Eileen Duggan, 1894 – 1972

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In 1930, J. M. Dent in London published an anthology of New Zealand verse under the title *Kowhai Gold*. Its editor, Quentin Pope, expressed the hope that its contents might serve as the foundation of a New Zealand literature, but within a few years the anthology was being seen as the embodiment of a moribund tradition of versifying, dominated by 'genteel female poets'. The verses were chastised as sickly and sentimental, laden with cliché; one of the severest critics, Allen Curnow, characterised it as a 'lamentable anthology [in which] imported insipidities were mixed with puerilities of local origin'. Prominent among the poets included in *Kowhai Gold* was Eileen Duggan, who until then had enjoyed a reputation second to none. Internationally, her poetry continued to be well received, but in New Zealand her standing began to wane, and never recovered; a largely male, secular group of younger poets and critics, attracted by modernist forms and philosophies, had little time for her more traditional lyrics, or for her active Catholicism. Her subsequent absence from major anthologies was as a result of her own decision, but it was a decision she felt forced to make by the prejudice and animosity she encountered.

Eileen May Duggan was born on 21 May 1894 in the small, South Island farming community of Tua Marina, close to the banks of the Wairau River. Some fifty years earlier, the area had been the scene of a deadly confrontation between European settlers and local Māori, but by the end of the nineteenth century it was a tranquil setting, one that well merited the name given to it by local Māori – 'the calm beyond'. Duggan's parents, John and Julia (Begley), were both immigrants from County Kerry in Ireland, who fled the circumstances of famine and continued English oppression to seek a new life in a new world. They met and were married in Wellington, but moved soon afterwards to Tua Marina, where John found work as a platelayer in the Railways, and where they brought up their four daughters, of whom Eileen was the youngest. Duggan spent her childhood and adolescence in this peaceful rural setting, and in later life was to write of its impact on her. A journalistic piece in *Selected Poems* celebrates the Para road leading into Tua Marina; another speaks of the importance of place – 'all our days the Wairau will be our river, and Tapuaenuku … will be our mountain'.

Duggan began her primary schooling at the Tua Marina village school; then in 1907, the recipient of a Junior National Scholarship, she went on to secondary school at Marlborough High School (renamed Marlborough College in 1909). By the end of her secondary schooling she had decided to follow her older sister Evelyn into teaching (she had already been teaching Sunday school lessons to Catholic children in Tua Marina), and in 1911 she enrolled at Wellington Teachers' Training College. The following two years saw her back at Tua Marina primary school as a student teacher, before returning to Wellington where she combined her teacher training with university study at Victoria University College. Her academic ability was again demonstrated; her undergraduate degree combined study in Latin, French, English and History, and F. M. McKay cites a letter from the then Professor of Classics who acclaims her as 'in some respects the most brilliant woman student it has been my pleasure to teach … with quite remarkable powers of expression'. She then went on to further study in History, graduating in 1918 with a Masters degree with First Class Honours, and the award of another academic scholarship.

Duggan then took up an appointment as a History teacher in the rural North Island town of Dannevirke, but it proved to be an unrewarding experience for her, and she remained only for the one academic year. In part, no doubt, her dislike for teaching was occasioned by her physical health: she had suffered from an illness in childhood (possibly encephalitis) which left her with a general frailty and with shaking hands and head for most of her life. In addition, although she was an intelligent and scholarly woman, one whom J. C. Reid would later describe in a radio broadcast as having 'a vigorous personality and a mind as swift as a sword … with a sparkling wit and a robust sense of humour', she was by nature somewhat retiring – perhaps too much so for the hurly-burly of a rural high school classroom. Grace Burgess's memoir also records that, while at Dannevirke, Duggan received a proposal of marriage, which she reluctantly refused. Her health appears to have been a factor in this decision, too, but it is equally possible that she had already decided that her future lay as a writer, and that such a choice required her to remain single. An essay on Yeats bears the title 'Dedication, the Artist's Discipline'; another, on Middleton Murry, contains the observation that 'a woman artist is only half a man's woman'. (Both essays are reproduced in *Selected Poems*.)

