

A. R. D. Fairburn, 1904 – 1957

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A. R. D. (Rex) Fairburn was one of the most influential poets and independent thinkers of 1930s, 40s and 50s New Zealand. He engaged fiercely with the political, social and economic issues of his day, often using sharply rendered parody and satire to attack points of view with which he disagreed. He was a central part of the group of writers sometimes referred to as the '*Phoenix* generation'. He contributed to all of the significant literary and cultural magazines of his day, from *Phoenix* (Auckland) to the *New Zealand Listener*, often taking his place among their editorial staff. While his political beliefs were sometimes at odds with those of his collaborators, and his overtly physical masculinity and unconventional lifestyle tended to alienate the more conventional sectors of society, his delight in argument for argument's sake and his capacities as a poet overrode any reservations which might have arisen about his place in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

Rex Fairburn was born in Auckland on 2 February 1904. His paternal ancestor William Thomas Fairburn, a lay-preacher with the Church Missionary Society, arrived in the far north of New Zealand in 1819, two decades before the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and the beginning of organised settlement by the British. William's son Edwin, born in 1827, became a land surveyor, one of the crucial occupations of colonisation, and is credited with writing New Zealand's first novel, an inchoate vision of the future entitled The Ships of Tarshish (1867). His son Arthur, the poet's father, was more conventional, spending his working life as a clerk and then accountant for a sugar manufacturer and in his leisure hours cultivated a reputation as a music critic. Arthur married Teresa Harland in 1902; she was a musician of some talent, the daughter of recent immigrants from the north of England, and possessed of increasingly nonconformist religious beliefs. Rex was their first child. He was followed by two brothers, Geoffrey in 1905 and Thayer in 1909.

A quiet child, Fairburn grew into a tall and athletic youth with a predilection for sport, particularly tennis and golf, and for roaming the hills of the Auckland isthmus and the fringes of its attendant harbours, Waitemata and Manukau. The region's forests, farmlands and beaches form a backdrop for much of Fairburn's poetic output, poetry which is also imbued with the energetic physicality of the outdoor life he loved. He was as much at home swimming in the sea as walking the land, and until his untimely death was never happier

than when living under canvas on some remote beach with a small boat to hand.

His schooling was conventional, culminating in three years as a scholarship student at Auckland Grammar. It was here that his facility for cogent argument and sharp wit first found public expression. Here, too, he met R. A. K. Mason, a young poet and classicist of precocious talent who further stimulated Fairburn's interest in ideas, politics and literature. In 1920 Fairburn left Grammar without qualifications and entered a prolonged period of drudgery as an insurance clerk, living at his parents' recently built home at remote Green Bay on the northern shores of the Manukau. The house was designed around a performance space used for musical concerts, but its main asset was its proximity to the local golf course. Fairburn spent many of his leisure hours with Mason, reading Housman and other moderns, arguing the merits of Joyce's *Ulysses* and writing. With Mason's encouragement, Fairburn returned to his studies, gaining sufficient credit to allow him to enrol at Auckland University College in 1926. Despite having little taste for academia, he found the political and literary ferment of student life highly stimulating. He began to correspond with Mason's friend Geoffrey de Montalk, a flamboyant young poet of royal Polish ancestry whom he had first crossed paths with at primary school and again at Auckland Grammar. While de Montalk's literary talent was relatively slight he had considerable charisma and ambition, both as a pretender to the vacant Polish throne and as the aspiring doyen of an intellectual aristocracy full of disdain for the rest of humanity. He had a brief but significant influence on Fairburn. A more considered and lasting influence was another friend of Mason's, the talented photographer and ardent socialist Clifton Firth.

In 1926 Fairburn finally resigned from his job in the insurance office to spend three months on Norfolk Island in the Tasman Sea mid way between New Zealand's North Island and the coast of Australia. Fairburn found the island's isolation and small close-knit community to his liking. He wrote poetry and walked the headlands, but the sojourn came to an unfortunate end when he was convicted of assault and fined after an incident involving a young woman and a rival suitor.

