

Edith Searle Grossmann, 1863–1931

Kirstine Moffat

Edith Searle Grossmann wrote the two most significant New Zealand novels to come out of the nineteenth-century women's movement. *In Revolt* and *A Knight of the Holy Ghost* are powerful critiques of gender inequities, in spite of their didacticism and melodramatic excess. The first novel attacks male abuses of power, while the sequel presents Grossmann's vision of a world with no gender or class divisions. Throughout, the compelling, psychologically convincing character of Hermione Howard provides the focal point. In her life as well as her art Grossmann upheld feminist ideals. One of the earliest New Zealand female Master's graduates, she used the written word to campaign for women's education. An independent career woman who worked as a teacher, journalist and writer, Grossmann kept her maiden name after her marriage and lived most of her life apart from her husband. Her journalism and fiction also reveals a passionate concern for New Zealand's cultural identity. *The Heart of the Bush*, her final novel, creates a myth of New Zealand as a rugged, natural wonderland. This world of bush and mountains strips away the hypocrisies of English society, breeding men and women of integrity and passion, but also 'dispossesses' and eventually eliminates Maori (Stafford, 'Going Native', p. 168).

Edith Howitt Searle was born on 8 September 1863 in Beechworth, Victoria and she spent much of her childhood in the Australian bush. She was the fourth child and third daughter of Mary Ann (nee Beeby) and George Smales Searle, both of whom were 40 when she was born. Her father was a newspaper editor and the family moved first to Melbourne and then New Zealand as he pursued his profession. The Searles settled in Invercargill in 1878, where Edith attended the Grammar School.

In 1879 Edith Searle was sent to Christchurch Girls' High School to finish her education. However, the principal, Helen Connon (later Macmillan Brown), admired Edith's intellect and persuaded her to work towards entry to university. Connon was the first female Master's graduate in the British Commonwealth and believed passionately in the need for women to develop intellectually. Edith became head girl of Christchurch Girls.

In 1880 Edith was awarded a junior scholarship to Canterbury College and began studying towards a Bachelor of Arts. She was one of only four female students at the College (by the time she graduated this had burgeoned to over 100), but soon gained a reputation for her literary skill, coming second to Joseph Penfound Grossmann in the 1881 Bowen Essay Competition.

Successfully gaining a senior scholarship in 1882, she won that year's Bowen prize for an essay on 'The probable effect of geographical and other physical conditions on the future development of the Colony of New Zealand'. In 1884 she graduated with her Bachelor of Arts degree and enrolled in a Master's programme. She also joined the debating society, taking the affirmative on issues such as the importance of higher education for women and the necessity of the Married Women's Property Act. Her professor, John Macmillan Brown, described her as one of his most talented students, with a particular gift for 'the imaginative and philosophical' (*The Press*, 7 March 1931). She was awarded her Master of Arts in 1885, with first class honours in Latin and English and third class honours in Political Science.

From 1885-1890 Edith taught at Wellington Girls' High School, first as assistant mistress, then as second assistant. During this time she also contributed theological and philosophical essays to magazines. In an article in the *Monthly Review* entitled 'Templa Serena Philosophiae' Edith asserted that 'Alone God – God the personified father, God, the power and righteousness – suffices' (February 1889, 91-2). However, she was also critical of the way in which religion had been perverted in order that it could be used to hurt and subdue women and the working classes ('The Divorce of Religion and Morality', *Monthly Review*, June 1889, 253-7).

Edith's interest in theology is also apparent in her first creative writing ventures. A poem, 'On The Death of Hope', appeared in the 1 February 1890 issue of *Zealandia*. This reveals a melancholy acceptance that life is shrouded in 'bleak skies' of 'misery', but also a belief in the need for God and faith in the midst of despair. This blend of pessimism and religious sentiment is also a distinguishing feature of Edith's first novel, *Angela: A Messenger* (1900), published in Christchurch. This is a moral tale, more tract than fiction. The heroine, Angela Mount, an inherently pure and noble girl, is converted at a Salvation Army rally in Fielding and departs on a proselytising mission to Australia where she is murdered by a drunk on a Sydney beach. Edith Searle's feminism in this early novel is narrow, but foregrounds later developments in her writing. Angela's status as passive victim is used to protest against male brutality and the evils of alcohol. Throughout the novel red and white colour symbolism reinforces the message of the need for female moral virtue in a corrupt world.

