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IMAGES OF SOCIETY IN NEW ZEALAND WRITING

AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIAL CONCERNS OF NEW ZEALAND
WRITERS 1960-1970

SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND.

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An Examination of the Social Concerns of New Zealand Writers 1960-1970

Every writer works within a particular social context which influences the way in which he apprehends and attributes value to the experience he represents in his work. This influence does not promote an absolute uniformity of outlook among writers, nor does it necessarily limit the formal possibilities open to them: rather it predisposes writers to favour arguments or value experiences that confirm certain ways of seeing society which, though they may vary in their emphases, are still contained within identifiable parameters.

It is possible to describe the nature of the culture of any period by defining the 'structure of feeling' shared by writers -- that blend of theories and assumptions which constitutes the organising vision through which their social concerns and aesthetic ideals achieve a formal reconciliation. With the novel, this structure of feeling may be identified by attempting to locate the point of vision of the writer as it is stated in terms of social reality. For what is seen and rendered in the novel represents an interpretation of social reality, an image of society, stated in terms of the structure of feeling prevailing during the period in which the writer is working.

The purpose of this present study is to relate these general principles to a consideration of literature in New Zealand concentrating on work produced between 1960 and 1970. To do so necessarily involves an examination of literature and criticism produced outside this period in order, firstly, to define the values which are held in common within the New Zealand literary tradition -- that is to say, the structure of feeling which prevails here -- and secondly, to discover how the themes which are treated most consistently during this decade are subsequently developed or, alternatively, resist development.

An associated purpose is to identify the themes which recur in the work of writers whose approach to literature, and the forms they choose, are otherwise very different; to illustrate the origin of these common concerns in the structure of feeling which informs literary culture in New Zealand; and to show how that structure is expressed in relation to the new experiences and phenomena encountered here as a result of the rapid social change which has occurred during the 1960s.

The argument of this study is developed mainly through an examination of prose fiction, in particular the work of Frank Sargeson, Noel Hilliard, Janet Frame, Maurice Duggan, Maurice Gee and Maurice Shadbolt. Criticism and occasional writing -- particularly that found in popular magazines -- is also referred to.

What should be conclusively demonstrated is the extent to which the structure of feeling which informs New Zealand literature has been rendered obsolete by the recent rapid changes in New Zealand society; that the assumptions about society implicit in this structure of feeling prevent the writer from fully apprehending the nature of his experience; and that if literature here is to remain a valuable source of social knowledge, new ways of seeing -- and new forms which can effectively express them -- must be developed.

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