

Charles Brasch, 1909 – 1973

Stephen Hamilton

Charles Orwell Brasch was the editor of New Zealand's most influential literary magazine, *Landfall*, from its establishment in 1947 until his retirement from the role in 1966. Despite some poor patches, *Landfall* has continued as the country's premier literary magazine, publishing critical and creative work of a consistently high standard. Brasch is today best remembered as a literary editor and less as a poet, despite his work continuing to be anthologised. Following his death in 1973 his estate endowed the Robert Burns literary fellowship, the Francis Hodgkins visual arts fellowship, and the Mozart music fellowship at Dunedin's University of Otago. His extensive collection of books and art works were largely donated to the University, and his papers, recently released from a thirty-year embargo, are proving a rich source for literary historians and biographers.

Charles Brasch was born in Dunedin on the South Island of New Zealand on 27 July 1909. A secular Jew, he was the first son of Hyam Brasch (or Henry Brash as he later preferred), a lawyer, and Helene Mary Fels, a member of the wealthy Hallensteins commercial dynasty. After bearing a daughter, Lesley Mary, in 1911, Helene died during a third pregnancy in 1914. Brasch was subsequently raised by his father and various aunts and housekeepers. Henry Brash wanted his son to pursue a business career, something Brasch proved unable to undertake. As he entered his teens he began to spend increasing amounts of time at Manono, the home of his maternal grandfather, Willi Fels. Wealthy, cultured and well-travelled, Fels made Manono into a repository of cultural and archaeological treasures from Europe, New Zealand and the wider Pacific. The young Brasch was torn between his father's desire that his son attain material and social success, and his own need to pursue a more aesthetic career, encouraged by his grandfather. Fels was to prove to be the more lasting influence, continued after his grandfather's death by Brasch's maternal cousin Esmond de Beer.

In 1923 Brasch became a boarder at Waitaki Boys' High School, Oamaru, a state school steeped in the English public school tradition. Here he began a life-long friendship with James Bertram and with Ian Milner, son of Waitaki's formidable rector, Frank Milner. With their encouragement he had his first poetry published in the school magazine, *The Waitakian*.

Henry Brash decided that on leaving Waitaki his son should attend Oxford University, in England. Together with Brasch's sister, in 1927 they made a pilgrimage to the 'old country' where a place was found for the young student at St John's College, the college of Esmond de Beer. The father hoped for a time of social and sporting engagement; the son enjoyed the collegiality of undergraduate life and eventually emerged with an 'ignominious third' in History and a blossoming interest in Egyptology and Italian culture. The former was stimulated by a fellow student, Colin Roberts, the latter by Esmond and his sisters, Mary and Dora. Brasch dedicated the title poem of his second collection, *Disputed Ground*, to Roberts, whom he described as an 'eager and beautiful fellow', and with whom he was able to share his love of poetry. Together they read a great deal of Shelley and Keats and other Romantic poets, Yeats, de la Mare, Housman and the Georgians. Brasch's own poetry showed these obvious influences: 'the feeblest sort of worthless Georgian-romantic verse', to quote his later self-deprecatory opinion. Some were published in university magazines.

On a visit home to New Zealand during the summer of 1931-32, Brasch reluctantly took up a position within the family business. In the early New Year, he found refuge with Bertram and Milner at the Milner holiday house at Waianakarua, on the coast north of Dunedin. Here they talked long into the night about the need for a new New Zealand literature and planned the little magazine eventually titled *Phoenix*, published by the Auckland University College Literary Society under the editorships of first Bertram and then R. A. K. (Ron) Mason. Although he was never named as a member of the extensive editorial committee (which included such luminaries to be as Jack Bennet, Robert Lowry, Hector Monro, Allen Curnow and Blackwood Paul), Brasch assisted Bertram and Milner in preparing much of the first issue. He went on to contribute work to all but the final number, including several poems and articles and translations of Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Letters to a Young Poet', possibly the earliest attempt to render these into English. Brasch's involvement with the genesis of *Phoenix* is particularly apt considering the connections between that short-lived journal and *Landfall*, founded by him in 1947. *Phoenix* must be considered a proto-*Landfall*, its publication motivated by many of the same aspirations as those which Brasch entertained for the later periodical. As with *Landfall*, *Phoenix* deliberately claimed an English progenitor while attempting to differentiate itself from local and contemporary publications. By openly associating itself with Middleton Murry's *New Adelphi*, *Phoenix* both elevated its nascent literary status and asserted its up-to-the-minute modernity.

The fifteen years which separate the two magazines were spent by Brasch largely in London, with excursions (sometimes in the form of archaeological expeditions) to Europe and Egypt. In 1937 he became a teacher at Little Missenden Abbey, a progressive school for problem children similar in outlook to A. S. Neill's more famous Summerhill. Here he met John Crockett, a painter and conscientious objector who was to become one of Brasch's closest friends.

While overseas he continued to contribute poetry to New Zealand periodicals. Ten poems appeared in the radical fortnightly *Tomorrow* during its run from 1934-1940. Many were gathered in 1939 into his first collection, *The Land and the People*. The collection was the first of six volumes of poetry by Brasch to be published by Denis Glover's Caxton Press. Glover described *The Land and the People* as something of a 'typographical experiment' (Edmond, 1981: 120), while the twenty-one poems in the collection were described by Bertram as 'the selected aesthetic impressions of a world traveller in the uneasy 1930s' (Bertram, 1976: 13). The title poem reflects the then current preoccupation with the European coloniser's identity in the still-new land, asking 'What have any of us learned / Of the place except its obvious look' where 'the newcomer heart . . . moves gauchely still, half alien.' The indigenous Māori possess ancestral connections to the land where 'Maui dropped his line, / As Kupe steered', but for the more recent arrivals, the true nature of its 'shore, mountain, dogged bush' remains hidden behind 'its obvious look'. Other poems in the collection are slight, if competent, and give only an inkling of the quality of Brasch's later verse.

With the onset of war and the closure of *Tomorrow*, Glover kept the literary magazine momentum going with *Book*, described as a Caxton miscellany, but far more than a mere sampler of the Press's work. Again poems by Brasch were featured, several of which were gathered into his second collection, *Disputed Ground: Poems 1939-45*, published by Caxton in 1948. Other poems in the volume came from magazines such as the *Arts Year Book* and the English journal *Folios of New Writing*. To quote Bertram again, the poems in *Disputed Ground* represent the 'poetic legacy of the war years' (Bertram, 1976: 15). The collection contains Brasch's most anthologised pieces, including the title poem and 'A View of Rangitoto'. These had first appeared in the fourth issue of Caxton's *Book* and both had been gathered by Allen Curnow into his landmark 1945 *Book of New Zealand Verse* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1945). The title poem is dedicated to Colin Roberts and memorialises their

time together in England and elsewhere, 'Oxford, Soulbury, Llanthony, Trier, Venice, Kôm Aushîm.'

Earlier, in 1941, having been deemed unfit for active service, Brasch found himself working for the Foreign Office at Bletchley Park, the intelligence centre where Alan Turing's early computer assisted in the breaking of the Nazi ciphers. Late the same year, he was transferred to London where he lived in a flat in Lawn Road, off Haverstock Hill. Here he was visited by Glover, then serving with the Royal Navy. As Brasch recalled, 'When he [Glover] came on leave from the sea or from training he was always the same. Like a whale surfacing he blew, rolled about uncouthly, churned up the sea; it took him a day or two to settle down.' During these visits they often discussed the possibility of producing a little magazine to succeed *Phoenix*. Brasch recalled how he and Glover 'talked over the prospect again and again, at all times of the day and night, even while Denis lay soaking and talking in the bath, a large pink almost hairless octopus'. Along with Glover, he regarded *Phoenix* and the magazines which had succeeded it – *Tomorrow* and *Book* – 'as keeping the pot boiling for something more substantial' (Brasch, 1980: 388).

On Brasch's return to New Zealand in 1946, he immediately entered into discussions about the proposed new magazine with James Bertram and others. He was initially reluctant to become its editor, doubting his own ability. However, unlike the one or two other possible candidates, Brasch had two qualifications which more or less forced the job upon him: his deep commitment to New Zealand culture; and, more pragmatically, his ability as a man of independent means to work at the task without payment.

Landfall was founded as soon as the Caxton Press was deemed able to support the regular publication of a quarterly. The establishment in 1947 of the State Literary Fund, administered by the Department of Internal Affairs and charged with supporting publishers and writers, was to prove a continuing source of aide. Caxton immediately became a benefactor, and *Landfall* directly so (and fairly consistently) from 1950.

Its initial editorial policy (to be more than a narrowly literary magazine) echoed that of its predecessors. Indeed, for Brasch the aim was no less than the formation of a distinct national culture. *Landfall* rapidly monopolised all the resources available at Caxton for periodical publication. The first issue appeared in March 1947, and the second in June. The final issue of *Book* was published in July, after which *Landfall* became the sole magazine published by the Caxton Press.

During *Landfall's* first year, Brasch included work by most if not all the prominent writers active during the period, the majority of whom had previously appeared in one or other of the magazine's precursors: *Phoenix*, *Tomorrow* or *Book*. Poets Allen Curnow, James K. Baxter and James Bertram appeared in the first issue of *Landfall*; issue two opened with 'Poems for Lili Kraus' by Bertram, Curnow, Fairburn and Glover, while Keith Sinclair was the first representative to appear from the rising generation of younger poets; Hubert Witheford, Kendrick Smithyman and Arthur Barker were added to this group in the third number while Bill Oliver and Basil Dowling added their names to the fourth. In fiction, Janet Frame, John Reece Cole, James Courage, R. M. Burdon, and Bruce Mason are the most prominent contributors during *Landfall's* inaugural year.

