

Charles Edgar Spear, 1910 – 1985

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Charles Spear's life and work represent something of a contradiction. A poet whose work has been described as 'owing none of its themes to New Zealand' continues to be anthologised – and praised – by New Zealand poets to this day. This is all the more remarkable for a poet whose published work runs to little more than a single book (*Twopence Coloured*) of fifty-two 'exquisite cameo lyrics' of no more than seventeen lines in length. But perhaps the most striking contradiction is that between a body of work which 'travels widely in time and space' and a poet who said of his own life – not without justification – that 'practically nothing has ever happened to me'.

As Adrienne Jarvis says, 'information about Spear's early career... remains frustratingly elusive in the absence of any material deposited with institutions'. We do know that Charles Spear was born in Owaka, South Otago, in 1910, and attended Otago Boys' High School in Dunedin. He first came to prominence during his undergraduate degree at Canterbury University College (now the University of Canterbury, Christchurch), where he fell in with a group of 'aesthetes' centred around Lawrence Baigent and Leo Bensemann. Ian Milner, in his posthumously published memoirs, says this of Spear:

Roundfaced, with a mouth that enjoyed smiling, he had dark eyes that became beams of light as he warmed to his chosen poem or poet of the hour. He was dedicated to the cult of the beautiful as an end in itself. Before long he began writing, and publishing in the University magazine, some of his exquisite cameo lyrics.

Milner goes on to cite a quatrain published by Spear in his student days which later went on to become the first stanza of 'God Save the Stock' in *Twopence Coloured*. Spear's devotion to the 'cult of the beautiful' is exemplified in an article he wrote for *Canta* in 1931 where he extols the virtues of 'beautiful, artificial prose, more fragile, more delicate than ordinary words'.

This group of 'aesthetes' were associated with the broader nationalist / modernist cultural movement represented in 1930's Christchurch by Allen Curnow and Denis Glover, but shied away from those authors' social-realist style. Adrienne Jarvis suggests that

the stance adopted by Baigent, Spear and Bensemann... was notably Eurocentric in character. Desiring to fashion a distinctively nationalist aesthetic, they nevertheless embraced both the historic past and the avant-gardism of the European 'Other'.

Jarvis claims that Spear as a student was 'a dandified Baudelairian figure' who 'outwardly proclaimed his commitment to the principles of aestheticism... by his flamboyant dress'. Such a persona is captured in Bensemann's



bookplate which he created for Spear in 1937, although Peter Simpson suggests that Spear was not as notably flamboyant as the openly homosexual Baigent.

Milner, as editor of the *Canterbury University College Review* for 1932, published a satirical poem co-written by Spear and Lawrence Baigent, titled 'The Hippopotamus'. The poem quotes from T. S. Eliot's 1920 poem of the same name – a heavy influence from the style of the early Eliot is also visible in Spear's later works. Peter Simpson has suggested that

many of the other poems by Baigent included in the same issue were in fact Spear's work, and that 'there seems to have been a deliberate attempt to confuse or amalgamate the identity of the three close friends' (Spear, Baigent and Bensemann).

Spear's creative collaboration with Baigent resulted in a novel, *Rearguard Actions*, published by Methuen in London in 1936, under the name 'C. L.

Spear-Baigent'. Like Spear's poetry, the authors read this novel to their 'circle' during its composition. Michael Anderssen, the protagonist of this cultural and political satire, is a 'cool young hedonist' escaping from an unhappy love affair who becomes embroiled in intrigues and romantic scandals among socialites and bohemian artists at a Mediterranean seaside resort. The tone of the novel is contemptuous of the minor aristocracy and disgraced film stars who disguise the emptiness of their lives with gossip, adultery, petty blackmail and a continuous round of parties – a life devoted entirely to appearance and artifice.

