

Ngaio Marsh, 1895–1982

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Dame Ngaio Marsh, the detective novelist, dramatist, short-story writer, theatre producer, non-fiction writer, scriptwriter, autobiographer, painter and critic was born in Christchurch, New Zealand on 23 April 1895. Her birth in the closing years of Queen Victoria's reign and her childhood and adolescence in the twilight—albeit a transferred one—of the Edwardian era were to prove crucial in shaping the prevailing temper and tone of her outlook, particularly when Marsh set out to experiment with writing as a young woman. Her very name enacts a symbolic and liminal binary opposition between Old and New World elements: a confluence echoing the indigenous (the ngaio being a native New Zealand coastal tree) and the imported (a family surname from the coastal marshes of Kent, England). Seen thus, 'Ngaio' connotes New World zest—a freshness of outlook, insight and titanic energy—while 'Marsh' suggests an Old World *gravitas* grounded in notions of a stable, class-based lineage and secure traditions. The tension between these twin imperatives and hemispheres drove and energized Marsh's career and life-pattern (of ongoing dualities: New Zealand-England; writing-production) and enabled her to live what Howard McNaughton has called an incognito/'alibi career' in a pre-jet age of sailing boats and vast distances and time horizons between her competing homelands (in Lidgard and Acheson, pp.94-100).

Edith Ngaio Marsh's Taurian date of birth was both richly symbolic and portentous, given that 23 April is both St George's Day and the legendary birthdate of Marsh's beloved Bard, Shakespeare. The other, antipodean, aspect of her dual heritage (father a Londoner, mother New Zealand-born of English stock) is encoded in what became quite early on her preferred first name. Her parents asked an uncle, a lay missionary fluent in the Maori language to choose a suitable indigenous name for their first-born (as was common practice at the time), and he selected 'Ngaio' (pronounced 'nye-o') which denotes a native evergreen tree but may also connote 'expert,' 'clever,' 'deliberate,' 'thorough' or 'restless' (all applicable to Marsh). As an adult, Marsh cut an imposing, dignified and—sometimes—an intimidating, Amazonian figure. Jack Henderson, an early student actor (who played her first Prince Hamlet in 1943) later described Ngaio as 'tall (5 foot 10 inches), thin, mannish in appearance, flat-chested, rather gawky,' adding that she dressed 'usually in beautifully cut slacks' and possessed 'large feet with shoes like canal boats' and had a deep contralto voice yet was 'intensely feminine withal.'

Marsh, the dynastic romantic, proudly traced her ancestry on her father's side back to the twelfth-century de Marisco family of pirate lords operating from Lundy Isle (at the entrance to the Bristol Channel), who as Normans spoiled the kingdom of Henry III and harassed the realm along the Devon coast. They were also known as de Montmorency, Marsh and by other derivatives and these malefactors were imprisoned in the Tower and at Newgate and Fleet prisons on charges of high treason. As Marsh wrote, 'They were kicked out of Lundy and turned up in Kent, where they changed their names to Marsh and many, perhaps on the rebound from piracy, turned Quaker.' The lineal Marsh family seat was Marton (East Langdon, near Dover). Dame Ngaio's father, Henry Edmund Marsh, was born in Balham (Surrey) on 9 May 1863 before a family move to Streatham (South London). H. E.'s father, Edmund Ironside Marsh was a London tea-broker who died when H. E. was 16 but not before he had sent his eldest son as a day boy to Dulwich College (later the public school of P. G. Wodehouse and Raymond Chandler). Thus her people were broadly gentry (or upper-middle-class) on the Marsh side, but of a particular sort: neither young sons who long knew that they would have to make their own way, nor Remittance Men (wealthy blackguards sent out to 'the colonies' to purify Mother England and paid allowances), but, rather, young men with disappointed expectations. Edward Seager (Marsh's maternal grandfather) retained specious hopes of a fortune in Chancery but had to train as a blind-maker and schoolmaster, and Marsh's father's heritable fortune declined through a series of small, but incremental and downward, reversals. Henry Marsh was the eldest of ten children raised by a widowed mother in straitened circumstances and the males of the family served the Crown or tried to follow careers in the professions. Planning a banking career in Hong Kong, H. E. Marsh did a year in a Lombard Street bank before contracting pleurisy and travelled to South Africa to recuperate and manage a farm in the Cape province where, as a self-styled country-lover and sportsman, he relished the clear air of the veldt and its varied flora and fauna. In 1888 a well-placed uncle secured him a position in the fledgling (and soon insolvent) Colonial Bank in Dunedin, New Zealand. Henry Marsh did find new work as a clerk for the Bank of New Zealand in Christchurch, where he worked modestly until his retirement. Having enjoyed amateur theatricals in England, the young bank clerk eventually met the talented (and deep-voiced) thespian Rose Seager in the context of staging a play in late Victorian Christchurch to raise funds for a Hospital. Miss Seager was a second-generation New Zealander and an actress of outstanding natural talent. Born on 27 July 1864 in Christchurch, she was the daughter of two energetic colonists: Edward William Seager and Esther Coster. The resourceful 'Gramp' Seager (as he was to become) arrived in Lyttelton in 1851, acting initially as a marriage-

