS

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

[New Zealand Literature File](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

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