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POLITICS AND PUBLIC THEMES IN NEW ZEALAND
LITERATURE 1930-1950

WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO
MULGAN, SARGESON, MASON, FAIRBURN, CURNOW

By

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of Doctor of Philosophy in English, University of Auckland.

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ABSTRACT

In the thirties and forties politics and public themes bore in upon writers influencing what they wrote about, the forms they chose and their conception of their function in society. It is a period in which writers sought to make literature serve the larger political end and often artistic merit is a function of the success the writer had in accommodating in his work the demands of outside pressures.

It is always difficult to detach a period of history from the longer continuum but there is, nevertheless, a case to be made for viewing the years from about 1930 to around 1950 as a relatively homogeneous unit in New Zealand's literary history, distinct in important respects from what came before and from what followed.

The new generation of writers in England in the thirties, particularly Auden and the group around him influenced young New Zealand writers both technically and in the attitudes they adopted to the relationship between the artist and society. The prevailing left-wing ethos emphasised the political and public responsibilities of the writer. Retreat into private, esoteric, literary modes was seen as an abdication of these responsibilities.

The major themes of this period in New Zealand writing were social realism and nationalism; the literary products of the pressures exerted by political and economic forces. For the young writers the political awareness and sense of social commitment generated by the depression, together with the crusade to inhabit the land imaginatively, provided a sense of literary direction. These writers and their contemporaries accepted responsibility in both these areas seeing themselves as crusaders for social justice and creators of the imaginative understanding necessary to achieve a sense of belonging to this country. Such an understanding would be reached not through seeing it as offspring of England, nor as a picturesque, innocent new society; but by exploring it honestly and creating the terms and vocabulary for describing it.

This study documents the careers of John Mulgan, Frank Sargeson, R.A.K. Mason, A.R.D. Fairburn and Allen Curnow in the period, roughly, 1930 to 1950, and looks at the ways each responded to the public demands they perceived were placed upon them. In their different ways these writers went about the business of changing New Zealand society, broadening its understanding of itself, creating an atmosphere conducive to artistic and literary development. Despite the fact that the degree of success in accommodating these demands varies considerably from writer to writer, the literary output of the period as a whole generated the confidence and energy that were a prerequisite to the development of an indigenous literature.

During this period there developed an acceptance, albeit highly critical, of New Zealand and a feeling that the tradition which had been established in the thirties and forties could be extended by succeeding generations of artists and writers.