Edith Searle's sanctimonious sentiments and writing style in *Angela* have much in common with New Zealand prohibition and salvation novelists of this era, such as Bannermann Kaye and Bertha Cameron. However, the novel also connects with the fiction of Arthur Adams and George Chamier through its depiction of an indigenous natural environment. Angela goes for long walks through a distinctively New Zealand landscape of matai and totara and

delights in the song of the tui and her brother John writes highly romanticized poetry about the 'Tui bush' (24, Stafford and Williams, 187-8). Searle's castigation of Fielding as insular, judgemental and gossip-ridden established a tradition of critiquing small town mentality that later writers, from Jane Mander to Frank Sargeson and Bill Pearson, were to follow.

On 23 December 1890, in Wainuiomata, Edith married Joseph Penfound Grossmann. He had been a fellow student at Canterbury College, graduating with triple first-class honours, and was now a teacher at Wellington Boys' High School. Edith continued to work after her marriage and retained her maiden name, now being known as Edith Searle Grossmann. The couple moved to Christchurch, where Joseph taught at Christchurch Boys' High School. Edith's feminist sentiments were echoed by her husband and in 1892 they both became founding members of the Canterbury Women's Institute. Edith co-ordinated the literary department of the organisation.

In 1893 Edith published a novel which outlined her feminist views. *In Revolt* is set in Australia and makes its feminist protest through the tragic history of Hermione Howard. Parts of the novel descend into Victorian melodramatic and sentimental excess, but the portrait of the flawed, suffering and struggling central character has psychological depth. The novel was reviewed favourably in the New Zealand and British Press, but had a very small readership.

Eager to go to university and shape her own life, Hermione is forced into marriage with Bradley Carlisle by her aunt. Bradley is a type rather than an individual, a sadistic brute whose sole purpose is to demonstrate the evils of male domination. From the first he is determined to 'quell' Hermione and be her 'master' (64, 181). When she disobeys him, he uses his superior physical strength to exact obedience and to punish her. His brutality is heightened by alcohol and in a drunken rage he murders his son. Grossmann is scathing of the system that upholds Bradley's authority, particularly the law, which offers women no protection, and orthodox religion, which demands female submission. Hermione's inner journey is a liberating progression away from domestic submission to independent thought, but the action which results from this transformation is punished by a patriarchal universe. In the tragic denouement Hermione wanders through the Australian wilderness in a state of nihilistic despair and physical exhaustion that is strongly suggestive of impending death.

Edith's only child, Arthur Searle, was born on 5 December 1894. There is some suggestion that Arthur was mentally handicapped, although this may be a rumour perpetuated at a later date by Joseph as an excuse for financial difficulties. The marriage became increasingly unhappy and Edith left her husband in 1897. She moved to Wellington where she tutored university classes and pursued her own studies with Dr Innes. In 1898 Joseph was

convicted of two counts of fraud and was sentenced to two years imprisonment. He was never reconciled with his wife.

Edith moved to Auckland in 1898 where she worked as a freelance journalist for New Zealand and British magazines and journals, such as the *Otago Witness*, *The Contemporary* and *The Nineteenth Century and After*. Her articles covered a range of topics, including Maori education, the development of parks, and literary criticism. She was described by a contemporary as a 'leading writer on literary or historical matters and social movements' (Thomson, 310).

In June 1902 Grossmann was sent as a special reporter to write up King Edward VII's Pacific Island coronation ceremonies and celebrations. She then traveled to England, basing herself in London. There is some suggestion that she left New Zealand to seek treatment for her son, but she was also motivated by her desire to further her career as novelist and journalist. She was a founding member of the New Zealand Circle at the London Lyceum Club and after another colonial women's club, The Austral, was established in 1903 she used this as her writing headquarters. Here she came in contact with other expatriate authors, such as Kathleen Inglewood (Kate Evelyn Isitt), G. B. Lancaster (Edith Lyttleton) and Dora Wilcox. Grossmann urged Australasian authors trying to make a name for themselves in Britain to join a club or society of authors, stressing that the difficulties inherent in finding a publisher were 'doubled for a colonial' (Evans, 58).