broker in Immigration then joined the police force where he designed the first police uniform in the Canterbury province. Appointed Gaoler-in-Chief of the Lyttleton Gaol, in 1864 Seager was placed in charge of the new Sunnyside Lunatic Asylum (unsurprising given the Victorian presumption of the links between criminality and insanity). At Sunnyside Seager, a kindly man, had practised innovative therapies such as mesmerism, conjuring, amateur theatricals and magic lantern shows with and for his 'children' (the inmates). The potent influence of Seager's criminological work and his lavish exercises in live theatre upon the quick, lively mind and imagination of his granddaughter Ngaio Marsh can easily be imagined.

Henry and Rose married on 24 April 1894 and rented a home in Carlton Mill Road (Merivale) where their only child, Edith Ngaio, was born on 23 April 1895. After enduring many colds and attacks of influenza there, in 1904 the Marshes purchased a large plot of land out in the country (Cashmere estate) which Henry Marsh wrote of as 'a perfectly virgin spot with everything to be done to make it both attractive and habitable.'

Marsh remained an only child of loving—if somewhat unconventional—parents. As a mature woman Marsh expanded upon her childhood, describing herself with some asperity as a little girl who 'was obligingly introverted, delicate, solitary, fanciful, pig-headed and rather morbid.' She attended a select city dame school (in the company of D'Arcy Cresswell), where she was bullied (describing herself as 'a highly imaginative young child and not really very strong ... with strange fears'). So between the ages of ten and fourteen Ngaio was taught at home by her mother and an itinerant governess, Miss Ffitch, who introduced Ngaio to Shakespeare via *The Tragedy of King Lear*—'of *all* the plays!' as Ngaio said (convinced that this primordial work would have been given in an expurgated version, scrubbed of gouged eyes and copulating flies). Dame Ngaio once said that growing up as an only child in 'Marton Cottage' (the new Marsh home in the drier and unpopulated Cashmere Hills above Christchurch from 1906) and the family's Westland camping holidays constituted the 'halcyon days' of her busy childhood. Marsh also relished Kipling's *Jungle Books* and *Just So Stories*, Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*, Mabel Deamer's *A Noah's Ark Geography* and read Dickens' *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend* between the ages of seven and ten. Later, adolescent, reading included George Macdonald, Henry Fielding, Smollett and the Sherlock Holmes stories of Conan Doyle.

In May 1910 Marsh began attending a small independent girls' school run by an order of Anglo-Catholic nuns. St Margaret's College was the place where Marsh imbibed her great love of history and firmed up her commitment to the theatre. From the astringent Miss N. G. Hughes (trained at the

University of London) Marsh derived what she later called ‘an abiding passion for the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare.’ Ngaio put on plays for the school break-up for three years in a row and also read and wrote stories for the Lower School girls after she was appointed Head Prefect (1912-1913). Marsh also became, for a time, an ardent Anglo-Catholic: ‘When I became a schoolgirl I took out my adolescence in religious fervour and a passion for English literature and history,’ she observed. This was doubtless related to the ceremonial and was an extension of her growing sense of theatre, and her fervour was gradually transformed into a subtle Anglican humanism. Marsh wrote verse and stories and two ‘no doubt rather sickening little fairy plays’: *Isolene* and her striking adaptation of a George Macdonald fairy-tale which she called *The Moon Princess* (produced in September 1913). Marsh later conceded that ‘[t]here were long chunks of very torrid blank verse and a good deal of theeing and thouing’ in the latter play. To be fair, her family lived in an atmosphere redolent of theatre (‘It was rampant on both sides of the family and I cannot remember a time when I did not hear long and entrancing discussions of plays and actors’) and such excesses were likely from a young and passionately literary Edwardian woman.

