

## Elsie Locke, 1912–2001

*Philip Steer*

Elsie Locke was widely known as a peace activist and historian but she was also a groundbreaking and successful author of children's literature. Her literary reputation rests primarily on her historical novels set in New Zealand's colonial past, many of which have been reprinted. Attending university during the Depression, she associated with many of New Zealand's emerging literary figures. She also became a socialist because of her experiences and observations of poverty at this time, and her many social histories reflect this lifelong conviction. The realisation that she was largely ignorant of Maori history led her to study the Maori language, and to incorporate a Maori perspective into her writing. She received several awards in her later life for her children's literature.

Elsie Violet Farrelly was born in Waiuku, New Zealand on 17 August 1912, the youngest of six children. Her parents, William John Allerton and Ellen Electa (née Bryan), were only educated to primary level but nevertheless were progressive thinkers in the raising of their children. William grew up in Reefton, New Zealand and while his intelligence was recognised at school he was unable to be educated beyond Standard Six. Because of this, he strongly encouraged the academic endeavours of all his children. Ellen was also born in New Zealand and, having been a teenager during the suffragette movement of the 1890s, she imparted to her daughters the value of independence and a sense of gender equality. She attended Waiuku District High School from 1925 until 1929, where she was the sole student in her class during her final two years. Farrelly always wished to be a writer, in contravention of the social norm that literate women become teachers or nurses. After winning a scholarship, Farrelly entered Auckland University College in 1930.

Entering university at the beginning of the Depression, Farrelly struggled to support herself through a mixture of scholarships and part-time employment. A seminal influence on her developing political views at this time was witnessing the demonstrations of unemployed men. As she later recalled in *Student at the Gates*, 'When the last of the ten thousand had passed me, I was left on the pavement to answer the question these men had silently flung at me: whose side are you on? Whoever you are, and wherever you are going, I am going too, I had answered' (98).

Farrelly became increasingly interested in socialism while at University, attending meetings of the Friends of the Soviet Union and the Fabian Club.

Through the Literary Club, she also became involved with the production of the pioneering literary magazine *Phoenix*, published at Auckland University College by Bob Lowry. The first two editors of *Phoenix* were academic James Bertram and poet R. A. K. Mason, and its contributors included poets Allen Curnow and D'Arcy Cresswell and the founder of *Landfall*, Charles Brasch. While Farrelly did not write for *Phoenix*, she assisted Lowry with its printing and her flat became a focal point for those involved.

In September 1933 Farrelly joined the Communist Party and, after graduating in the same year, travelled to Wellington. There she soon became involved in the leadership of the local branch of the Communist Party. In 1934, with the support of the Communist Party, Farrelly began a monthly newspaper, *The Working Woman*, which ran until November 1936. It was superseded by *Woman Today*, which ran from April 1937 until October 1939 and sought to appeal to a wider audience. Among its contributors were poet Gloria Rawlinson and novelist and poet Robin Hyde. In a later article, 'About *Woman Today*,' Locke argued that 'a "second wave" of feminism came at that time and was building up when it was cut short by the war, and much of it was expressed in and concentrated around *Woman Today*' (49).

In 1935, Farrelly married fellow Communist Party member Fred Freeman and she gave birth to a son in 1938. In 1936, Elsie Freeman (as she then was) convened the inaugural meeting of the Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society, the forerunner of the Family Planning Association, out of concern for those families unable to cope with further children. In 1941, following a divorce, she married John (Jack) Gibson Locke, a meatworker and fellow member of the Communist Party. They moved to Christchurch in 1944 where Locke, despite her love of the country and dislike of cities, was to live for the rest of her life. They would eventually have four children. Locke spent the years 1946–1948 in hospital after contracting spinal tuberculosis, and used the time to read and contemplate her political beliefs as she learned more of Stalinist Russia and the overthrow of the Hungarian revolution. She became convinced of the need for the New Zealand Communist Party to develop a more home-grown ideology. The questions raised at this time ultimately caused her to leave the Communist Party in 1956; in 'Looking for Answers,' she wrote, 'These were times that called to faith, not questioning. I committed the supreme crime: I *did* question.' (344)

It was in the 1950s that Locke first began to take seriously her desire to become a writer. Her early publications included editing *Gordon Watson, New Zealander, 1912–45: His Life and Writings* (1949) for the New Zealand Communist Party, and the privately printed *The Time of the Child: A Sequence of Poems* (1954). In 1959, she won the inaugural Katherine Mansfield Award for Non-Fiction for her essay in *Landfall*, 'Looking for

Answers' (1958), where she detailed her reasons for joining and later leaving the Communist Party. It was also in 1950s that Locke helped found the New Zealand branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. She served on its national executive between 1957 and 1970, and she remained committed to the cause throughout her life.