Jarvis sees this as evidence that it is meant as 'a witty response' to A.R.D. Fairburn's attacks on the 'fancy dress' of the Canterbury aesthetes, and a 'counter-manifesto' of their position – a 'rearguard action' in itself. She also suggests that it is an allegory containing 'a web of coded references to contemporary New Zealand social and cultural discourse'. Leo Bensemman's art itself is explicitly referenced in one scene; in turn, *Rearguard Actions* appears to supply the organising themes to Bensemman's *Fantastica* suite of drawings (1937), which is dedicated to 'C. L. Spear-Baigent'. Jarvis suggests that Anderssen and his close friend Lucas Bundy are actually 'self-parodic' depictions of Bensemman and Baigent.

The heavy irony of the description of resort life extends to the plot of the novel, which twists and turns up until the last page in a manner which seems to deliberately undermine romantic conventions. Interestingly enough, among the few characters in the novel described sympathetically are the servants and a retired general's black secretary. Although sketchily drawn and not vital to the plot of the novel, the attention to and sympathy for such characters is unusual in popular novels of this period. This aesthetic distaste for bourgeois society may also show the influence on Spear and Baigent's circle of Marxist ideas, fashionable among Canterbury undergraduates in the 1930's and enthusiastically espoused by Ian Milner.

A second Spear / Baigent novel, *No Place for a Gentleman*, was completed by 1939 but never published due to the war. It seems to have continued the parody of the mores of the idle rich begun in *Rearguard Actions*, but positioned the action locally in Fendalton, Christchurch.

Information about how Spear spent the war years is sketchy. Spear describes himself in his 1960 autobiographical note as being 'occupied with journalism and teaching', including a stint at the Southland Technical Institute in Invercargill, before joining the Department of English at Canterbury

University College as a lecturer in September 1948. His position was made permanent in late 1951.

Spear began publishing poetry again in 1948. A collection of six poems under the title 'In Time Like Glass' appeared in *Landfall* in 1950. F. W. N. Wright suggests that this represented a kind of 'trial run' for the collection later to be known as *Twopence Coloured*. Others appeared in *Arachne*, in the *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook* – especially in a special section in the first issue, edited by Louis Johnson – and in *Landfall*. Some of these poems were revisions of his student verse (e.g. 'God Save the Stock').

All of Spear's poems published from 1948-1951 are collected in *Twopence Coloured*, the seventh and last volume in the poetry series from Denis Glover and Leo Bensemann's Caxton Press. The title refers to the toy theatres popular among children of the Victorian era, which could be bought for 'a penny plain and twopence coloured'. Colour is certainly highly important in the poems – although MacDonald Jackson gently chides his weakness for 'bells, chimes, stars, swords and butterflies, and for colours like azure, opal and violet'. ('Carmine' should certainly be added to the list of typical Spear colours, as James K. Baxter recognized in 'News from Prague' – although, ironically, Spear was colour-blind.) Nonetheless, the *Twopence Coloured* poems are distinguished above all else by the vividness of their word-pictures, fitting enough for a devotee of 'the cult of the beautiful as an end in itself'.

Critical attention to *Twopence Coloured* was universally favourable, if somewhat bemused in places. The most obviously striking feature of the poetry for many reviewers was, as the *Christchurch Press* reviewer put it, that Spear 'has hardly taken root in the New Zealand creative compost'. The Canterbury aesthetes were much more closely linked with the nationalist-modernist school than might be apparent, but unless one counts the reference to 'old Zealand' in 'Portrait', New Zealand is as apparently absent from *Twopence Coloured* as from *Rearguard Actions*. 'We have grown so used to lyric poets interpreting the New Zealand scene or searching their own hearts, that it is a surprise to find a New Zealand poet avoid such subjects in so studied a manner as almost to indicate disdain,' said Keith Sheen in *Landfall*. Peter Simpson suggests that 'the Wellington poets including Louis Johnson liked Spear because he ignored "the New Zealand thing" that Allen Curnow made so much of.'