A meticulous and at times exacting editor, Brasch made *Landfall* not only a literary journal but also a forum for critical comment on life and culture in New Zealand. He insisted that the arts in New Zealand 'must . . . depend on the European tradition', and he judged them against the highest standards of that tradition. His exclusion of work that did not meet his exacting criteria for craftsmanship led some to judge *Landfall* as elitist, yet his aim was always to establish a worthy New Zealand literature. During his editorship he was often perceived by aspiring contributors as imperious, fussy, an aesthete among primitives. While he encouraged new writers in whom he saw promise, he was intolerant of poor standards. As an inevitable outcome of so quickly dominating the centre stage of New Zealand literary culture, oppositional movements were spawned, often in the form of rival little magazines whose editors strove to undermine *Landfall's* pre-eminence. All writers and readers were benefactors of such exchanges.

Despite this, *Landfall's* immediate effect was to foster a previously unseen cohesion within New Zealand culture, not necessarily of taste, for the magazine engendered antagonism as well as admiration, but of community among practitioners previously isolated 'through long and narrow islands' (Bertram, 1976: 19). Brasch took a pivotal role in the 1951 Writers' Congress, held in Christchurch, giving personal effect to his ideas on the means and ends of New Zealand culture, explored in the editorial 'Notes' with which he opened each issue of *Landfall*.

The Estate and other poems appeared in 1957, its long title poem dedicated to Brasch's friend Harry Scott (killed on 1 February 1960 while climbing Mt. Cook, New Zealand's highest mountain) and written between

1948 and 1952. In his 1969 assessment of Brasch's poetry Vincent O'Sullivan regarded it as 'the finest extensive piece of poetry any New Zealander has written' (O'Sullivan, 1969). Others were less generous. A fourth volume, *Ambulando*, appeared from Caxton in 1964 and marked a noteworthy shift in poetic style for Brasch, furthering a move towards the personal, inner life and away from concerns of cultural and national identity. The death of his father marked the end of the need for Brasch to argue his vocation, and the late flowering of his long-denied sexuality, for all its secrecy, found its way into his verse. The father's life is memorialised in poems which explore his Jewish heritage; his lover in the sequence 'In Your Presence', in which, as O'Sullivan observed, 'Love begins like a faith, that must be worked at, religiously,' but then, almost inevitably, 'death becomes central, the "dying" of sexual love; the dying of memory after separation; the final death of the body.' In *Ambulando* Brasch's former lyricism was suppressed in favour of more spare and forceful voice, a shift completed in his two remaining collections, *Not Far Off* (1969) and *Home Ground*, published posthumously in 1974.

Brasch compiled a *Landfall* anthology in 1962, gathering together a sampling of the best of the magazine's content, from editorial notes, through poetry and stories, to what he termed 'Explorations', articles on an enormous range of topics which Brasch published from the start with a view to placing the magazine's creative and critical content within its social context. In 1966 he passed the editorial mantle to his chosen successor Robin Dudding, initiating a prolonged period of difficulties for the magazine.

In his last years Brasch took the opportunity to take up a number of new tasks and enthusiasms, extending himself with translations of Russian and Indian poetry and with a new publishing venture with long time friend Janet Paul. He prepared his autobiography, still incomplete at his death, and continued to travel widely and correspond with his numerous colleagues and friends throughout New Zealand and the world.

Not Far Off, Brasch's penultimate volume of poetry which appeared in 1969, is arranged in four parts: a first grouping of poems mainly devoted to those to whom he owed a literary debt (Auden, Mason, Glover); a second of more personal, reflective verse; a third of poems written in response to his recent journeys abroad; and a final less cohesive group, various in style and subject matter.

Brasch died in 1973 of Hodgkin's disease, aged 64. He was nursed in his last months by his friends including Dr Deidre Airey and the poet Ruth Dallas.

He passed away peacefully in his home in Heriot Row in Dunedin on 20 May. On his request, he was cremated and his ashes scattered 'from a high and windy place.'

In his excellent short literary biography of Brasch published in 1976, James Bertram drew on his life-long friendship with his subject and on his role as editor of Brasch's unfinished autobiography, published as *Indirections* in 1980. Bertram set out to disperse the popular view of Brasch as a 'sheltered dilettante and aesthete' who used his independent income and bachelorhood to become the leading arbiter of New Zealand literary and cultural taste. In accordance with the prevailing mores of the period, Bertram refrained from mentioning Brasch's now acknowledged homosexuality, rightly regarding it as irrelevant to any estimation of his pivotal role in the cultural life of New Zealand during the mid-twentieth century.

LINKS

['New Zealand's Missing Penis: Charles Brasch and Harry Scott.' Article by Patrick Evans of the University of Canterbury.](#)

[New Zealand Book Council profile](#)

[University of Otago Library Exhibition](#)

[New Zealand Literature File University of Auckland](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

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