

## Ellen Margaret (Nelle) Scanlan, 1882–1968

*Kirstine Moffat*

Nelle Scanlan was the most popular New Zealand novelist of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly important for her pivotal role in creating a New Zealand market and readership for New Zealand fiction. Her *Pencarrow* novels were the first bestsellers written by a New Zealander, with a New Zealand setting, and appealing to the local market. However, the success of these, and Scanlan's other novels, is also an indication of their limitations. Scanlan's fiction appealed to readers precisely because it held up a comfortable picture of New Zealand as a prosperous, thriving nation of hard working individuals with close ties to their British roots. Her novels speak of the desirability of the traditional ideals of family loyalty, individual responsibility and hard work and are grounded in a conservative political outlook distinguished by laissez faire non-interventionism and free trade. These were the values of her middle class, pakeha readership and inevitably her fiction had wide popular appeal. Within the confines of her chosen genres, the family saga and romance, Scanlan was capable of insight into the tensions and triumphs of human relationships. However, her recurring character types — the serene wife and mother, the demanding husband, the rebellious adolescent and the patient lover — at times lack individuality and her plots are constrained by their moral framework and romantic formula. Only in *Ambition's Harvest* does Scanlan depart from her successful pattern in a bleak expose of the predicament of the New Zealand artist abroad. This is the most autobiographical of Scanlan's novels and reflects her independent outlook and adventurous spirit. Scanlan's life as a journalist and writer has all the hallmarks of a feminist crusader, but, in keeping with her conservative politics, she vociferously rejected the feminist label and in her fiction lauded the influence of strong, domestic women.

Ellen Margaret Scanlan, always known as Nelle, was born in Picton on 15 January 1882. She came from Irish Catholic heritage. Her father, Michael Scanlan, was born in Country Kerry, Ireland. He had an adventurous disposition and had travelled to the Australian goldfields before settling in New Zealand, where he worked as a police sergeant. His wife, Ellen Kiely, was 20 years his junior and came from a farming and seafaring County Cork family. Nelle Scanlan had an older sister, Mary, and an older brother, Dan.

Scanlan had an awareness and appreciation of language from a young age. When she was four she was attracted by the word 'Pickwick' when her father read aloud Charles Dicken's *Pickwick Papers*. The rhythms of poetry

also appealed, another early memory being waking to hear the line 'Quoth the Raven never more'.

When Scanlan was 5 the family moved to Blenheim, where she attended the Convent School. Her father's friendship with the poet Thomas Bracken reinforced her early love of literature. Bracken would recite 'Not Understood' and the 'Legend of the Taramakau' for the family and would always give Nelle a special rendition of 'Chinese Johnny' in pidgin English. Another important family connection was with gregarious Wellington businessman Henry Blundell, who later became the model for Miles Pencarrow in the *Pencarrow* tetralogy.

Michael Scanlan died when Nelle was a child and in the late 1890s the family moved to Palmerston North. Nelle taught herself shorthand and typing and acquired her first job as a typist in an office. However, she wanted a more independent career and established her own secretarial business doing confidential work for lawyers and bankers. She rented an office in the Copeland Building and later drew on her memories of the inventor Copeland brothers, James and Henry, when she wrote *Leisure for Living*.

Scanlan's first literary experiments as a young woman came in the form of poems. A submission to the *Bulletin* resulted in a cutting comment in the Red Page: 'N.S.: As your poem was neatly type-written we restrain our wrath' (*Road to Pencarrow*, 121). A second venture proved equally humiliating when her poem was rejected by the women's magazine *The New Idea*. Abandoning poetry, Scanlan turned to fiction and journalism and had the occasional article and short story published in the *Manawatu Times*.

At the outbreak of World War I in 1914 Scanlan volunteered to go to the North Island command center at the Awapuni Racecourse where she was responsible for getting the soldiers' papers in order. The following year she joined the staff of the *Manawatu Times*, working first as a reporter and then the sub-editor. The war years were a painful time for the Scanlan family, Nelle's brother Dan being killed in action in France.