Marsh attended the conservative School of Art at Canterbury University College (est.1882) from 1909 on a part-time basis (during her secondary schooling) and then formally enrolled full-time from 1914 to the end of 1919, gaining first-class honours in a Canterbury Society of Arts diploma (1917). Between 1918 and 1925 she published occasional stories and verse in *The Sun* newspaper (being influenced by Walter de la Mare and E.M. Forster) and became intensely involved with local dramatic production. Marsh enjoyed these years immensely, made new friends and won an impressive clutch of scholarships and prizes in composition, studies from life, and for figure composition. She later stated that her work as a painter never ‘panned out right’, adding: ‘I acquired quite a lot of technical skill and got quite a long way with my painting, but I never felt I was doing what New Zealand was about with my paint.’ The deeper and ‘more valid’ impulse was towards words, and the timely visits of the Allan Wilkie Theatre Company from 1916 introduced Ngaio to live Shakespearean production of a professional quality. The Wilkies’ opening night of *Hamlet* she later described as ‘the most enchanted I was ever to spend in the theatre.’ Thus inspired, Marsh wrote a melodrama which she called *The Medallion* and her mother (ever Ngaio’s great encourager) urged her to show Mr Wilkie this script. Wilkie offered Marsh a place in his actor-manager’s company for its New Zealand tour of autumn 1920 and her ‘winter of content’ (personal and theatrical fulfilment) steered Marsh firmly into the theatre world. This experience is vividly recalled, in the guise of fiction, in Marsh’s fifth novel, for Marsh once conceded: ‘I wouldn’t have written a book

like *Vintage Murder* [1937] if I hadn't had the personal experience of travelling with the Allan Wilkie Company.' However, Mrs Marsh would not countenance her unmarried daughter joining the company on an overseas tour and so Marsh taught 'speechcraft' (elocution) at a School of Drama and Dancing in Christchurch and then spent much of the 1920s producing a series of travelling vaudeville shows and large-scale fund-raising annual charity pantomimes for an organization known as Unlimited Charities (*Bluebell in Fairyland* [1924], *The Sleeping Beauty* [1925] and her own version of *Cinderella* [1926]) under the Chairmanship of Captain Tahu Rhodes. These stylish and highly acclaimed productions moved Marsh into the charming and socially elevated circle of a Canterbury gentry family (that of Tahu and Helen Rhodes) whose English and Irish relations, the Plunkets (many of whom were spread across Kent), she dubbed 'the Lampreys' in her 1940 novel *Death of a Peer/Surfeit of Lampreys*. Marsh had already become a familiar figure with the genteel Acland family of Mount Peel Station (near the Rangitata River) after tutoring the son of Sir Hugh Acland in Christchurch and becoming an occasional visitor at Mount Peel from 1916. (She was buried in their family churchyard at the Church of the Holy Innocents in 1982.) From 1927 Marsh also became a foundation member of 'The Group', a non-ideological grouping of mainly female visual artists, all trained at CUC School of Art, who clubbed together to pay for a central city studio and models' fees, and who exhibited together to break the intensely hide-bound, 'grey-head' conservatism of the Canterbury Society of Arts. Marsh continued to paint and exhibit with The Group sporadically into the 1930s, although this waned as regular contractual obligations to produce a book per year kicked in.

Marsh sailed to England in 1928 and spent almost five years there with the Rhodes-Plunket families, writing and opening an arts and crafts decorating shop in partnership with the Hon. Mrs Tahu Rhodes in Beauchamp Place (Knightsbridge). Marsh was elected in January 1929 to the Society of Authors (on the strength of a series of syndicated travel articles for the Associated Press in New Zealand as 'New Canterbury Pilgrim') and she acquired a flat near Eaton Mansions (SW3) once her mother 'came Home' and stayed with Ngaio to see the land of their Seager ancestors. While whiling away boredom on a wet weekend in 1931, Marsh decided to turn her hand to penning a 'tec' (having read Sherlock Holmes since she was a small girl and later some Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers novels). By this time Marsh had abandoned her big New Zealand book which she felt, after three chapters, was 'steaming off busily down the well-worn rails of the colonial novel' ('The Background,' *The Press*, 22 December 1934) and was keen to attempt the popular *genre* of 'teckery' as an exercise in technique. As a 1974 *Spectator* reviewer noted, traditional detective novelists need 'to create a separate and