F. W. N. Wright suggests that Spear's poems resemble 'a much briefer A. E. Housman', while J. C. Reid in *New Zealand Arts Year Book* suggested

'Wilde, Beardley, Dowson and Lionel Johnson' as critical antecedents. The similarities to the early T. S. Eliot have also struck more than one critic. The *Twopence Coloured* poems all range from four to seventeen lines in length, in regular iambic pentameter or tetrameter, and usually rhyming (often ABAB). This metrical formality and brevity of the poems strongly recalls Eliot's 1920 *Poems* – as do the 'witty and ironic barbs' which Jackson finds piercing 'the exquisite surface of the poems'. Spear's habit of giving two poems the same title is occasionally used to enhance this ironic effect. One poem entitled 'The Watchers' is a vivid word-picture resembling a scene from a historic romance, while another of the same title repeats some of the same words in a satirical portrayal of fashionable café society, which could be a distilled version of a scene from *Rearguard Actions*.

One can even detect an echo of *The Waste Land* in Spear's field of reference, 'a Europe of the past, the feudal Europe whose last breath of life expired in 1914' (D. M. Anderson in the *Southland Times*). The great allusiveness and obscurity of reference in the poems also recalls Eliot – as well as frustrating such critics as Sheen and Wright, the latter complaining 'I would like a great deal more explanation about what is going on'. Wright also notes that such 'allusiveness and reconditeness' is also to be found in the Old Norse and Old English poetry which was Spear's academic speciality. This use of words to convey an aesthetic effect rather than an easily-grasped meaning was certainly part of Spear's style: witness his review of James' *Portrait of a Lady* in *Landfall* (1950), which reads like a *Twopence Coloured* poem in its abstruse references and intensely metaphoric language.

Spear's vision is not entirely obscurely anachronistic. The references to Korea ('God Save the Stock') and to atom bombs ('Environs of Vanholt I') are decidedly contemporary. It is worth suggesting that, like Eliot, Spear is using the imagery of the past to represent the horrors of the present, still too intense in memory to name directly. The poem '1914', and the reference to 'Prussian gunfire' in 'Homecoming', certainly evoke what MacDonald Jackson calls 'the sounds of distant and not-so-distant wars', as does the titular potentate in 'Balthasar', who 'sets signet ring / to war dispatches full of lies'.

Sheen's remark about Spear's 'disdain' for poets 'searching their own hearts' suggests that *Twopence Coloured* is an entirely impersonal, aesthetic experience. MacDonald Jackson concurs that 'the poet's personal experience is nowhere to be found'. However, Ian Milner suggests that 'The Disinherited' looks back on the life of the Canterbury aesthetes who

...cared for nothing but the days and hours
 Of freedom, and in silent scorn
Ignored the worldly watchers and the powers...
 What was their wisdom whom no vice could hold?

Other critics have taken the words of 'Remark' (appearing in an earlier version as 'Nec Reditura Dies') as a reference to Spear's own 'muse': 'studiously minor, yet attuned to doom'. The muse in the poem – placed last in *Twopence Coloured* – 'hears waltzes that are not for her' and 'may grow spiteful in a little room / attack the glass with crystal shoes', suggesting a creative consciousness frustrated with its isolation and limitations. Curnow saw *Twopence Coloured* as the creation of 'a mind withdrawn upon itself' – or, as Jackson put it, 'a mind nourished by books, not by society or landscape'. This certainly fits with Copland's depiction of Spear in his obituary, as an extreme introspective whose main source of pleasure was the accumulation and reading of a vast collection of books.

Only two published poems post-date *Twopence Coloured* – 'Die Pelzenaffen' ('The Fur Apes', 1952) and 'Letter from Guadeloupe' (1953). Both follow the metrical and formal rules of the *Twopence Coloured* poems. The former reproduces the themes of war found throughout the earlier collection, with special reference to German/Russian conflict, although masked in the anachronistic imagery of the Crimean War. The latter, Spear's last new-published work, seems to reflect a sense of frustration and repetition:

And you may frown to see the same old cherry stone,
The same old psychic extra on your plate.