Scanlan continued to pursue her journalistic career after the war. In 1921 she travelled to Washington to report on the Arms Limitation Conference. As the only woman at the Conference and one of only three New Zealanders, she had an exotic appeal for Washington political society. After speaking at a conference for delegates and their wives at the Raleigh Hotel she acquired the status of an unofficial roving ambassador for her homeland, speaking at functions from Los Angeles to Boston.

Throughout her time in America Scanlan wrote articles on social events and local personalities for the *New York Times* and the newly established Women's News Service. In 1923 she published her first book, a collection of essays about female American political personalities, including Alice

Roosevelt Longworth, Mrs Woodrow Wilson and Florence Kate Harding. *Boudoir Mirrors of Washington* was published anonymously and is a chatty, anecdotal and at times sarcastic commentary on Washington politics.

Scanlan moved to England in 1923. She continued to work as a freelance journalist, specialising in writing articles about famous people (particularly royalty), social occasions and places of historic note. In 1927 she returned to New Zealand to report on the royal tour of the Duke and Duchess of York. Travelling back to England via Singapore, she had a journalistic triumph when she obtained permission from the recently appointed Admiral Mackworth to tour the Singapore Naval Base.

In 1930, coming home angry from a party, Scanlan sat on the edge of her bed and wrote the first few pages of a novel. This became *The Top Step*, first published in 1931. The novel focuses on the relationships between the members of an extended family, a narrative set-up that became Scanlan's trademark, and establishes several character types that Scanlan was to return to in subsequent fiction. At the centre of the novel is the soothing presence of Margaret Crest, patient wife, wise mother and domestic buffer between her querulous husband and his rebellious stepdaughter. Jonson Crest and Nuala must learn the lesson Margaret has already mastered, that mutual understanding and compromise are the necessary foundations of productive relationships.

*The Top Step* was well received in both Britain and New Zealand, the *New Zealand Herald* praising the novel for its 'humour, sincerity and understanding' and its 'studied avoidance of cheap sensationalism' (4 July 1931). Scanlan was invited to join the international writers' association P.E.N. after its publication, coming into contact with contemporary authors such as John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells.

Scanlan's second novel, *Primrose Hill* (1931), quickly followed. Once again the focus is on the pathos and humour of human interaction, this time in a London boarding house. The main narrative establishes the moral romantic formula that became the staple of much of her fiction, Clare Patterson and Erick Hogue unable to indulge their love until the death of his wife. Scanlan also comments on the artistic lifestyle. Erick, who has had to fight for success as a writer, is productive, while Clare's ambitions as a pianist are never realised because she 'suffered from the supreme artistic handicap of having just enough money to live on' (40).

From the outset of her career as a novelist Scanlan was open about her desire to write what people wanted to read. When her publisher, Robert Hale, suggested to her in 1932 that she should write about New Zealand, she told him that novels with a New Zealand setting were 'never popular out there...There have been novels about New Zealand, some of them quite

good, but they've never had much in the way of sales. Something romantic and dramatic can happen in Piccadilly Circus but not on Lambton Quay' (*Road to Pencarrow*, 181). He persuaded her to reconsider and she began writing an historical novel set in Wellington.

*Pencarrow* (1932) focuses on the fortunes and interweaving relationships of the Pencarrow family, who are held together by the gracious matriarch Bessie (based on Scanlan's mother). The original Pencarrows immigrate to New Zealand in the 1860s in search of 'better things, wider opportunities' (7). Their ambition is fulfilled and they establish two prosperous farms in the Hutt Valley and the Wairarapa. Their children continue this tradition of hard work breeding success. Michael stays on the land, while the flamboyant Miles (based on the Scanlan family friend Henry Blundell) becomes a successful lawyer in Wellington. The novel was an immediate success in both New Zealand and Britain, running to five editions in the first year of its publication. New Zealand reviews speak of the way in which the novel struck a chord of recognition with readers, presenting them with a New Zealand they felt comfortable with and proud of: 'Their [the Pencarrows'] successes and failures, loves, tragedies, and achievements might equally apply to numerous pioneer families... [who] have contributed to the faithful building of this young Dominion along traditional British lines' (*Manawatu Standard*, 2 July 1932).