In spite of the familial attachment to Tua Marina, recorded by Duggan in the school's jubilee publication, by 1920 all of the family had left the settlement. The eldest of the daughters, Mary, had married in 1913 and was settled in

Wellington; Catherine had joined a religious congregation; and when Evelyn also married and settled in Wellington their parents sold the family home and moved there too. Tragedy struck the family in January of 1921, when Evelyn died unexpectedly of nephritis. Duggan expressed something of her grief in a letter to the Australian writer, Nettie Palmer: 'A most keen and sudden sorrow, my first sorrow, has crushed my brain. My sister, who was the light of my eyes, died without warning after a few minutes' illness. She was like a young tree growing and in a month we hoped to hold her child'.

Duggan had started writing poetry around 1916 when she was at Training College. Initially, she experimented with light verse, collaborating with another student to write the words for a capping-song, but by the following year had sent a few poems to the New Zealand *Tablet*, a Catholic weekly published in Dunedin. Its newly appointed editor, Dr. James Kelly, brought to the paper a special interest in and promotion of Irish affairs, and with that background he welcomed and encouraged Duggan's writing. Not only did the *Tablet* publish individual poems, but it was also the publisher of her first volume of poetry, a slim booklet of thirty-five lyrics with the unpretentious title of *Poems*.

As Kelly noted in a brief preface, the poems in this first collection were influenced by her strong Catholic faith and by her Irish heritage, and he concluded with a promise that Irish readers would find here evidence that 'the traditions of the old land' were being preserved in New Zealand, and that 'young hearts beat here, as warmly as at home, for the cause that is dearer than life to us all'. The 'cause' (the word might well have been capitalized) was, of course, the desire of Sinn Fein for the total separation of Ireland and England. As McKay notes, at the time of the appearance of Duggan's collection, 'Irish resentment against England was running high'. The Easter Rising was fresh in the memory, to which was added the suppression of the Irish Parliament in 1919, and the atrocities committed by the Black and Tans from 1920. Despite Kelly's comment, however, only a few of the poems directly address the wrongs suffered by Ireland, although McKay cites another unpublished fragment which vividly recalls 'bedside tales … Of men eating grass / Of skeletons walking … Of the crash of doors / When the battering ram struck'. Rather than springing from an immediate sense of grievance or outrage, these early poems are at a remove from the political events that lie behind them; instead, they reveal a prevailing mood of (often unnamed) melancholy or a sense of foreboding, products of a youthful romanticism set down in a mystic land of faery. One of the most interesting and successful poems in the collection is 'Rosa Luxembourg'. It is an imaginative and sympathetic response to the tragic life of the revolutionary socialist, Rosa

Luxembourg, who was murdered by political opponents in 1919. Duggan clearly admires the woman's 'wild heart' and 'wild voice' that speaks on behalf of 'those whose lips are dumb', but for the most part this direct political action is not endorsed in other poems, which seek instead to merge Irish nationalism with religious faith.

Having abandoned teaching as a career, Duggan lived with her parents in Wellington, but in 1923 the tragedy she experienced with the death of her closest sister was compounded when both her mother and her father died within a few months of each other. The ill health that had contributed to her decision to leave teaching made it undesirable for her to live on her own, and so she lived for a time with her sister Mary. That continued for some eighteen months, during which time Duggan supported herself by her journalistic writing, but it became increasingly obvious that Mary's husband resented her presence in their home, and she moved out to live in a central city boarding hostel for young women. Soon after, she tried teaching again – for a year at a Catholic boys' school, St Patrick's College in Wellington, and then the following year as an assistant lecturer at Victoria University College. Neither situation appealed to her; in another letter to Nettie Palmer she described her time as a teacher as 'my Land of Egypt and House of Bondage'. From then on, she went back to writing as a full-time occupation, and for the remainder of her life she earned her living almost exclusively from her contributions to newspapers and journals. One notable contribution was a page she wrote for the New Zealand *Tablet* for over fifty years; ahead of herself with the supply of copy, the last numbers appeared after her death. At the same time, Duggan continued to write and publish poetry over the next few years, sending poems to newspapers and journals in New Zealand, Australia, America and England.