slightly artificial' fictional world, and Marsh probably chose this genre, having accepted her limitations in limning her emergent nation in fiction. Marsh may have shared Curnow's dim view of the writing of 'colonial and pre-national' authors who, he felt, became entrapped in 'absurd postures, trying to concoct the "national" by colonial pressure-cookery, with much sentimental steam and scraps from Victorian kitchens.'

'I don't think that before or since [that] weekend I have ever written with less trouble and certainly never with less distinction,' Marsh wrote in her autobiography, *Black Beech and Honeydew* (1965) of the composition her first novel. Nancy C. Joyner has noted that *A Man Lay Dead* (1934) 'is a significant first novel—in that it establishes those characteristics that have come to be Marsh's hall-marks: the attitude that fictional murder is primarily a game whose first obligation is to amuse, the interest in the habitations of the gently eccentric British middle and upper classes as locales, and the presentation of her perdurable detective, Roderick Alleyn.' Depositing the typescript of her 'Opus I' with an agent, she returned hurriedly to New Zealand in 1932 to nurse her very sick mother and was unable to revisit England and the Continent until 1937, then spending about a year away, continuing to paint scenes in Belgium, Germany, Austria, northern Italy and France and completed *Artists in Crime* (1938)—the novel which introduces her *alter ego*, the painter Agatha Troy—and wrote *Death in a White Tie* (1938) after a memorable dinner party in London with aristocratic friends. Upon her return to New Zealand after this brief sojourn in a Europe teetering towards war, Marsh found her novels being touted as mainstream successes in England, and she continued to look after her elderly widowed father in Cashmere, produced more plays for local repertory societies in New Zealand and sat out the Second World War in real anguish for her friends enduring the privations and turmoil of war in Britain. Marsh wrote a play *Exit, Sir Derek*, for Canterbury College's Drama Society (performed in October 1935) with the help of a renowned gynaecologist, Dr Henry Jellett, with whom she co-authored the novel *Death Follows a Surgeon* which was published in 1935 as her third crime novel, *The Nursing Home Murder*. During the war, Marsh undertook voluntary aid work (60 hours per fortnight) at Christchurch's Burwood Hospital, driving repatriated soldiers in a hospital bus all across Canterbury to their homes and was a much-loved Head Section-Leader of the Red Cross Transport Unit. It was while performing these strenuous duties and writing more novels (*Death of a Peer* [1940], *Death and the Dancing Footman* [1941], *Colour Scheme* [1943] and *Died in the Wool* [1944]) that Marsh began a lengthy, legendary and mutually enriching association with the Drama Society (CUC) which resulted in more than twenty full-scale Shakespearean productions, from her 1943 '*Hamlet* in Modern Dress' until *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream (which starred Sam Neill) in 1969. Forced to stay in New Zealand to attend to her ailing father and because of the war, Marsh brought Alleyn 'Down Under' to investigate espionage in *Colour Scheme* and *Died in the Wool*.

When Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh came to Australasia with the Old Vic in 1948, Ngaio's students were asked to entertain the Oliviers after their performance. Marsh was able to get some talented actors started on shaping up the first act of her obsession: Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922). The Oliviers advised Marsh to take her troupe to Australia and thus was born the hectic three-week tour of January-February 1949 which Marsh recalled as 'one of the most exciting things that has ever happened to me.' It helped her to cope with the loss of her father in September 1948 and also served as a prelude to the establishment of what was hoped would become a permanent travelling repertory. Under Marsh's direction, the British Commonwealth Theatre Company was set up to celebrate the Festival of Britain in the Commonwealth in 1951 and to circulate around the 'Dominions.' To this end Marsh left in mid-1949 for London to recruit thespian talent and arrived for the Penguin 'Marsh Million' that July (a gala occasion in which a million of ten of her titles were released on the same day). In January and February 1950 she produced *Six Characters* for a short season in the Hawtrey family's Embassy Theatre in London.

1951 was a year of personal triumph and trial: Marsh published the British version of *Night at the Vulcan* (title: *Opening Night*) and was voted 'one of the best active mystery writers by an international poll' (*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, September 1951). She also brought the BCTC out to open with Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* in Sydney, then moved onwards to New Zealand where primitive staging conditions and poor advertising defeated the enterprise which Marsh later described as 'a confusing, a baffling, an exciting, an exhilarating and at the same time a disappointing experience' for her and her highly talented troupe. In 1955 Marsh attended the International Conference on Theatre History in London and in 1960 paid her first visit to the Far East and the United States (where she was treated to a hail of publicity). In 1962 her children's play *The Wyvern and the Unicorn* (1955) was turned into an opera in a collaboration with the avant-garde New Zealand composer David Farquhar (Marsh wrote the libretto) and given its world premiere as *A Unicorn for Christmas*. It was performed again for the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh during the 1963 Royal Tour of New Zealand on the evening which inaugurated the Queen Elizabeth Arts Council. That same year Marsh delivered the Macmillan Brown Lectures on Shakespearean production ('Three-Cornered World') and received the first honorary doctorate of literature from Canterbury University. In 1965 Little, Brown published Marsh's

autobiography, *Black Beech and Honeydew* and in June 1966 she became Dame Ngaio Marsh (Civil Division) in the Queen's Birthday Honours. In July 1967 she produced *Twelfth Night* to open the Ngaio Marsh Theatre in Christchurch and her final full-scale production was of *Henry V* at the close of 1972 (when she was 77 years of age) to open the theatre in the new Christchurch Town Hall civic complex. Marsh's last theatrical effort was to write and produce in 1976 a one-man show on the Bard of Avon, *Sweet Mr Shakespeare*, in collaboration with Jonathan Elsom, one of her *protégés*, after her final visit to the United Kingdom which had become her second home and a place she visited regularly.

Life had to be quieter in these autumnal years but Marsh loved to entertain and her home (now a house museum) remained a lively gathering place for her wide circle of friends. 1978 was, in many ways, an *annus mirabilis* for Dame Ngaio, for in March she received the Grand Master Award of the MWA, and in September her phenomenally successful thirtieth novel, *Grave Mistake*, was published. In the same year a New Zealand television company (South Pacific Television) released adaptations of four of her novels as 'Ngaio Marsh Theatre.' Dame Ngaio spent 1979 continuing to write the bulk of her novel *Photo Finish*, which was published in 1980 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Collins Crime Club, underscoring the fact that she was indisputably the last of the original Golden Age 'Crime Queens.' Further ill-health forced Marsh to employ a full-time live-in housekeeper and, sensing that her time was drawing to a close, she updated her autobiography and finally tackled the difficult novel which she had so long nursed a strong urge to write, *Light Thickens*, which confronts the theatrical taboo surrounding 'the Scottish play' and which provides a superb insight into how Marsh believed *Macbeth* should be staged. She just managed to complete this text in her new study (with its expansive views of both her English-New Zealand country garden and of her beloved Southern Alps mountain range) a mere six weeks before her death: a gentle passing in the dignity of her own home occasioned by a speedy cerebral haemorrhage. Thus Dame Ngaio Marsh's long, intensely productive and fruitful summer was at an end.

Over a fifty-year span from 1931 to 1982 Ngaio Marsh wrote 32 classic English detective novels ('whodunnits')—from which her global fame derives—while simultaneously building a New Zealand-wide reputation as a distinguished theatre director with a predilection for the plays of Shakespeare. A contemporary of Dorothy L. Sayers, Marjory Allingham and Dame Agatha Christie, Marsh was the only 'colonial' author who came to be lauded as a member of this illustrious quartet of Golden Age 'Queens of Crime.' Marsh also published works of non-fiction including two books about New Zealand and monographs on dramatic production and the visual arts in her homeland.

In addition, she continued working as a highly competent visual artist, executing and exhibiting a variety of oil paintings from the 1920s into the 1930s before her dual career as a crime novelist and producer of repertory theatre limited these endeavours to making scenic and costume designs for her long extended season of Shakespearean productions at the University of Canterbury (New Zealand) from 1943-1969.

Marsh's singular achievement was to capture international acclaim in literature and the arts while contributing to nurturing the cultural life of her homeland, a contribution that was explicitly recognized in 1951 when she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA). Marsh was also made a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America in 1978 for a lifetime's achievement in the genre (a tribute which meant a great deal as she was honoured with Dame Daphne du Maurier). Furthermore, as a citizen of the British Commonwealth, Marsh was awarded the OBE in 1948 and was created Dame Ngaio (Dame Commander of the British Empire) in 1966. In 1962 she received the first Honorary Doctor of Literature degree conferred by her alma mater, the University of Canterbury.

At her death, the late Professor James Bertram argued that Marsh was, with Katherine Mansfield and Frances Hodgkins, 'one of the first New Zealanders to achieve full professional standing in a major artistic field.' However, the Yale historian Robin Winks observed that 'When Ngaio Marsh was at the height of her powers, the New Zealand literary establishment tended to belittle her novels as 'popular culture,' a subject which today is widely studied and accepted in the most august of critical and academic circles.' Jacques Barzun added that while some famous literary critics 'went out of their way' to label 'mysteries' a lowbrow form, '[t]his was contrary to fact; detective stories were written by and for highbrows.' Terry Sturm, writing long after Marsh's death, seems to have accepted the unjustness of an allied local version of literary snobbism, arguing:

Despite the oft-expressed view, especially among New Zealand critics, that Marsh's was an essentially outdated colonial Anglophile sensibility, there was in fact considerable complexity in the relationship between 'New Zealand' and 'English' elements in her life and art, and her affinities were much closer to the new high-cultural nationalist-realist impulses of the 1930s and 1940s than to the earlier literature of colonial exile.

The clear implication is that Marsh struggled to decolonize her outlook away from being the neo-colonial focused loyally on the imperial art-Centre (London) and that she gradually came to accept her fluid, hybrid status as one whose significant cultural interventions and contributions in theatre were

made on ‘the periphery’ and that, like her friends the composer Douglas Lilburn and poet Allen Curnow, New Zealand constituted a valid ‘here’ in the production of art. The dilemma of the sensitive New Zealander attracted to metropolitan style but belonging to New Zealand was limned in the figures of Roberta Gray (*Surfeit of Lampreys*), Dikon Bell (*Colour Scheme*) and Cliff Johns (*Died in the Wool*)—young people caught in the irreconcilable pull between local belonging and Northern Hemisphere sophistication and aesthetic-intellectual variety, and all too aware at the same time that valid national art cannot be force-fed. This dilemma of hemispheric stress (and what Winks once called ‘myths of islandhood’) was very much on Marsh’s mind in the 1940s as a National Orchestra and National Theatre were being discussed in small-scale New Zealand, and her views were well expressed in a published dialogue that she had with Allen Curnow in 1945.

However, Marsh had her detractors, notably Edmund Wilson. Deriding a field which ‘is mostly on a sub-literary level,’ Wilson arraigned Marsh’s *Overture to Death*, insisting that ‘I do not see how it is possible for anyone with a feeling for words to describe the unappetizing sawdust which Miss Marsh has poured into her pages as “excellent prose” or as prose at all except in the sense that distinguishes prose from verse.’ Much less acerbically, Julian Symons (an admirer of her work) wrote that Marsh’s ‘capacity for amused observation of the undercurrents beneath ordinary social interchanges was so good that one hoped for more than she ever tried to do,’ citing *Night at the Vulcan* (1951) where she took ‘refuge from real emotional problems in the official investigation and interrogation of suspects.’ Symons concluded that ‘engaging though the books are, one is bound to regret that Ngaio Marsh did not take her fine talent more seriously.’

The first nine or so of Marsh’s novels adhere quite strongly to the exigencies of the Golden Age formula (with jokey references to Christie and Sayers and an early self-consciousness about the form, which suggests an author kindly laughing at her own art), but in them Ngaio gradually psychologized her characters beyond stiff stock types and also experimented with techniques of oblique narration to disguise the criminal while writing many others in the third dimension. Her obituary in *The Times* justly noted that Marsh ‘was one of those writers who, during the 1930s, raised the detective novel to a high level of literary art.’ In novels such as *Vintage Murder*, *Colour Scheme* (1943) and *Died in the Wool* (1944) Marsh satirized what she once called the fact that New Zealanders ‘are an extraordinarily insular set of people,’ adding: ‘I wouldn’t say that a very lively or vivid imagination is a national characteristic.’ In this neo-colonial view Marsh explains one reason why she always found London to be ‘an extraordinarily exhilarating place.’ However, with *Surfeit of Lampreys* Marsh provided an

alter-ego character, Roberta Gray, and a more balanced assessment of the NZ-UK admixture and launched into a Cowardian ‘comedy of manners’ mode that makes her novels *Death in a White Tie* (1938), *Death and the Dancing Footman* (1941), *Colour Scheme*, *Final Curtain* (1947) and *False Scent* (1959) such superb satirical exercises about egomaniacal (and frequently theatrical) personalities. These are among the most uproariously comic of Marsh’s explorations of the joke of death topos amidst high society *milieux*. Susan Baker has traced Marsh’s use of Shakespearean motifs in several novels, notably *Singing in the Shrouds* (1958) and *Night at the Vulcan* (1949) as illustrating her ‘high culture’ view of the Bard as a marker of status and her conviction that ‘not everyone is entitled to Shakespearean authority’; in other words, ‘Marsh’s etiquette for Bardinage apparently requires that one know both Shakespeare and the tacit rules for Shakespeare citation.’

Marsh’s first biographer, Margaret Lewis, was surely right to observe that Marsh’s ‘later novels became increasingly outdated regarding police methods, with Alleyn and [his offsider] Fox inhabiting a kind of undefined time-warp vaguely associated with the 1950s’ (Lewis, p.61). This is to beg the wider question of realism in the ‘classic’ whodunnit and misses the point that Marsh’s strengths as a subtle and nuanced novelist of character absurdities and sophisticated, mordant wit make later novels—such as *Clutch of Constables* (1968), *Black as He’s Painted* (1974), *Grave Mistake* (1978) and *Light Thickens* (1982)—so successful and elegantly literate. However, Lewis is right to alight on a point made by Jessica Mann—that Marsh’s extreme reticence and use of a mask to shield her inner life from public view may have vitiated the impact of her work and ‘diminished the life of her novels’ (Mann, p.233).

It is clear that the pre-Great War period (of the Edwardian twilight in Britain) was preserved in ‘twenties and ‘thirties detective fiction and that Marsh was to a degree marooned, by her historical-geographical location, between the colonial and post-colonial eras of national identity formation in her birthland. As such, her corpus usefully fossilizes a long-lost mindset of the obedient colonial who held to an idealized view of England. In addition, it is clear that Marsh wished to practise ‘safe’ art as a theatre director and as a writer (providing emotional protection and maintaining her mystique as a highly controlled and self-sufficient person). This ‘Miss Tame Lion’ role goes a long way to explain why Marsh operated within a safe Colonial Imaginal and relished the stylized satirical prose of the English comedy of manners tradition, recalling Marshall McLuhan’s argument that the ‘pointless ingenuity of construction’ in pseudo-scientific novels of detection ‘corresponds to our scientific skills divorced from contact with our emotional needs’. Any admission of affective need that she must have felt might compromise

Marsh's image of strict control and rectitude as a dutiful daughter of Albion (in this she was somewhat akin to Virginia Woolf and Nancy Mitford). In fact, Marsh was actually a deeply generous woman behind the rather stiff and forbidding persona, which she fashioned for self-protection and to secure much-needed creative 'space' (perhaps relishing crime fiction as a form which insulated her from impertinent critical or literary inquiries and allowing her to retain her own thoughts and integrity of personhood). There is no question, however, but that in her dual careers as a play producer and professional author Marsh gave aesthetic form to such traditional aristocratic/ 'posho-cratic' social values as hierarchy, restraint and rigidly codified behaviour.

It is a commonplace of modern criticism that rhetorical figures in texts may correspond to psychological defence mechanisms in the psyches of authors. This thesis certainly holds a degree of validity in the stylishly evasive detective fictions of Dame Ngaio. Jill Ker Conway has reminded us of what was almost certainly also Marsh's dilemma: that in her early days as a 'gamine' (boyish) figure, it would have 'troubled people to think of women owning and running their own turf'—'Ergo it was deviant, and since women were defined by their bodies and not their minds and talents, it had to be sexually deviant, and ... had to be intellectually weak.' Conway's statement brilliantly captures a strain of disdainful New Zealand commentary about Marsh (in particular for not following the male cultural-nationalist writers, such as Sargeson, as they championed proletarian realism in the wake of Steinbeck, Hemingway, Saroyan *et al.*)—commentary that betrayed jealousy at her conspicuous international success as a 'popular' author, for being a local celebrity, and for her Anglophilic, often opinionated and olympian cultural commentary.

Marsh liked writing to entertain and happily purloined Graham Greene's term 'entertainments' to describe her approach to the craft of 'detective cookery/bookery' in a late essay. Marsh always robustly defended the form in an age of shapeless fiction, arguing that the classical discipline of the detective story has much to commend it: 'In the seventeenth century, metaphysical poets fitted their verse into diamonds, hearts and triangles. I like to think we may be doing something the same.' Marsh believed that detective fiction is by its nature shapely and, as such, 'can command our aesthetic approval' and explained why:

It must have a beginning, a middle and an end. The middle must be an extension and development of the beginning and the end must be implicit in both. The writing is as good as the author can make it: nervous, taut, balanced and economic. Descriptive passages are vivid and explicit. The author is not self-indulgent. If he commands a good style, there is every reason for maintaining it. In an age of immensely long and undisciplined

novels we can do with some shapely ones and in the midst of much pretentious obscurity a touch of lucidity is not unwelcome. ('Entertainments', p.3).

Marsh saw herself as an 'impure' practitioner, in a second stream removed from the amateur/eccentric sleuth tradition of Sherlock Holmes. Marsh distinguished between the original, slightly effete, 'pure' puzzle formula founded by Poe, Conan Doyle and Gaboriau (a game 'played, strictly according to the rules, between author and reader' in which the characters 'however animated or enchanting are two-dimensional') and those later authors like herself, Frances Iles, Sayers, Allingham, Michael Innes and C. Day Lewis (and much later P. D. James), who attempted to write in the third dimension and to move beyond what she calls (in 'Entertainments') 'the slippered cosiness of a good read,' as first assayed in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* and Dickens' unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. This notion of fiction written more realistically but still one foot off the ground (what John Mortimer has called 'writing at a Dickens level') is applicable to Marsh's novels.

Ngaio Marsh grew up in an era in which New Zealand was a bit-part player in the grand British imperial narrative and it is unfair to pillory her for assenting to the prevalent attitude of well-heeled Kiwi Britons who, in Leslie Lipson's words, were long in denial about their Southwest Pacific location, their outlook remaining 'that of a north Atlantic people' who 'have felt these islands to be a fragment of the British Isles which, by some over-sight of the Creator, was put on the wrong side of the globe.' Marsh unquestionably aped the 'high culture' master texts of the centre (London), was mentally colonized by metrocentric 'Britishness' and was unquestionably a fully consenting member of an imperialized space (her crime novels allowed Marsh to live imaginatively in England). Lawrence Jones has argued that in the early twentieth century the 'view of New Zealand as a "privileged happyland" co-existed with its shadow, the fear that it might really be a "miserable banishment" from the England where all virtues resided.' For her part, Marsh was happy to produce ethical fables of social conformity and good order, following the Golden Age prescription for a stratified social world and for an ambience reflecting an eternally Edwardian value-structure. That such a validation of social and spatial order was regularly upheld by a New Zealand woman bred in colonial Canterbury ought to occasion no surprise if we accept historian James Belich's contention that Anglo-Zealanders invested much energy in replicating 'a pan-British compound culture to which New Zealand had contributed its mite.' The New Zealand novelist Maurice Shadbolt once wrote perceptively that while Marsh spent, on average, one year in three, as an adoptive

Londoner, she spent most of her days living alone in the ‘dark-panelled and book-filled house her father built...on a verdant hillside above Christchurch’ and that from her Cashmere eyrie, ‘Beyond quiet suburbs and spires rise the peaks of the Southern Alps, vivid substance of the rugged native country she has never quite managed to escape.’ Indeed, it was (as she would have wished) in her own comfortable New Zealand home that, in February 1982, Dame Ngaio bade the world goodnight, eight weeks short of her 87th birthday and having just approved the galleys of her final novel, *Light Thickens*, which magnificently fuses all the core strands of her long and exuberant life: New Zealand-England, Shakespeare, the live theatre and crime fiction. It was a stylish swan-song to cap a life of great fulfilment and signal achievement.

Links

[The New Zealand Literature File](#)

[The New Zealand Book Council](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

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