When Scanlan returned to New Zealand in 1933 she was awarded the Freedom of Blenheim and was active in establishing a New Zealand branch of P.E.N. and a New Zealand Women Writers' and Artists' Society. Her main reason for travelling to New Zealand was to do research for the sequel to *Pencarrow*, *Tides of Youth* (1933). Set in the early decades of the twentieth century, this focuses on the third generation of Pencarrows. The importance of the work ethic remains a constant, but Scanlan also emphasises the need for work to be congenial. Inter-generational conflict dominates the novel as Miles struggles to accept that his children have dreams of their own, Kelly longing not for the law but the land, Pat determined to leave the land and follow the lure of the sea and Mary rejecting plans for a brilliant marriage to become a nun. The familiar Scanlan mixture of family dramas, the trials of love and the rewards of hard work and moral conduct once again met with favourable reviews and healthy sales.

An insight into the type of fiction Scanlan enjoyed reading and aimed to write is found in her 1933 essay on 'Modern Literature'. In this she deplors the prevalence of thrillers, war books and novels 'sated with indecencies and...sex' and calls for more books to be published that are 'sane, sound, beautiful, vivid and above all, sincere' (*Whitcombe's Monthly Review of Literature*, February 1933).

On her return to London in late 1933 Scanlan established a routine that she followed in subsequent years. She led a quiet life over autumn and winter writing her next novel, submitted the manuscript to her publisher in early spring, travelled overseas (to European destinations such as Norway, Holland, Spain and Russia) and returned to London at the end of the summer.

The first novel to be written after her return was the third Pencarrow saga, *Winds of Heaven* (1934). This is set in the 1930s, the present for Scanlan's original audience. The Pencarrows, like Scanlan's readers, are enduring a period of struggle as wool prices slump during the Depression. However, as the country emerges from the Depression the family experiences a renewed stability and prosperity. Scanlan's recipe of triumph over adversity through family support and hard work once again proved popular.

Scanlan's next novel has autobiographical resonances and is by far the most bleak and realistic of her fictional oeuvre. *Ambition's Harvest* (1935) traces the growth of Mary Merridge from her Wellington childhood to her adult adventures in America and England. The novel is noteworthy for the way in which it punctures the glamour of overseas travel and the optimism of artistic ambition. Life for New Zealanders abroad is shown to be a succession of fleeting successes, petty subterfuges and financial perils. Even the standard love plot offers pain rather than comfort. Refusing to grant readers the relief of a happy ending, Scanlan has Mary's lover Harley Ross die of typhoid during their Spanish honeymoon. Readers and reviewers reacted adversely to this break from the Scanlan pattern, the *Auckland Star* declaring that 'for the ending Miss Scanlan gives to her romance she deserves to be shot at dawn' (13 July 1935).

Perhaps predictably, Scanlan retreated from the realism of *Ambition's Harvest* into the cosy comfort of the English countryside in her next offering, *The Marriage of Nicholas Cotter* (1936), which delighted reviewers with its 'flavour of the old bouquet' (*The Guardian*, 8 November 1936). This romance between a middle aged man and an eighteen-year-old girl retains a jarring note, however, in the person of Zoe Cotter. After a lifetime of devotion to her brother's comfort, she is displaced when he marries and reflects bitterly on male selfishness. While Scanlan's novels tend to deify the domestic wife and mother, there are also hints at a concern for the vulnerability of single women.

Scanlan's next four novels all had New Zealand settings and a strong message about the importance of the work ethic. *Leisure for Living* (1937) draws on her memories of the Copeland brothers from Palmerston North. The Marion brothers in the novel are indoctrinated by their uncle into his creed that 'life is not work; one must have leisure for living' (10). This is challenged by the difficulties they confront in their own lives and the example of florist Nancy Girling and builder Charlie Buckle who advocate discipline, work and 'limited

leisure' that is earned (111). Likewise, Simon Grimstone in *A Guest of Life* (1938) needs to learn to follow the tenacious, independent example of his friend Phil Henn when the two emigrate to New Zealand. In 1939 Scanlan satisfied demands for another Pencarrow novel with *Kelly Pencarrow*. The typical blend of family struggles and achievements through effort are, on this occasion, used to attack Labour policies, which are seen as a threat to the Pencarrows' ethic of individual initiative. The financial and romantic rewards of hard work are reinforced yet again in *March Moon* (1944), set on a struggling farm near Blenheim.