Grossmann continued to contribute freelance articles to a range of newspapers and magazines, particularly the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*, the *Auckland Star* and the *Empire Review*. Issues relating to New Zealand remained favourites. 'The Growth of a Colonial Sentiment' offers a particularly important examination of New Zealand literature. Grossmann calls for a New Zealand literature that embodies the new spirit of the country, declaring that English stories, history and news are becoming increasingly irrelevant in a land of young New Zealanders who are imbued with a growing nationalism (*Empire Review*, May 1905, 350-3). In 'The Women of New Zealand' the forces shaping this emerging New Zealand identity are analysed. Grossmann regards the scenery, the independent and versatile pioneering spirit and the emphasis on class and gender equality as defining influences on the New Zealand psyche (*Empire Review*, October 1905, 138-148).

Following the death of her former headmistress in 1905, Grossmann wrote a *Life of Helen Macmillan Brown*. In this she pays tribute to Macmillan Brown's pioneering work in the field of female intellectual and moral education. While Grossmann is admiring of Macmillan Brown's emphasis on cultivating women who were able to 'take an independent stand in life and at the same time manage a household', she also warns of the cost to women of

trying to maintain both a career and a marriage (36). Macmillan Brown continued to work as headmistress of Christchurch Girls after her marriage, but her health was ultimately undermined and she was forced to resign. Above all, this biography is a tribute to the transforming power of education in women's lives in general and Edith Searle Grossmann's life in particular.

In 1907 Grossmann's sequel to *In Revolt* was published. *A Knight of the Holy Ghost* is a much more consciously feminist and therefore more theoretical novel in which character development and narrative action are secondary to the feminist purpose. The novel opens with a Preface which reminds readers that society is in 'the midst of a great struggle which aims at overthrowing the power of a small privileged class over a large dependent one and the power of one privileged sex over a more dependent one' and locates the novel within this struggle. The title draws on Heinrich Heine's definition of the Holy Ghost as the spirit of liberty. Hermione, miraculously saved from her spiritual and physical disintegration at the end of *In Revolt*, seeks both freedom from oppression and the freedom to follow the light within. She embraces a new humanist faith in a 'Divine Spirit' within each individual, which prompts men and women to live a 'higher life' (296-7). This 'higher life' manifests itself through 'pure love' (182). As this term suggests, Grossmann's attitude to sexuality in this novel is extremely negative. Sex is linked to male power and is described as a 'monstrous, unregulated, unnatural passion' (261). Ideal relationships should be chaste and spiritual and women have a special role in elevating society because of their higher moral nature. The novel also advocates the ongoing need for social and legal reform. Hermione establishes a commune in Melbourne to provide refuge for abused women and 'equal education' (202). Her dream is shattered when Bradley finds her and the law refuses to grant her request for divorce, granting him control over her property. In a final act of disillusionment or protest Hermione kills herself.

A Knight of the Holy Ghost was the most internationally acclaimed of Grossmann's novels. It was hailed by the *Weekly Times and Echo* as a book that 'will take rank...with the really great novels of the time, crashing down the bonds and fetters that bind the victims of prostituted marriage' and was praised by the *Westminster Review* for its 'Zola-like fullness of detail and variety of situation as well as directness of purpose'. New Zealand reviews were also complementary, the Christchurch *Press* drawing parallels between Grossmann's novel and the fiction of George Eliot and Emily Bronte. A second edition, under the amplified title of *Hermione: A Knight of the Holy Ghost*, was published in 1908.

Grossmann's final novel, *The Heart of the Bush* (1910) is a very different novel to its feminist predecessors, not least in its fresh, unforced style. In some ways the heroine, Adelaide Borlase, conforms to Grossmann's ideal

female type. She is cultured and well educated, but also makes her home a haven of domestic bliss for her husband. However, she accepts and plays on her status as delicate female and exhibits no desire for activity beyond the domestic sphere. Likewise, Grossmann's earlier negation of sexuality is reversed. *The Heart of the Bush* celebrates the sexual element in heterosexual relationships, particularly female sexuality. Adelaide is frequently overcome with physical and emotional passion for her husband, in one scene drawn to touch the 'muscular and sun-browned flesh' of Dennis' arm and then to 'put her lips to the thick blue vein' (236-7). Adelaide and Dennis' marriage is a study of a relationship that does work because there is love, respect and a willingness to compromise on both parts.