Locke's writing career began in earnest in the 1960s when she became a contributor to the *School Journal*, produced by the School Publications Branch of the Department of Education. Between 1962 and 1968, she was commissioned to write a series of historical booklets, which were later collected as *The Kauri and the Willow: How we Lived and Grew from 1801–1942* (1984). Comprising over seventy vignettes, ranging from short plays to the reproduction of journal entries, arranged into loose chronological order, they were intended to give children a sense of New Zealand's social history. Some of the more prominent concerns highlighted by Locke include the occupations of the early colonisers, interactions between Maori and Pakeha, the achievements of social reformers and the experiences of children. It was while writing the series that Locke realised her lack of knowledge of Maori language, history, spirituality and attitudes to the land.

As her children reached secondary school age, Locke began writing children's fiction inspired by her historical research. Her first book, *The Runaway Settlers* (1965), also proved to be her most popular. The story concerns the Small family – Mary Elizabeth and her children Mary Ann, Bill, Jack, Archie, Jim and Emma – who flee Australia to escape their abusive husband and father, Stephen. They arrive in New Zealand and settle in Governors Bay, Lyttelton, assuming the surname of Phipps. They move into an abandoned cottage owned by the rich but unscrupulous landowner they first found employment with, and manage to survive through the friendliness of their neighbours and the sale of produce from their garden. While there they meet members of the local Maori village, help fight a fire when a neighbour's scrub burn-off gets out of hand, and Bill leaves for the Otago goldfields only to return penniless. The family's fortune is made when Mary and Archie undertake an epic journey, driving their herd of thirty-three bullocks and cows over the Hurunui saddle to the West Coast and selling them at a premium. *The Runaway Settlers* has been in continuous print for longer than any other New Zealand children's book and Locke received the Gaelyn Gordon Award for a Much-Loved Book for it in 1999.

Locke turned to the past of Waiuku for her next children's book, *The End of the Harbour: An historical novel for children* (1968). Her interest in her hometown had been rekindled by her work for the School Publications Branch and she spent a summer there researching the story. Set in 1860 at the outbreak of war in Taranaki, it concerns the interaction between Maori and

Pakeha in the microcosm of Waiuku, a town on the frontier between the expanding settler society and the territory of the Maori King movement. The main protagonist is eleven-year-old David Learwood, who has come to Waiuku in order for his parents to work at a hotel. David has never met any Maori and his mother is afraid of the very thought, but he nevertheless makes friends with Adam, a Pakeha-Maori boy, and several Pakeha adults sympathetic to the Maori cause. He also forms a friendship with Honatana, a local Maori boy; this relationship is given extra depth by the parallel they find between David and Jonathan in the *Bible*. Despite the peace being kept within the village, it becomes apparent that war is inevitable and David contemplates the causes of the conflict:

Was that the root of the trouble? The Pakehas were Englishmen torn from their own land; they had not had time to know a new country with the Maori kind of love. The land was something to clear the bush from, to put to the plough, to sow down in wheat or in grass for the cattle. (203)

The novel concludes by asserting that David belongs in New Zealand by way of his continuing friendship with Honatana. It also suggests that Maori culture will endure despite the loss of the land: “It doesn’t seem real, that they’ve taken his land from him,” whispered David. “I don’t think they ever *can*” (204).

For her next works, Locke turned to contemporary stories of nature. *Look under the Leaves* (1975) is a non-fictional book about ecology with elements of fantasy, while *Ugly Little Paua; Moko's Hideout; To Fly to Siberia; Tricky Kelly* (1976) is a series of animal stories. *The Boy with the Snowgrass Hair* (1976) is a novel about the tramping adventures of two teenagers, Tom Travers and Lou Callen, in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. Lou is struggling with a sense of inadequacy instilled by his disappointed father, whose wish that he become an All Black was been thwarted by his small size. Through six episodes, Lou develops from an enthusiastic but unskilled novice under the influence of the more experienced Tom, the awe-inspiring but merciless landscape they tramp in, and the beauty of the wildlife within it. At the end of the novel Lou begins to grow taller.

In 1978, Locke published *Explorer Zach*, a short book for young children. Set in South Canterbury in the 1920s, it describes the adventures of eight-year-old Zach and his dog, Bruce, as he leaves his parents’ farm to explore the countryside for a day. Also in 1978, Locke attended the Pacific Rim Conference on Children’s Literature in Vancouver, Canada. Following that meeting she published an article, ‘What About Our Children?’ in the *New*

*Zealand Listener* (1978) arguing for the establishment of a children's book foundation:

The eternal problem for our publishers is our small home market.... If some of our authors appear rather too wedded to the English tradition, it is not only because of literary influences, it is also because an English publisher may be seen as essential for launching the book, either directly or in a deal with a local firm. (61)

Three years later Locke published an autobiographical account, *Student at the Gates* (1981), which recalled her childhood and university education.