In his autobiographical note to the 1960 *Penguin Book of New Zealand Poetry*, Spear states that 'my ideas about verse and literature seem to be changing, for which reason I have written nothing for some years'. Spear may have simply found the *Twopence Coloured* style to have reached the end of its usefulness, but no record exists of other directions in which he might have continued to write. Wright reports 'gossip around Christchurch of long ago' that 'Charles Spear gave up writing poetry as a result of a religious conversion', although he admits 'I cannot confirm this.' Peter Simpson reports that Spear began writing poetry again late in life; none of this material has yet seen the light of day.

Ray Copland, in an obituary of Spear published in 1985, suggests that [m]ost of his pieces were not published but destroyed. His indifference to their departure into oblivion was of a piece with

his light account of their arrival on the page: they came almost fully-formed into his dreams, including the radiant colours, though his waking eyes were colour-blind.

The distance between Spear's muse and the reality of lived experience seems to have eventually become too great for poetry to be brought back from his dream world. W. H. Oliver in the 1966 *Encyclopedia of New Zealand* suggested that 'the effort to think in a vacuum might in the end [have] exhaust[ed] him, as, perhaps, it exhausted [R. A. K.] Mason'

The flamboyant dandy of the 1930's had become known decades later, according to Peter Simpson, who attended his lectures as a student in the early 1960s, as 'a rather boring lecturer, unsuited to large classes, who unkindly were known to roll coins and jaffas down the steps of the lecture theatre'. Although Spear was in Adrienne Jarvis' words 'an outstanding mediaevalist', and read fluently in several ancient and modern languages, Copland claims that he 'made nothing of his prodigious knowledge... to the riches of his mind only his immediate family, his close friends and his more perceptive students gained even a limited access'. Spear may have followed the advice of Baigent, also a lecturer in English at Canterbury University, whom Ian Milner reports as declining to add to 'the stacks of academic lit. crit., most of it rubbish'. A born scholar, Spear enrolled in a BA (Hons) degree at the University of London while on sabbatical in the late 1960's, which caused controversy back in Christchurch.

This picture of a withdrawn bibliophile obsessed with learning for its own sake, whose students perhaps had no idea of his 'other life' as a poet and aesthete, recalls 'As It Was...' from *Twopence Coloured*:

An elegy within a dream
 You half-despise our mundane tears
 And move as to a muted theme
 A trifle lost among your peers.

After retiring from his academic position in 1975, Spear and his wife Margaret moved to England to join their daughters Daintry and Angela. Copland notes that 'a major allurements to London was the availability there of so many books that he knew of but could not lay hands on'. At his death, many of these books were donated to the London Library. Copland says that Spear spent his last days in hospital 'translating favourite English poems into Latin'.

Copland's obituary describes Spear as 'a rarely gifted man, so European in his intellectual and imaginative range, and yet so essentially Kiwi in his personality, so self-deprecating'. This fascinating contradiction between a rare imaginative talent and an unwillingness or incapacity to engage with one's immediate surroundings may explain why Spear's poetic reputation survives up until this day. Anthologised in *Penguin Books of New Zealand Verse* up until 1985, his absence from the *Oxford Anthology* of 1997 drew comment from reviewers. James K. Baxter included a wickedly accurate parody of Spear's style in *The Iron Breadboard*, his 1957 book of pastiches of contemporary New Zealand poets. Also in 1997, S. H. Hamilton wrote 'Homage to Charles Spear' for the Auckland University literary journal *SALT*. It begins:

Charles Spear deserves immediate reverence. Long out of print, his only book of poems continues to excite and impress a number of lucky New Zealanders.

It seems fitting that the 'dandyish mandarin' author of 'liqueur poetry... not to everyone's taste' should retain a reputation among a minority of aesthetes and critics, similar to the milieu in which his creativity first flowered in the 1930's.

I am grateful to Dr Peter Simpson of the University of Auckland for his helpful advice in writing this entry.

LINKS

[See the notes to the 2007 publication of Spear's collected Poems from the Holloway Press](#)

[Ian Wedde's talk at the launch of Spear's Collected Poems](#)

BOOKS

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Twopence Coloured. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1951.

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