The Heart of the Bush is also an important novel in terms of New Zealand's emerging literary nationalism. Adelaide and Dennis are both individuals and representatives of types. Recently returned to the land of her birth from England, Adelaide is symbolic of fragility, art, society and civilisation. Dennis, the New Zealand-bred son of a farm labourer, is her symbolic opposite, standing for rugged strength, nature, the primitive, the barbarous. Jane Stafford argues that Dennis possesses an 'acquired indigeneity' by 'virtue of a Romantic association to the landscape' and his Celtic heritage (Stafford, 168, 166). In choosing to marry Dennis rather than Englishman Horace Brandon, Adelaide is accepting the local over the imported. The second part of the novel then poses the question of how colonial culture, once affirmed, is to be defined. Dennis is drawn to the developing export-orientated meat market, setting up the Farmers' Refrigerating Meat Company and the Wainoni Flat Creamery. Adelaide rejects this mundane reality for a love idyll in the South Island bush and mountains, which symbolise childhood innocence and transcendent emotion throughout. Her Edenic vision ultimately triumphs. The novel ends with an escape into a utopian natural landscape where the lovers read poetry (literature and nature being regarded as compatible throughout). Stafford describes this as a 'saccharine fantasy', a 'feminised and sentimental' Maoriland where 'Maori do not exist even as ghosts' (170-2).

The contemporary reception of *Heart of the Bush* was muted and this is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Grossmann never wrote another novel. More recent commentators, such as Jane Stafford and Mark Williams and Nelson Wattie, have focused considerable attention on the novel's preoccupation with an emerging indigenous cultural identity, while feminist critics remain uncomfortable with the novel's perceived betrayal of the feminist cause through its romantic, domestic focus.

Grossmann left England to return to New Zealand in late 1910. She lived in Auckland and continued to work as a freelance journalist. Grossmann was also a devoted civic campaigner, especially in the cause of conservation. She

was increasingly plagued by severe arthritic pain, another of the contributing factors behind her failure to produce any more novels. Dying in her sleep on 27 February 1931 at her home in St Helier's Bay, Grossmann was buried at Hillsborough.

The year after Edith's death her estranged husband, Joseph Grossmann, was again dismissed from a university position, this time Professor of History and Economics at Auckland University College, due to fraud. Joseph tried to excuse his actions by claiming that he was financially desperate due to his need to support his mentally disturbed wife and handicapped child. This myth has been perpetuated by several critics but is completely unfounded. In his obituary of his former student, John Macmillan Brown speaks of Edith Searle Grossmann's mental alertness and warm good humour. Macmillan Brown describes Edith as a woman of 'high ideals' who 'was ever on the side of the weak and the defeated; and it was this tenderness for the defenceless or helpless that was the ruling emotion to all her crusades' (*The Press*, 7 March 1931).

Grossmann's fictional oeuvre is perhaps most remarkable for its diversity. Both stylistically and thematically her novels demonstrate an evolving sensibility. *Angela: A Messenger* is orthodox in its religious sentiment and clichéd in its use of character stereotypes, little more than a prohibition salvation tract. The narrow feminist sentiments present in this early novel blossom in the two Hermione narratives. Here the erudite didacticism and melodramatic excess is redeemed by the complex ideas. *In Revolt* is a novel of protest, articulating its feminist message through Hermione's tragic history and ultimate rebellion. *A Knight of the Holy Ghost* is much more theoretical in its approach, militant in its feminism and global in its vision of a transformed society. The suspicion of sexuality that dominates Grossmann's moral feminism is reversed in *The Heart of the Bush*, which is unusual for its time in its celebration of female desire and physical passion. Here Grossmann's interest shifts to an emerging indigenous New Zealand identity. Quiet in tone and domestic in scope, *The Heart of the Bush* combines a realistic depiction of the everyday realities of a marriage relationship with a utopian evocation of the grandeurs of landscape. Grossmann's feminist texts and final novel offer windows into New Zealand's cultural and political past, but also retain a modern relevance and appeal in their preoccupation with gender equality, class divisions, the shaping power of the landscape and national identity.