Locke's next children's novel, *Journey Under Warning* (1983), marked a return to historical themes, centring on the story of the Wairau confrontation of 1843. The main protagonist, Gilbert (Gibby) Banks, is a fifteen-year-old from Nelson who is hired by the New Zealand Company as a cook for the party that is to survey the Wairau plain. He forms a friendship with Will Morrison, a Scot who opposes the actions of the Company but is forced to work for it due to economic necessity. As he observes:

Havers! The English gentry, they canna' bring themselves to think they might meet their match in a tattooed Maori. They're so well filled with the belief that their ways are the best on earth, they dinna seek to ken the ways of other folks. Little enough do they understand the Scots after two centuries under the same line of kings. (137)

In contrast to the Company's dogmatism, the Maori under Te Rauparaha and Te Rangihaeata oppose the survey through passive resistance. Confrontation proves inevitable, however, when the settler leadership determines to arrest Te Rauparaha yet the settlers prove to be unprepared and are outmanoeuvred when they finally precipitate a conflict. Will narrowly escapes, and is later found by Gibby who had been staying at one of the closest settlements. While Will is ultimately reunited with his son and Gibby is able to join him on their farm, the novel's sense of lost possibilities remains: with local Maori fleeing possible wrath from the Pakeha government, 'The beautiful church, so lovingly built, would be left to decay in a village deserted for ever' (180).

In her final historical novel, *A Canoe in the Mist* (1984), Locke turned to the eruption of Mount Tarawera and the destruction of the famous Pink and White Terraces in 1886. The novel is set in the village of Te Wairoa and focuses on the friendship that forms between Lillian, whose mother works at a local hotel, and Mattie, who is visiting from England with her wealthy parents. While

crossing Lake Rotomahana to see the Terraces, led by the Maori guide Sophia, they see a carved canoe that is believed by Maori to be an omen of disaster. Several nights later the mountain erupts, and both Maori and Pakeha inhabitants of the village struggle to survive. After the eruption, Sophia presents the two girls with sets of poi that symbolise their new relationship to New Zealand and the Maori:

‘They speak with different voices, these *pois*,’ said Sophia. ‘For you, Mattie, the charm is in music and rhythm and a glimpse of a far-away country. For you, Lillian, a little of the Maori spirit has entered your heart. Perhaps they will lead you to another *marae* where you will learn to use them.’ (199)

Also in 1984, Locke’s booklets for the School Publications Branch were collected as *The Kauri and the Willow: How We Lived and Grew from 1801–1942*.

From the mid-1980s, Locke began to gain official recognition for her literary achievements. She was awarded an honorary doctorate of literature by Canterbury University in 1987 for her contribution to history and literature. The next year, she published *Two Peoples, One Land: A History of Aotearoa/New Zealand especially for young readers* (1988). Four years later, she published her major historical work, *Peace People: A History of Peace Activities in New Zealand* (1992), described by historian Hugh Larracy in *History Now* (May 1998) as ‘a reference book of enduring value ... without relinquishing the power to disturb and persuade at the same time as it informs’ (30). By this point, Locke was spending most of her time caring for her sick husband, and her final children’s book, *Joe’s Ruby*, was published in 1995. It is the story of Joe, a man who hatches a rook in his hand. The bird, which he names Ruby, proves to be eccentric and intelligent and the story describes their developing relationship.

In 1995, Locke received the Margaret Mahy Award for an especially distinguished and significant contribution to children’s literature. In her acceptance speech, published as ‘For Children You Must do it Better,’ she listed the criteria that made a good children’s book. The first criterion was, ‘If it’s fiction, it should tell a good story. If it’s poetry, it should make the eyes shine and the ears tingle. If it’s non-fiction, it should stir a lively interest in finding out and knowing more’ (15). Locke died in Christchurch on 8 April 2001, four years after her husband.

Elsie Locke is now recognised as a pioneering children’s author in New Zealand. She was one of the first to publish novels specifically for New Zealand children, and she was an active advocate for the genre and its practitioners. Her historical novels have achieved an enduring place in New

Zealand literature, remaining popular in libraries and still being taught in schools. All her writing is rooted in the New Zealand landscape and New Zealand's history since colonisation, and that history and setting are presented to the reader through the experiences of vivid young characters unafraid to ask questions and express their feelings. These characters explore, in an understated way, the question of what it means to be a New Zealander, and the issues they face reflect Locke's own concerns: coping with poverty; the relationship between Maori and Pakeha; the interaction between individuals and the landscape. The continual reprinting of *The Runaway Settlers*, most recently in 1993, is evidence that her novels continue to meet the needs of those seeking children's fiction by and for New Zealanders.

## LINKS

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