In further letters to Nettie Palmer, Duggan wrote revealingly of her attachment to Ireland and her interest in Irish affairs, and her quiet disdain for the incessant cries of 'Empire' heard throughout New Zealand. She admits to leaning towards Ireland, loving it at times better than New Zealand, out of 'atavism, or pity, or lawlessness;' and she scorns the way New Zealand has become 'a simpering débutante, paying calls, and echoing Mother's phrases'. But in reality, it appears to have been her dislike for all the oppressive trappings of Empire, rather than any rejection of New Zealand, that prompted her apparent preference for Ireland. In 1926, when she was offered the chance of a trip to Ireland, she refused, explaining to Nettie Palmer 'New Zealand comes first. I am only a grandchild of Ireland. It has taken me some time to get my bearings but that offer did it for me'.

This sense of commitment to New Zealand is also borne out in some of her prose writing from the same time; in an article published in 1926 in the *Catholic World* she deplores the weakness 'that everything must have a European hallmark … until some European has praised us we mistrust our own judgement. … Our literary judgements are bounded on the north by a conviction that we must wait until Europe has spoken, and on the south by a conviction that we are not old enough yet to sing living songs'. Another article, reprinted in *Selected Poems*, shows an awareness of the need to balance nationalist demands ('no art can be made national by the mere mention of Kowhais and Kiwis') with the claims that art is free from national influences or responsibilities ('the obligations for sod and sky are permanent'). Through the later part of the 1920s and the early 1930s, Duggan was already arriving at an understanding of the importance of a national literature and of the means to achieve it – an understanding that, ironically, is not dissimilar from that of the nationalist poets who chose to condemn her work.

By the end of the twenties, Duggan had published enough good poems to receive considerable critical attention, and to raise expectations for a second volume. Those expectations were at once both fulfilled and confounded with the publication in 1929 of *New Zealand Bird Songs*, a collection that included a foreword by Duggan disclaiming the poems as literature: 'They are simply rhymes on their birds for the children of our country'. In spite of that, the volume sold out quickly, and plans were discussed for an Australian edition and a second New Zealand edition – plans which appear to have been abandoned as a result of difficulties in obtaining accurate royalty statements from the publisher, Harry Tombs. Regrettably, Duggan's modest disclaimer was ignored by many reviewers; Jessie Mackay, for example, welcomed the book (in her own words) 'with a kind of reverence', and others greeted it with similarly embarrassing sentiments. Again, letters to Nettie Palmer provide a revealing comment. Duggan is almost disparaging about the 'little bird book', confiding that she found its uncritical reception alarming. A more perceptive comment is provided by the American reviewer Paul Kavanagh, who noted its interest in terms of metrical experimentation. McKay rightly notes the threatening quality of 'The Song of the Kingfisher', the most successful poem in the collection, and the keen observation of natural phenomena throughout, but apart from that the bird songs should be accepted on the terms their author introduced them, as children's verses. Together, these two collections show Duggan's easy lyric grace, her accomplished handling of rhythms, her ability to evoke atmosphere, and her spontaneous appreciation of the natural world.

In 1931 her brother-in-law died, and she and her sister set up house together. She continued to write poetry, but still the anticipated 'real book' did not appear. Perhaps the gushy enthusiasm with which *Bird Songs* had been acclaimed persuaded her to delay; certainly she expressed to Nettie Palmer her fear that 'when or if the real book comes there will be nothing left to say on it'. In spite of the absence of a significant new work, her reputation continued to grow, and to win national and international honours for her; in 1935 she was admitted to the Missouri-based Gallery of Living Catholic Authors, and in 1937 she was awarded the O. B. E. for services to literature.

The 'real book' did appear, however, later in the year in which she received her royal honour. *Poems* was published in London in 1937, with an American edition the following year, and enlarged editions in both London and New York in 1939. At the request of the English Jesuit, C. C. Martindale, who had met Duggan when visiting New Zealand, Walter de la Mare agreed to write an introduction to the collection, and the two poets corresponded from then until de la Mare's death in 1956. De la Mare's introduction drew attention to the freshness, the incisiveness, and the energy of the writing, to the presence of 'a unique feeling expressed in a renewed language', and concluded with an acknowledgement of the difficulty 'of attempting to introduce a poet from so far away to listeners so near'. Privately, he suggested to Duggan that the notion of her work needing to be 'introduced' was laughable; he thought her assured of a strong and loyal readership, but even as her work was published, changes in literary fashion were reaching New Zealand that would ultimately see her marginalized within the literary community.

The first poem in the collection, 'Heralds', grows out of Duggan's consciousness of the relative slightness of the local literary tradition, a theme that pre-occupied her in much of her writing. Here, as in 'New Zealand Art', she imagines the artist in New Zealand as a solitary figure, distanced from the mainstream of literary culture and having to break in new soil. But such an attitude is itself part of a literary tradition, for Duggan's conception of the artist is of the solitary figure of Romantic poetry, the exile from ordinary society, the figure engaged in a quest for truth. While she does not subscribe to the idea of the poet as philosopher (even less so as legislator), she shares the Romantic notion of inspiration, asking in 'Booty' that 'song come always at me and not to me / And, coming, let it plunder, burn, and flay'.

In an article on the Australian poet Shaw Neilson (see *Selected Poems*), Duggan wrote that 'the ballad is a necessary stage in the evolution of a national literature', and this collection includes a number of ballads (what she

called ‘my peasant poems’) that present brief glimpses into the lives of ordinary working people – a bushman, a blacksmith’s wife, a milker – acknowledging the hardships of their daily existence in taut, understated lines that show an easy handling of the colloquial. The same easy rhythms and simple colloquial language are successfully employed in the lullaby-like lines of ‘The Oxen’ or of the very popular ‘A New Zealand Christmas’ – a poem that often appeared on Christmas cards and was several times set to music. In a similar vein, although imbued with an unsettling atmosphere of vague omen, is the imaginative lyric ‘Twilight’ with its vivid recollection of childhood.

Prominent in this collection, too, are poems that explore the subject matter of her faith. Although much of her work has this dimension, and she can with some justice be thought of as a religious poet, in general she writes from an assured acceptance, so that she is an affirmative, devotional poet rather than one who engages in profound explorations of spiritual questions or explores individual crises of faith. In spite of that, her religious poems show considerable variety and achievement. There are the simple lyrics of ‘The Oxen’ and ‘A New Zealand Christmas’ noted above; the delightful, homely image of Mary ‘standing at the gate’ calling ‘Jesus, come home; it’s late;’ the imaginative sympathy with the ‘fierce, troubled heart’ of St Peter, ‘an old man, bred to nets and sails, / Betrayed by ignorance and awe’, whose ‘ancient infidelity [was] / Rewarded by a risen God;’ or the more complex image of Mary in ‘After the Annunciation’ that sees her instinctively saluted by bees and birds, as she walks in a countryside rich in Eucharistic symbols. Perhaps the most subtle of the religious poems is ‘Autumn’, which appears at first glance to be addressing the ‘royal’ season, welcoming it (with a Keatsian sensuousness) with ‘multitudes of fruits … flowers and clouds’. Gradually, however, the symbolism of welcoming a king transforms into imagery that reminds us of the triumphal procession of Christ on Palm Sunday, an event that in the southern hemisphere takes place in autumn. And just as autumn must inevitably give way to winter, so Palm Sunday serves to introduce the events that lead to the Crucifixion. Much is made in northern hemisphere poetry of the symbolic associations between spring and Easter; Duggan here has very successfully forged a new connection between natural and ecclesiastical seasons that is appropriate for her antipodean context.

One of the best, and best-known poems in the collection is the accomplished lyric ‘The Tides Run Up the Wairau’, in which the speaker denies a love she is nevertheless overwhelmed by, just as the snow-fed Wairau river resists, but is invaded by the in-rushing tide. Human and natural images are beautifully merged in the poem, which equally achieves its effect

through exquisite manipulation of rhythm and careful management of alliteration and assonance. The taut, mostly mono-syllabic lines powerfully suggest the tension that is being explored, a barely-controlled tension that springs from an apparently unfulfilled relationship. Other poems occupy the same territory. In this volume, there are 'Trance', 'When in Still Air', and 'Sonnet'; from the same period are the uncollected or previously unpublished poems, 'The Parting', 'The Boastful Lover', and 'Absence'. Although we know that Duggan turned down an offer of marriage in Dannevirke, little else is known of that aspect of her private life. There is, therefore, no way of knowing what relationship such poems have to her own life (and their merits certainly do not depend on such associations), but their existence provides an intriguing sidelight upon her otherwise secluded life.

The next volume appeared in 1940, its title, *New Zealand Poems,* having been decided upon by Allen & Unwin. Initially, there was some hesitation about publishing the collection; as Sidgwick and Jackson had felt with Ursula Bethell's first book, there were difficulties attendant upon publishing 'colonial' verse, and extant letters from Allen & Unwin indicate they felt this volume 'too New Zealandish'. Eventually, however, they elected to go ahead, choosing a title which deliberately highlighted its New Zealand content in the nation's Centennial year.

The austerity of the war years no doubt explains the plain paper and dull, soft cover of the publication, so different from the earlier *Poems*, but despite the unprepossessing exterior, the collection bears the caption 'In Honour of the Centennial of the Dominion of New Zealand'. As one might expect, a number of the poems deal overtly with nationalist themes, and do so from a historical perspective. Two of the poems, 'Centenary Ode' and 'Ode', are formal pieces in a forced, declamatory style. It is not a style that Duggan manages well; the rhetoric is rather too self-conscious, the formal voice something with which she seems uncomfortable. Equally part of her nationalist endeavour are the poems which seek to incorporate aspects of Māori life and legend. They reveal an imaginative sympathy for Māori as first settlers of the land, but the attempts to render Māori themes read now as somewhat clumsy and even alienating. Again, it is the simple lyrics and ballads, the evocations of rural life, and the delineations of familiar landscape that are most successful. The grander rhetoric with which she sought to write of New Zealand at large gives way to a much more controlled use of language when she concentrates her attention on particular scenes – Cloudy Bay, Tua Marina, Titahi Bay – and the result is a more successful poetry of region rather than of nation.

McKay and Weir draw attention to the highly favourable reception both these volumes were given by international papers, but Weir is right to detect some partisanship in the praise. Reviewers who were distrustful of modernist free verse welcomed her preference for traditional forms, coupled as it appeared to be with an equally conservative philosophy and affirmative Catholicism. But a partial and preconceived reading of her work was as much a feature of those who criticized her verse as of those who acclaimed it.

From the mid-thirties, it had become clear that a generation of younger poets were dissatisfied with the policies and practices of literary editors such as Alan Mulgan, C. A. Marris, and J. H. E. Schroder, policies and practices that they felt favoured a coterie of derivative women poets. Denis Glover lampooned the three editors in his *Short Reflections on the Present State of Literature in this Country*, and later, in *The Arraignment of Paris* (the rhyme with Marris was irresistible), he decried the 'atmosphere of petticoats and frills'. Witty his verses may have been, but they were certainly not good-natured, as McKay describes them, any more than was A. R. D. Fairburn's denigration of what he called 'the menstrual school' of poetry. Patronising and chauvinist, Glover and Fairburn felt a need to extinguish other candles for their own lights to shine. The promotion of an alternative in New Zealand literature was effected in no small part by the publications of the Caxton Press, which Glover established and ran. In 1943, Allen Curnow sought Duggan's permission to include some of her poems in the anthology he was preparing, eventually published in 1945 by the Caxton Press. She declined, writing in a letter to W. F. Alexander that 'their New Zealand is not mine'. In 1948, Curnow again sought permission to include her work when the anthology was being revised, but again she declined. Curnow's judgement of her work in his first introduction, that 'the whole effect is that of an emotional cliché', can hardly have encouraged her to participate. Indeed, she rarely published again in New Zealand, apart from occasional commissioned poems.

She did continue to publish abroad, though, and her reputation in England, Australia, and the United States remained high. An Eileen Duggan Society had been established in several states in America; she was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London; and she was even made an Honorary Member of the International Mark Twain Society.