LINKS

[DNZB](#)

[NZETC](#)

[The New Zealand Literature File](#)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

- Angela: A Messenger*. Published under maiden name Edith Searle. Christchurch: Simpson and Williams, 1890.
- In Revolt*. London: Eden, Remington, 1893.
- Life of Helen Macmillan Brown*. Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1905.
- A Knight of the Holy Ghost*. London: Watts and Co, 1907.
- The Heart of the Bush*. London: Sands and Co, 1910.

REFERENCES

- Carter, Sue. 'She'll Be Right: Feminine Perspectives in New Zealand Fiction.' MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1994.
- Cvitanovich, Lynley. *Breaking the Silence: An Analysis of the Selected Fiction of Two New Zealand Novelists*. Palmerston North: Massey University Monograph, 1985.
- Evans, Patrick. *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*. Auckland: Penguin, 1990.
- Kendrick, M. R. 'The Use of Fiction for Historical Purposes: A Look at the Feminist Novels of Edith Searle Grossmann.' Honours essay, Massey University, 1977.
- MacDonald, Katherine. 'Saint, Sinner or Symbol: A Generic Approach to the Novels of Edith Searle Grossmann.' MA thesis, University of Otago, 1992.
- Brown, John Macmillan. 'Edith Searle Grossmann: A Pioneer in Women's Education.' *The Press*, 7 March 1931, obituary.
- McLeod, Aowera. 'Aliens: Two New Zealand Novelists of the First Women's Movement.' *Women's Studies Conference Papers*. August 1989. Clare Simpson. Christchurch, 1990: 35-43.
- McLeod, Aowera. 'Edith Searle Grossmann.' *The Book of New Zealand Women*. Eds. Charlotte Macdonald, Merimeri Penfold and Bridget Williams. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1991, pp. 263-67.
- McLeod, Aowera. 'A Home in This World: Why New Zealand Women Stopped Writing.' *Women's Studies Journal*, 14:2 (1998): 61-76.
- Moffat, Kirstine. 'The Demon Drink: Prohibition Novels 1882-1924.' *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, Special Issue, 23:1 (2005): 139-61.
- Moffat, Kirstine. 'European Myths of Settlement in New Zealand Fiction, 1860-1940.' *New Literatures Review*, 41 (2004): 3-18.
- Moffat, Kirstine. 'The Puritan Paradox: an annotated bibliography of Puritan and anti-Puritan New Zealand fiction, 1860-1940. part 2: reactions against Puritanism,' *Kōtare: New Zealand Notes and Queries*, 3:2 (2000) 3-49.
- Moffat, Kirstine. 'The Puritan Paradox: The Puritan Legacy in the Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life of New Zealand, Focusing Primarily on the Works of Novelists Writing Between 1862-1940'. PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1999.
- Moylan, Philippa Maria. 'Paradigm and Promise: A Feminist Critique of Novels by E. S. Grossmann and L.A. Baker'. MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1990.
- Mulgan, Alan. 'Edith Searle Grossmann Pioneer.' *Art in New Zealand*, 3:12 (1931), obituary.

- Reilley, Helen. 'Education as Problem and Solution in Some Novels by Edith Searle Grossmann'. MA thesis, Massey University, 1993.
- Roberts, Heather. 'Grossmann, Edith Searle.' *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Volume 2 1870-1900*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, Department of Internal Affairs, 1995, pp. 180-1.
- Roberts, Heather. '*Where Did She Come From?*' *New Zealand Women Novelists 1862-1987*. Wellington: Allen and Unwin, 1989.
- Sinclair, Keith. *A History of the University of Auckland 1883-1983*. Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Stafford, Jane. 'Going Native: How the New Zealand Settler Became Indigenous.' *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, Special Issue, 23:1 (2005): 162-73.
- Stafford, Jane and Mark Williams. *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872-1914*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006.
- Thomson, C. Hay. *New Zealand Women Writers*. London: Cassell, 1909.
- Wattie Nelson. 'Grossmann, Edith Searle.' *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*. Eds. Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 220-1.
- Wattie, Nelson. 'Images of England and New Zealand in Edith Searle Grossmann's *The Heart of the Bus*.' *World Literature Written in English*, 24:1 (1984): 200-208.