

## Introduction

*Mark Williams*

Colonial poetry reminds us that the genre once commanded a broad audience that consumed poetry for pleasure and instruction, that it influenced moral, social and philosophical reflection of the day, and that writing poetry routinely accompanied—even contributed to—a busy public life. In this, the last collection of essays on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century New Zealand literary lives, we consider that most persistent yet changeable genre: democratic in one period, hieratic in another; demotic, high-brow, vulgar, refined, political and quietist for different audiences and different historical periods. The problem in New Zealand's literary history has been that the judgements of one period favouring serious and strenuous poetry presenting a relatively high social threshold for readers have overwhelmed the preference of an earlier period in which poetry was discursive, digressive, undisciplined and widely read. The purposes of these essays are: to offer the lives and poetry of those born in the colonial period the due attention they warrant—that is, to be read in terms appropriate to their own time—; and to consider those born as the colonial era closed in the early twentieth century who went on to inhabit a climate vigorously at odds with the world of their grandparents.

By the 1940s, when some of the poets treated here were still writing, the colonial had become fastened to a poetic mode that had no use value for the intellectual conscience of a settler society eager to move beyond its former dependency on the cultural forms of 'Home'—to establish a place for the mind in the actual without complacently reaching back to a lost ideal. Allen Curnow in particular is harsh on the poets who wrote in the period up to World War I, finding in their work belatedness, feminine sentiment, a lack of linguistic or mental trenchancy. Often characterized as cultural nationalist, the pushy generation of the '30s was also modernist in its programme of renovation, and stands in the same relation to colonial poetry that Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot do to the Victorians. That effort of making new in both cases occasioned both a forceful poetic intervention and a loss of cultural memory that needs to be corrected.

Why did the colonials write so much poetry? This was not a phenomenon peculiar to New Zealand. Indian literary critic Rukmini Bhaya Nair observes that

During the period of the consolidation of the East India Company, the British in India produced surprisingly large quantities of one commodity that could not be traded – poetry. . . questions of value and fetish [are] raised by such prized, yet priceless goods. Why should a nascent colonising culture, confident of both its mercantile and military prowess, expend so much labour on the production of such apparently unsaleable goods and services?

Writing colonial poetry can be seen as a form of dilettante experience at odds with the world of commerce and colonial authority, but this is arguable. In New Zealand a surprising number of important colonial administrators and politicians wrote poetry, some of it of epic length. This writing was part of the shaping of colonial society as it adapted to the new world. It served various purposes: high-minded, as with William Golder; overly ambitious, as with Alfred Domett; patriotic, as with Thomas Bracken; curiously prescient of later modes of national representation, as with Edward Tregear. Colonial poetry was a part of public as well as private discourse, as when Jessie Mackay engages in the cultural and identity politics of the day. In Domett's case, poetry imposes orderliness on and applies classification to the Victorian mind in its passages between faith and science; and is also caught up in the commodified world of empire. For David McKee Wright poetry has a very broad social register, and his work corresponds to a popular ballad style more associated with Australia than with New Zealand at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Others of these poets, born before the First World War, nevertheless, become part of the modernist movement, or its sometimes uneasy precursors in the 1920s. Blanche Baughan and Ursula Bethell have been caught up in the ongoing disputes about the modernist intervention of the 1930s and its effects on earlier generations of writers. A. R. D. Fairburn, R. A. K. Mason and Denis Glover are all central movers of that intervention (as is Curnow, who must wait here for a later volume of essays). Yet they exist here in a context which sees them, appropriately, as part of the continuum of New Zealand poetry from the early colonial period when Golder projects his idealised schemes for social being to the 1930s, when another generation consider the social in strong terms—this time dystopian rather than utopian, but still part of the same history of making.