



<http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz>

ResearchSpace@Auckland

Copyright Statement

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

This thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of this thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from their thesis.

To request permissions please use the Feedback form on our webpage.

<http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback>

General copyright and disclaimer

In addition to the above conditions, authors give their consent for the digital copy of their work to be used subject to the conditions specified on the Library Thesis Consent Form.

FINGERS ROUND THE EARTH

A Biography of A.R.D. Fairburn (1904 – 1957)

Denys John Trussell.

Thesis Completed in Fulfilment
Of Requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy
(PhD) at The University of Auckland 1980, (2003)

Abstract

This thesis is a literary biography. It incorporates material that is often outside the scope of scholarly or academic writing: the detail of an individual's day-to-day life. It also spans several disciplines: the fine arts, their history and theory, literary history and criticism, ecology, philosophy, classical music and general history. The discussion involved these because the biographical subject had an active interest, at times an active involvement in them.

There has been an attempt to follow through themes and patterns that were enduring in the life of A.R.D. Fairburn. He is shown as a man who saw the world in vitalistic and metaphysical terms, rather than in terms of their opposites – mechanism and materialism. These views he represented consistently in a secular society that had a predominantly scientific world view.

He is treated as a Romantic/Modernist where his poetry is discussed, and as a pivotal figure in New Zealand's literary history; one who helped make the transition from Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian poetic idioms to those of a regional Modernism, within which he developed a unique style.

The biography has implicit in it an 'argument', though not one that is developed in an abstract way: namely that Fairburn, his grandfather Edwin and his great-grandfather, William, were peculiarly representative figures in our history. Their active New Zealand presence lasts from 1819 – 1957. Two of them played direct roles in establishing a settler culture here; the third was acutely aware of the tensions and contradictions of that culture. Though A.R.D. and Edwin Fairburn were eccentric in the social milieu of New Zealand, their lives touched it in so many ways that they, along with their missionary forebear, William Thomas Fairburn, are personifications in an

historical narrative. The line of their lives traces much in the history of the country since the early nineteenth century.

This work is for Ruth Nichol
1948 – 1991,
who with the author
travelled
in the southern mountains
of New Zealand

Preface

Faced with the generous energy and multitudinous detail of Fairburn's life a biographer must make his hundreds of choices as to what should be chronicled, discriminating minutely between more and less "relevant" aspects of a complex and dynamic man. Selection was tortuous. Fairburn did little that was not "in character" – relevant to the main rhythm of his life. His own view of the self was such. He knew the essential person could be expressed through a whole range of activity – be it poetry or boat-building, brewing or metaphysics.

The essential Fairburn is to be found in many places and many guises: a richness in experience that was paradoxically his greatest limitation. For death reached him long before he sounded the depths of all he felt within.

Given such bounty, why spend a chapter on his ancestry? It was not lightly done in a country where small books have strong appeal for publishers perennially short of capital. But while writing this biography I read many others, and was struck by the fact that, in cultures with deep roots of time, the influence of ancestry is so intrinsic to the fate of their peoples as to demand little development in biography. New Zealand is not such a culture: history is not yet implicit in the mentality of its people. It is, instead, explicit – sought after and painfully identified. And Fairburn was deeply concerned in this process. It was his particular predicament: one that had been largely constructed by the few generations of settlers before him.

Among these settlers were his great-grandfather and grandfather, men unique for the exact way in which they exemplified the dilemmas of a young, overwhelmingly physical society. Having traced William Thomas and Edwin Fairburn's lives I could see no alternative but to depict them in detail. Theirs were energies that found shape

directly in their poet descendant. They were the moral, genetic and spiritual architects of his psychology to a degree rare in any family.

The proportions of the biography were determined by what I felt to be most significant moments in his development. Essential growth in the man, not the mechanical recording of chronological detail was given greatest space. Hence the extensive treatment of his year in the English countryside and, by contrast, the fairly brief exposition of his last eight years. Nor was a simple linear narrative suitable for portraying him. His great lateral spread, the lessening of his development in depth at the end of his life, were factors shaping this thesis as much as the sequence of his day-to-day existence.

The result is of a work of middling length. Biography tends to be an intricate and extensive form, as anyone who has read the twelve hundred pages of Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* would appreciate. Even in this era of an abbreviated journalistic statement the long biography survives. Michael Holroyd's recent life of Lytton Strachey, Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce* attest to a continuing love for the discovery of human character by means of numberless particulars being deployed on the printed page.

I cite Holroyd's work partly because Strachey, like Fairburn, had a short life during which he managed to attract around him some of the most characteristic talent of his generation. The New Zealander, for me, was the richer personality, though by no means as cultivated or disciplined as the Englishman (for whose circle he had some distaste). And whatever judgement the future might pass upon his poetry there is little doubt that Fairburn, the person, will remain a figure significant in the struggle for survival and growth of individuality in a society still deeply motivated to break down the singular person.

For this reason I have not treated him just as the maker of his poetry. Writing was one of many passions which combined, making him not so much a man of letters as a person of exceptionally rich and diverse character. He accepted the burden of individuality in its fullest sense, and weathered his existential crises with courage and humour. With all its failing and fulfilment his life is a clue to the problems and the possibilities facing a people who have ceased to be colonists, but who lack still the unselfconscious culture of an older civilization.

Denys Trussell, Auckland 1980, 2003.

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	Ancestral.	1
2	Father of the Man.	44
3	The Bread of Youth.	73
4	He Shall Not Rise.	107
5	The Substance of Cities.	160
6	An Infinity Within.	184
7	Neither Brave Nor New.	235
8	A Question of Revolt.	284
9	An Age That Unfastens Us.	311
10.	Citizen.	359
11	To Inhabit his World.	414
12	Strangely Not Foreseen.	471
	References	539
	Bibliography	618