Then in 1951, some eleven years after *New Zealand Poems*, Allen & Unwin brought out a new collection under the unassuming title of *More Poems*. Something of the literary climate within which it was released may be gauged

from an unpublished letter written by Fairburn to Charles Brasch, editor of *Landfall*. Declining an invitation to review *More Poems*, Fairburn was pleased to be relieved of 'the obligation to abuse a spinster. La Duggan's verse has never been much more to me than a distant mewing: I haven't read this latest book, but should be surprised to find it much different in texture and feeling from what went before it'. It is a far cry from the letter Fairburn wrote to Duggan in 1929, describing 'And at the End' as 'one of the greatest things I've ever read'. Had Fairburn read the new work, he might indeed have been surprised, for the volume represents, as E. H. McCormick notes, 'a remarkable achievement, the transformation in late maturity of long-established poetic habits in response to the pressure of inner experience'.

The experience that lies behind *More Poems* and that accounts for the remarkable transformation is the experience of a world again at war. Like many of her contemporaries, Duggan saw the war and its aftermath, and the emergence of atomic weapons, as threatening the whole of civilization. Although some of the poems in the collection come from an earlier period, the majority of them grow directly from her reflections on this catastrophe. The first poem, 'End of Autumn', draws on literary and classical allusion to indicate 'the fall / To silver Latin of the classical' and ends with a reflection that humanity has lived through 'the saddest autumn ever known'. Duggan's sombre reflection is that 'the tree of man' is stripped bare, and this mood characterizes much of the poetry in the volume. Not that it is without hope. Her religious faith confirmed her in the belief that ''tis not extinction but eclipse', but in spite of that intellectual hope there is a bleakness in much of the verse that is quite unlike the lyric exuberance of earlier work. That bleakness of mood is matched by a spareness and austerity of style seen in such poems as 'Post-War', 'Dark Age', and 'Thoughts of a Dead Airman'.

Religious material is still present, as in the splendid poem 'Contrast', which imagines the approach of the Magi to Bethlehem, planned, calculated, 'as slow as reason', and contrasts that with the intuitive, impulsive response of the shepherds, 'helter-skelter, wild-foot, down the cragside, / as fast as instinct – no conjecture, no dismay'. More soberly, 'Agnus Dei' attempts to find some way of understanding human suffering by locating it within the suffering of Christ, and associating it with his redemptive sacrifice.

But for the most part there is a preponderance of negative images, images of death, of wildness, of absence of sunlight, of cold seas, all in keeping with the troubled times. An article written for the New Zealand *Tablet* suggests the same attitude: 'we have lived in the Dark Ages … Our age has seen total

combat; it has seen obliteration'. And although this article refuses to countenance despair, it shows an awareness that something frighteningly new has happened to the world: 'Now men fight robots which, with a deadly, impersonal precision, so destroy that we have no verb in our tongue violent enough to convey the impact. These, indiscriminate, implacable, have bred more hatred than any fear, save one, the fear for liberty'.

That deadly, precise destruction provides the subject for another of the best poems in the collection, 'The Discipline of Consequences'. The mastery of 'the last wild element' that has been achieved through atomic warfare unleashes an inevitable 'revenge' upon the world, 'Setting the air alight, the sea a-boil'. McKay locates the source of the extended image of 'the molten fox' in the Book of Judges, and his discussion refers appropriately to the range of apocalyptic images that run through the poem. The frightening vision of a world ablaze, countries catching fire from one another in an uncontrollable chain reaction, powerfully conveys the anguished reaction felt in the 1940s to the previously unimagined horror of atomic warfare.

The final poem in this collection, the sonnet 'World Woes', may also be linked to Duggan's article on the war cited above. One response to the discovery that there is 'no verb in our tongue violent enough to convey the impact' of these violent times is to cease 'verbing'. The inadequacy of language may be met by silence. In this last poem, Duggan reflects on her own circumstance – in practical terms, remote and sheltered from the world woes she has had to contemplate. She accuses herself of a kind of indulgence, savouring the sorrows of the world because they provide material for her verse. Drawing upon familiar rural imagery, she observes that 'coastal cattle' have no need for a salt lick. Salt is in the wombs that bore them, the rain that washes them, the grass on which they feed. And reflecting that 'salt-licks are savours' in her verse, she counsels herself to 'have done with words that are no more than sounds'. This last sonnet may be read as a kind of renunciation of art. After the publication of *More Poems*, Duggan stopped writing verse. Although she continued to earn her living through her prose writing for another twenty years, the muse of poetry was silenced.

For the remainder of her life, Duggan maintained the private, semi-secluded lifestyle which had been her wont for many years. She kept up a wide circle of friends and correspondents both in New Zealand and abroad, and she maintained an interest in literary and religious affairs, but she did little that placed her in the public gaze. Curnow made one more effort to include her poems in an anthology he was compiling, the Penguin anthology that was

finally published in 1960. (Protracted legal discussions, in part with Duggan and her legal advisor, delayed publication for some years.) At one stage she consented to the inclusion of some poems, but anthologist and poet were unable to agree about the choice of titles, and Duggan finally refused permission. Then late in 1963 her sister Mary, with whom she had lived for more than thirty years, died in Wellington; and less than six months later her only remaining sister, Catherine, also died. Despite her poor health, Duggan survived for a further eight years, nourished by the faith that had strengthened her throughout her life, and cared for by close and attentive friends, Julia McLeely, with whom she lived, and Grace Burgess, who wrote a sensitive memoir of Duggan's life.

On October 22nd, 1972, the literary community was shocked by the sudden death of one of its giant figures, James K. Baxter; indeed, his death was a prominent national news item. Six weeks later, on December 10th, 1972, Eileen Duggan died quietly in Wellington hospital, her death quite overshadowed by that of the younger man, who was not only a much more prolific and powerful writer but also a more public figure.

It cannot be denied that there are weaknesses in Duggan's poetry. Of which poet might that not be said? Bewitched from her schooldays by the magic of words, she is at times seduced into reaching for an elevated, rhetorical manner; preferring Celtic exuberance to English understatement, she sometimes indulges in fanciful imagery which fails to correspond to the underlying experience; and having developed within the Georgian tradition, she can fall victim to its typical weaknesses – a blurred sentimentality, a reliance on poeticisms, and a tendency to avoid reality.

Nor can it be denied, however, that she had strengths that her critics were unwilling to acknowledge, strengths that go beyond the easy label of 'Georgian'. Throughout her writing, she exhibits a love of the natural world; imaginatively, and at times a little fancifully, evoking an Ireland she knew only at second hand; more immediately and with greater success, capturing the New Zealand landscapes of Marlborough and Wellington that she knew and loved. At the same time, the best of her poetry reveals a warm understanding of human nature, an imaginative sympathy with the poor, the dispossessed, the victims of oppression, and a compassion for the frailties of human nature. From the outset, Duggan was an accomplished lyric poet, with a sensitive ear for the rhythms of the language; in her later work, she put aside some of those lyric graces as she struggled to explore more complex ideas and more sobering experiences. Finally, her poetry is always informed by her religious

faith, its beliefs and practices, its values and ideals, its legends and symbols. Georgian lyricist describes one dimension of her verse, but she also belongs within a much longer and more comprehensive tradition of religious poetry which has its roots in the intellectual toughness of the seventeenth century.

In certain respects, the development of New Zealand poetry in the middle years of the twentieth century was closely bound up with the emergence of Modernism and with issues of nationalism. About one of those, Eileen Duggan was as impassioned as any of the generation of writers who succeeded her, but about the other she cared little. She learned her art in virtual isolation from serious and informed critical comment, and she resisted the obscurity and formlessness of the Modernist movement (about which she was wittily rude in 'Shades of Maro of Toulouse' in *More Poems*.) It may have been her misfortune to have been the last of the New Zealand pre-Modernist writers, but she was also the most important, and the most accomplished.

LINKS

Eileen Duggan image gallery New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre
New Zealand Electronic Text Centre
Bibliography at the University of Auckland NZ Literature file
New Zealand Book Council
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A collection of Eileen Duggan's papers is held in the Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington, New Zealand; some correspondence is held in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington; letters to Nettie Palmer are held in the Australian National Library, Canberra.