On returning to Auckland he chose to avoid paid employment, preferring to spend much of his time exploring on foot the wider Auckland region, reading widely, and cultivating a range of radical, unconventional beliefs. He worked as a volunteer for the Labour Party and began to contribute articles, letters and eventually poems to local newspapers. He became increasingly involved

with the students at the Auckland University College, contributing to their newspapers and magazines, and alternately alienated and cultivated the various editors who controlled the literary pages of the city's mainstream outlets. While freelance journalism brought in a little income, he was drawn more and more to sympathise with the growing underclass of unemployed. As the Depression began to bite more deeply, his criticism of capitalism and its institutions became more strident. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the poetry of Rupert Brooke were added to Housman's *Last Poems* as being among his main literary influences and by the start of the new decade he was ready to abandon what he saw to be a moribund New Zealand for the tumult of London.

By late 1930 he was not only residing in the great metropolis, but had also published there (through the agency of de Montalk and at his own expense) his first volume of poetry, *He Shall Not Rise*. Through de Montalk and other New Zealand contacts, he began to associate with leading publishers and editors, including Harold Munro, Charles Lahr, Victor Gollanz and A. R. Orage. He met the sculptor Jacob Epstein and art patron Lucy Wertheim, and expanded his circle of fellow expatriate New Zealanders, including the painter Frances Hodgkins. In need of respite from the intensity of London, he crossed to Europe and walked and took trains through France and the Pyrenees to Barcelona, a return journey which only augmented a growing sense of dislocation and depression. Back in London worn-out and physically unwell, he moved into the fringes of a by then faded Bloomsbury, and it was here that he met Jocelyn Mays, a young New Zealand woman attending the prestigious Slade School of Fine Arts. A bond quickly formed between the destitute and somewhat ill poet and Jocelyn, and they soon retreated together to the depths of Wiltshire where they were to remain for the rest of 1931. Fairburn began to write again, poetry as well as two novels (never published). In November they were married in a local registry office and returned to their cottage to pursue a bucolic existence, interspersed with trips to London, or Bath or, on one memorable occasion, to Stonehenge. Fairburn attended meetings of Major C. H. Douglas's social credit movement, an economic philosophy which Fairburn found more appealing than Soviet-style socialism. He contributed articles on the subject to Orage's *New Age*. On his return with Jocelyn and their first daughter Corin to New Zealand in 1932, he became one of Douglas's chief advocates, addressing meetings and promoting the movement in articles and letters to newspapers.

In Auckland, Rex and Jocelyn were to have a further three children by the end of the thirties, two daughters, Dinah and Janis, and a son, Hanno. As

breadwinner, Fairburn was forced to take labouring work on an unemployed relief gang, an experience which both strengthened his critical writing on New Zealand society and provided material for some of his strongest poetry. During these years of political upheaval he contributed to a number of periodicals which proved crucial in the development of New Zealand literature. Most renowned among these is the Auckland University College student quarterly *Phoenix*, the third and fourth numbers of which were edited by R. A. K. Mason. But Fairburn also contributed to the student magazines *Kiwi* (Auckland) and *Sirocco*, published at Christchurch's Canterbury University College. Through *Sirocco* he came into contact with the printer and typographer Denis Glover, founder of the Caxton Press. Glover was to publish the majority of Fairburn's poetry, and collaborate with him in several books. And it was partly through Glover that Fairburn began to contribute regularly to the radical newspaper *Tomorrow*, published in Christchurch between 1934 and 1940. He became friends with fellow contributor and Auckland Frank Sargeson, a short story writer who was to radically alter the genre within New Zealand. The thirties proved to be a time of considerable change in New Zealand literature, within which Fairburn took an increasingly central role.

In 'Some Aspects of New Zealand Art and Letters', his most considered and influential essay of the early period of his career (published in the magazine *Art in New Zealand* in June 1934), Fairburn gives his assessment of the writer in New Zealand, an 'Englishmen, born in exile', who longs for a return to the 'Home' country, England. Tapping into a strong vein of literary nationalism which had begun to find expression, he argued that the writer must be 'influenced, but not enslaved' by this British heritage. He advised his fellow writers to turn for a better model to the American literary tradition – Twain and Hemingway are cited. He argued that Georgian mannerisms and the use of geographically neutral settings ought to be eschewed in favour of a 'willing[ness] to partake, internally as well as externally, of the anarchy of life in a new place and, by its creative energy, give that life form and consciousness.'

And so he proceeded, cultivating in his poetry a lyricism worthy of the new place. His love poetry is perhaps most deserving of renewed attention, from the much anthologised 'The Cave' of 1943, to other less well-known pieces. The flipside of these serious works are the humorous ballads and lighter, shorter pieces of topical verse, best represented by 'The Rakehelly Man' and 'I'm Older Than You, Please Listen'. Such verbal exuberance reached its zenith with the Joycean play of language of his 'pollytickle parrotty' of Labour Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage, *The Sky is a Limpet* (1939).

Earlier, in 1934, Fairburn had found a position as Secretary to the local branch of the Farmers' Union, for whom he edited the journal *Farming First*. He held the role until 1942 when he was conscripted into the New Zealand army before being transferred the following year to the National Broadcasting Service. In addition to writing radio scripts he also presented material on-air. He took up the cause of organic farming, becoming editor of *Compost Magazine*, a position which allowed him to expound his environmental beliefs, promoting recycling and the importance of the health of the soil.

In 1938 Fairburn published *Who Said Red Ruin*, a political pamphlet attacking the conservative Auckland newspaper the *New Zealand Herald*. More significantly, he began to publish collections of poetry with Glover's Caxton Press. The first of these, and the most important, was *Dominion*, published in the same year as *Red Ruin*. In this long poem, loosely modelled on Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Fairburn draws on the bitter experience of unemployment to render a powerful if artistically flawed assessment of nothing less than the spiritual, cultural, economic, political, and environmental state of the nation in the depths of the Depression.

With the war over, in 1947 the Fairburn family moved to a larger house on the foreshore of the Waitemata Harbour at Devonport. Here Fairburn's love of the sea was at last sated. He developed a modest small business screen printing fabrics with bold motifs based on New Zealand Māori cave drawings. His work was sold in New York and was used to decorate New Zealand House in London. He also began to gain more influence as a critic, controversialist and social commentator. In 1948 he was asked by Lucy Wertheim to act for her in the donation of her gift to the Auckland City Art Gallery of a significant selection of recent British art. He undertook several lecture tours for the Adult Education Service, speaking on literature and art to a wide range of groups. Tours of Northland and much of the South Island proved as enlightening for the speaker as for his audience and provided an opportunity for him to engage in famously riotous behaviour with friends such as Denis Glover in Christchurch. On his eventual return to Auckland, and despite his failure to fully matriculate, he was appointed tutor in the English Department at Auckland University College. He enjoyed the academic community but found the work burdensome. In 1950 he shifted roles to that of lecturer in art history and theory at the Elam School of Fine Arts, for which he was eminently qualified. Here he was able to indulge his long-standing interest in aesthetics as well as give voice to his views on New Zealand art. These were sometimes as conservative as they were controversial. His dislike

of the work of Colin McCahon (now regarded as the central figure in New Zealand art in the mid-twentieth century) was symptomatic of a growing intolerance of newness and difference which has tainted his reputation since his death. This intolerance grew particularly strident on the subject of homosexuality – his friendship with Frank Sargeson broke down under its pressure.

Fairburn died on 25 March 1957 after a rapid decline in the face of a particularly virulent form of cancer. The vigorous, athletic youth and man had been reduced to a shell in the last year of his life. From being regarded as one of the leading poets of his generation, after his death his critical reputation likewise declined with increasing rapidity. The vein of misogyny and homophobia manifest in some of his prose culminated in the posthumous publication of the anti-feminist title essay of *The Woman Problem*, issued almost mischievously by Fairburn's brother Geoffrey and Denis Glover in 1967, a publication date coincident with the rise of second-wave feminism within the New Zealand universities. Written in the mid 1940s, the title essay had rightly remained unpublished during his lifetime, and it has been suggested that its more shrill passages would likely have been rewritten by the poet prior to the essay being issued. Its publication was a blow to the critical reputation of one of the most independent and influential thinkers and poets of the period.

Fairburn's slow critical rehabilitation was begun by Denys Trussell in his excellent biography *Fairburn* (1984) and more informally by James and Helen McNeish in their large format and generously illustrated *Walking On My Feet* (1983). The best recent reassessment of his poetry is that undertaken (albeit briefly) by MacDonald P. Jackson in his introduction to the *Selected Poems* (1995). There is much work still to be done before Fairburn's work as a poet and writer can be judged free of reference to the strength of his personality and the persuasiveness of his opinion.

LINKS

New Zealand Book Council

New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre

[An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand 1966](#)

Public Address article with recording of Fairburn's 'My Imaginary Journey'

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PAPERS

The main repositories of Fairburn's papers are the Alexander Turnbull Library of the National Library of New Zealand, in MS-Papers-1128 and elsewhere, and the University of Auckland Library, primarily in MSS & Archives A-11 and A-125.