Scanlan was in New Zealand on one of her regular five yearly visits at the outbreak of World War II. During the next few years she gave a series of radio broadcasts entitled 'Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax' which provided descriptions of the locations of the war arena, most of which Scanlan had visited.

Returning to England on board the *Waiwera* in 1944, Scanlan reestablished her writing regime. During her enforced stay in New Zealand she had begun another novel set in London between the war years. She described *Kit Carmichael* (1947) as a 'means of escape from the terrifying present' (*Road to Pencarrow*, 185). In contrast to the New Zealand novels of the preceding decade, this acknowledges the need for the pleasures of culture as a leaven for the dull realities of work and routine. The title character is a dilettante who has the financial luxury to dabble in the arts. There is none of the usual Scanlan condemnation for this lack of backbone. Kit is rewarded with a happy marriage, continues to indulge himself and forces his staid cousin Mark to 'wonder if it were essential that every aspect of life should be constrained to some utilitarian purpose' (213).

A similar insistence on the need for spontaneity and personal pleasure are hallmarks of *The Rusty Road* (1948). Returning to Scanlan's favoured farming setting just north of Wellington, the novel is a typical family saga. The patriarch, Roger Harty, has much in common with Scanlan's father, an Irish rover, an adventurer and a dreamer. His excesses are restrained by his wife Katty (another Scanlan matriarch), but the Harty home is a gregarious, fun-loving, welcoming environment in which personal happiness is seen as a right. In contrast is the regimented household of the puritanical Jessie Swift, which stands as a warning against an obsessive devotion to duty and work.

In 1948 Scanlan returned to live permanently in New Zealand, settling in St Jude's Cottage at Paraparaumu beach. She continued to write, publishing two more novels with New Zealand settings. *Confidence Corner* (1950) draws on her memories of her Blenheim childhood, particularly the idiosyncrasies of retired army officers from India. Her final novel, *The Young Summer* (1952), is set on the Kapiti Coast and revisits the themes and personality types of her

first novel. Once again a young, sulky, rebellious daughter has to come to terms with a parent's remarriage, this time a beloved father.

The *Pencarrow* tetralogy was successfully reissued in 1958. The total New Zealand sales of both issues of the series exceeded 80,000, a record for fiction written by a New Zealander and set in New Zealand. (Mulgan, 96). In 1963 Scanlan published an anecdotal autobiography, *Road to Pencarrow*, which reuses much of the material in *Ambition's Harvest*, and in 1965 she received an MBE for services to journalism and literature. She died in Calvary Hospital in Wellington after a severe heart attack on 5 October 1968.

Nelle Scanlan's ambition was to write novels that people would want to read and she was successful in realising this ambition. Once she had established a successful recipe of family dynamics, moral conduct and romantic dilemmas she stuck to the formula. She had the ability to capture and hold the attention of readers through her uncomplicated narrative action, eye for humour and pathos, and believable, if somewhat formulaic, characters. The continued presence of her fiction on the shelves of public libraries is testimony to the ongoing appeal of her readable prose and conservative ethics. While her fiction is limited by its reliance on romance conventions and its evocation of an insular, middle class, pakeha world, Scanlan is a significant figure in the New Zealand literary canon because of her influence on the kind of fiction that was read by New Zealanders. With her beloved *Pencarrow* series she revolutionised New Zealand reading tastes, creating an appetite for New Zealand fiction that paved the way for subsequent local authors. Such a warm-hearted embracing of New Zealand material was perhaps only possible with fiction that did not seek to critique or change the national character, but rather celebrated New Zealand as a nation with a proud pioneering past and a secure industrious future.

## LINKS

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography \(DNZB\)](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre \(NZETC\)](#)

[New Zealand History on Line](#)

[Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand 1966](#)

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## PAPERS

Collections of manuscripts and biographical material, reviews and letters relating to Nelle Scanlan are in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington.