D’Arcy Cresswell, 1896 – 1960

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D’Arcy Cresswell’s reputation is not the one that he coveted. He is not remotely the poet he believed himself to be, and, judged on his verse alone, would long have been forgotten. He remains, however, one of New Zealand literature’s outstanding identities. His value is principally symptomatic, exemplifying in extravagant gestures the signature dilemmas of mid-century provincialism. But the idiosyncratically quotable prose of his two volumes of autobiography exerts a strong fascination in its own right, even as readers inevitably struggle with the questionable attitudes and foibles of its author.

Walter D’Arcy Cresswell was born in Christchurch on 22 January 1896, the third child of Walter Joseph and Hannah Cresswell. The family had been in Canterbury since 1850. D’Arcy’s grandfather was the first Works Manager for the Canterbury Frozen Meat company; Walter Joseph, a prosperous Christchurch barrister, also farmed a property called Barnswood near the Rangitata River in South Canterbury. Cresswell attended elementary school in Christchurch, and then an isolated private preparatory school at Robin Hood Bay in the Marlborough Sounds. He would later credit this impressive location with instilling in him a particular sensitivity to the natural world. It is this romantic sentiment which he will struggle to express in the greater part of his verse. From 1910 to 1912 he attended Christ’s College in Christchurch, a self-conscious imitation of an English public school and very much the secondary education of choice for the sons of Canterbury’s well-to-do. Cresswell appears largely to have enjoyed the experience, and refers to the institution proudly in later reflections.

In 1913 he traveled to Britain, the first of five such voyages which would punctuate his adult life. After briefly attending architecture classes in London, he enlisted in the Middlesex Regiment shortly after the outbreak of World War 1, serving in France, where he was severely wounded. After recuperating in England, he re-enlisted with the New Zealand Royal Engineers, returning to New Zealand with the forces in 1919. There followed in 1920 the event which has come to be known as the ‘Wanganui Affair.’ In circumstances still to be elucidated fully, Cresswell was engaged in a blackmail plot whose purpose was to destroy the career of Charles Evan Mackay, the liberal and far-sighted mayor of Wanganui. Mackay, who was known to be homosexual, was at odds with members of the local establishment, including one of Cresswell’s cousins. Cresswell apparently beguiled Mackay into making a sexual pass at

him, only then to threaten him with exposure and demand his resignation. Mackay's disgrace was duly effected, but not before a fracas in which the writer received a bullet in the chest. Cresswell is surprisingly frank about his own homosexuality, and appears to have come to an understanding of it relatively early on. (A brief marriage in England in 1925, in the course of which he fathered a son, goes unmentioned in his autobiographies.) But his treachery towards Mackay, however obscurely motivated, is an obstacle to his rehabilitation as a pioneering gay writer. Wells and Pilgrim, who narrate this incident, do not include his work in their path-breaking gay anthology, *Best Mates*.

He made his second voyage to England in 1921, at which point he begins the first volume of his autobiography. By this stage Cresswell was telling family and friends that poetry was to be his life's vocation. It was a position he never retreated from, and his refusal throughout most of his life to accept the compromise of regular employment would lead to an entanglement in ambiguous forms of patronage that is a *leit-motif* of Cresswell's career. After a small allowance from his father was withdrawn, he took to selling his poems from door to door in London, and on extended tramps through the English countryside. For his poems, individually printed, he records asking sixpence each and five shillings the set.

The legend that has grown up around this image has proved far more resilient than the poems themselves. *Poems 1921-27* (1928), was published, reluctantly by Cresswell's own account, by a firm who had printed his leaflets for him. The venture was funded by Lee Cooper, whom Cresswell knew as a patron of the arts from Christchurch, and Beatrice Lyall, whom he had met while peddling his poetic wares in Kensington. The poems themselves, by common critical consent, read like the vanity publication they are. Though two longer pieces reflect, diffusely, on the author's experience of World War 1, his principle themes are the poet's vocation and his recollections of New Zealand 'Nature.' Cresswell believed that English poetry had languished since the time of the Romantics. He was contemptuous of Modernism, and thought little enough of the Georgians. He also exhibited an unshakeable belief in his own providential mission of restoring poetry to its rightful path. What he appears to have wished to do is to imitate the Romantics as faithfully as possible, which included resorting erratically to archaic idioms and constructions. The result can fairly be described as doggerel. Cresswell was deluded in his self-belief as a poet, and nothing that he wrote subsequently would alter this impression of his verse.

However, the same need not be said of his autobiographies. Following a brief trip home to New Zealand in 1928, Cresswell gained entry the following year to the circle around the painter William Rothenstein. Here he was introduced to Arnold Bennett. Though Bennett was dismissive of Cresswell's poetry, he used his influence to encourage Fabers to publish his prose narrative, *The Poet's Progress* (1930). The work is partly a memoir of the poet's escapades – at street-level in London, and hawking his poems on the road – and partly an exposition of his passionate and eccentric convictions about poetry. Written in what comes across as a mannered, regressive, and yet archly engaging prose, *The Poet's Progress* was a minor success. Briefly it confirmed Cresswell's place in an expanding network of prosperous connections. Most importantly it earned him the friendship of the Georgian anthologist Edward Marsh, as well as the favour of the veteran London patroness, Ottoline Morrel. Cresswell's letters to Ottoline Morrel were published posthumously as *Dear Lady Ginger* (1983). In a photograph Cresswell can be seen handing round a tray among a group which includes W. B. Yeats and Lytton Strachey.

Despite his improved personal fortunes, his second volume of verse, *Poems 1924-1931* (1931), proved no more successful than the first, and if anything may have confirmed a dawning suspicion among his new-found admirers that Cresswell's talent might not be equal to his colourfully embodied self-belief. Between the lines of *Present Without Leave* one can sense Marsh's eagerness to get Cresswell off his hands, paying for his passage when Cresswell sailed again for New Zealand at the end of 1931. With him he took a commission from John Lane of The Bodley Head to collate a verse anthology of the 'Best Poetry since Byron.' Cresswell's struggle to complete this task, including the polemical introduction which he referred to as his 'thesis,' would preoccupy him for much of the decade. The anthology would never appear. But Frank Sargeson, who read a version of it in draft form, would later record with amusement his surprise at the heavy representation of Cresswell's own verse, thinly disguised by its attribution to 'Anonymous.' The essay-length booklets, *Modern Poetry and the Ideal* (1934) and *Eena Deena Dynamo* (1936), the latter a cranky 'tract against modern science' published by Denis Glover at the Caxton Press, are partly a by-product of the failed 'thesis.' Cresswell's complaints against materialism and rationalism provide a running refrain throughout his corpus.

The period spent in New Zealand between 1931 and 1938 is nonetheless significant. It was a crucial seeding time for an emerging national literature, and Cresswell, trading on his overseas success, commanded enough respect

to enter into significant dialogue with key figures, including Ursula Bethell, Robin Hyde, and, perhaps most importantly, Sargeson. From 1933 he spent most of his time on Auckland's North Shore in one of two baches loaned to him by the Stronach family of Castor Bay. Sargeson, in the middle volume of his autobiography *More Than Enough*, puts considerable emphasis on Cresswell's importance to him during this phase. Cresswell's quixotic dedication to a life entirely committed to writing gave Sargeson something to work against as he attempted to fashion a more realistic version of the same vocational commitment. Sargeson's anecdotes are among the most vivid images of Cresswell to have come down to us.

His struggles with the poetry anthology notwithstanding, the 1930s in New Zealand were productive for Cresswell's own writing. The sonnet sequence *Lyttleton Harbour* (1935) was the cornerstone of Cresswell's surprisingly generous representation in Allen Curnow's Caxton anthology ten years later. Curnow defends Cresswell's archaisms, claiming that 'in the best of the sonnets these become a living speech. There is an innocence in the rhetoric that seems – I venture only a suggestion – to have an affinity with Blake.' Curnow's 1960 anthology, however, has less room for Cresswell's verse, and more recent major anthologies have ignored it entirely.

More significant for Cresswell's enduring reputation is the prose of the 1930s, specifically the continuation of the autobiography which began to appear in instalments in the Christchurch *Press* in 1932. It would later be maintained by Cresswell and others that their unflattering image of New Zealand caused so much outrage that the editor, Oliver Duff, was obliged to cancel their publication. There is no evidence to support this in the correspondence columns of the newspaper itself, but the sequence was certainly terminated, and its portrait of provincial New Zealand is both striking and abrasive:

> The air of their islands is mainly fresh from the sea, and the rainfall abundant from the mountains whereon it condenses, from which, in some places, a violent sirocco results. Their present condition depends on the state of peoples a great distance off, and their communications with these. As yet they have no future of their own; and when at length one confronts them, they shall awake to find where they lie, and what realm it was they so rudely and rashly disturbed.

Curnow quoted this particular passage, in part or in full, on seven distinct occasions. What it seems to capture for him is the kernel of that vision which

Alex Calder has dubbed ‘critical nationalism’: a discourse of settlement whose polemical opening gambit is a wholesale critique of the *unsettled* state of provincial culture. It has since become a critical commonplace to see these instalments, which would duly become the opening passages of *Present Without Leave* (1939), as the most significant writing in Cresswell’s *oeuvre.* The interest of this second volume of autobiography, however, does not end here. Among other things, it offers a discernible window into masculine homosexual cultures of the 1920s and 1930s, both in New Zealand and in Britain.

Cresswell sailed again for the Northern Hemisphere in July 1938. *Present Without Leave* appeared the following year, but attracted little notice in a Britain now preoccupied with the approach of war. He was not to experience again the small taste of public attention that he had enjoyed briefly a decade earlier. Ottoline Morrell had died a few months before Cresswell’s return, and the relationship with Edward Marsh was not resumed. Increasing isolation and obscurity were to be Cresswell’s lot for the remaining twenty years of his life.

Shortly after his arrival back in London he secured a small cottage in St. John’s Wood, which became his permanent home. In 1942 he was confirmed as an Anglican in St Paul’s Cathedral. During the war years, partly thanks to the influence of his long-time friend Ormond Wilson, a minister in Savage’s first Labour government, he was able to earn a living, briefly with the BBC in 1940, and then for the next four years with the Ministry of Information, touring England and Scotland to lecture on New Zealand to the armed forces. In the subsequent decade he enjoyed the occasional material boost, including a commission to write a biography of social worker and children’s advocate Margaret MacMillan (1860-1931), which he duly completed in 1948, and the following year a grant of £300 from the newly established New Zealand Literary Fund, much to the indignation of A. R. D. Fairburn. In 1951 he took a job as a night-watchman with the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works in London, establishing a low-key *modus vivendi* that allowed him a modest income with relative freedom to write.

None of the publications of Cresswell’s last two decades has occasioned any lasting interest. He himself set greatest store by *The Forest* (1952), a three-act verse play committed to Cresswell’s now-familiar denunciation of post-Copernican rationalism. It also features, by his own estimation, a ‘tremendous defense of homosexuality,’ unfortunately marred, like so much of Cresswell’s thought, by his pervasive misogyny – a point made by Keith Sinclair in an acerbic review in *Landfall*. *The Voyage of the Hurunui* (1956) is

a rambling quasi-philosophical ‘ballad’ loosely prompted by Cresswell’s last return voyage to New Zealand in 1949-50. Its acceptance by Caxton was to be his last success with an established publisher. Subsequent poems and broadsheets, including two editions of the desultory squibs that he entitled *Poems for Poppycock*, were issued under the imprint of his own Trireme Press. The beginnings of a third volume of autobiography appeared in the *New Zealand Listener* in 1950, but the project appears to have progressed little further beyond this date.

Cresswell was discovered dead in his cottage on 20 February 1960. The coroner found the cause of death to be carbon monoxide poisoning, deemed accidental. By way of an obituary, *Landfall* in December of that year carried a suite of memoirs collectively titled ‘D’Arcy Cresswell by his Friends,’ which remains one of the key biographical resources. Ormond Wilson is exasperatedly loyal; Denis Glover ambivalent; Sargeson evenhanded; Oliver Duff is bitterly acerbic; Roderick Finlayson, who would later write a monograph on Cresswell for the Twayne’s World Authors series, is wryly anecdotal.

These memoirs’ fluctuations in tone reflect Cresswell’s ambiguous status, then as now. Though Finlayson, and Helen Shaw, who edited a number of posthumous publications, have maintained the case for Cresswell as a poet and a thinker, they have been almost entirely unsupported on these terms. Cresswell repeatedly went on record declaring that his poetry was superior to his prose, but in this, as in so much else, he appears to be misguided. Nothing of Cresswell’s is now in print. But a new edition of the autobiographies would certainly find readers, particularly academic ones. The opening passages of *Present Without Leave* have a small but colourful place among the source texts of mid-century nationalism, while the volumes together are fascinating, not only as gay social history, where it may be argued that they are of genuine significance, but also for the way in which their errant aestheticism contravenes the new demotic codes that would become so dominant with the emergence of a masculine nationalism. He is a mentor to Finlayson; he is a key point of reference both for the major poet of the nationalist movement (Curnow) and for the major fiction writer (Sargeson). He exemplifies, often ludicrously, the struggles of a nascent professionalism in New Zealand writing; of a high-brow provincialism cut adrift from its moorings; and of the gay male writer in a provincial masculine culture. To what extent academic literary studies may yet rehabilitate him on these grounds remains to be seen. But enough readers are likely to enjoy the

discovery of Cresswell's prose to keep his modest legend alive in the foreseeable future.

LINKS

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PAPERS

The major collection of D'Arcy Cresswell's papers is in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Included among them are research materials gathered by Helen Shaw (Hofmann), which have been of considerable value in the compiling of this article.