

*All in the Family:  
Continuum of Discourse  
in Recent New Zealand Criticism*

PETER SIMPSON

Long ago was the then beginning to seem like now  
As now is but the setting out on a new but still  
Undefined way. *That now*, the one once  
Seen from far away, is our destiny  
No matter what else may happen to us. It is  
The present past of which our features,  
Our opinions are made. . . .  
The things that were coming to be talked about  
Have come and gone and are still remembered  
As being recent. There is a grain of curiosity  
At the base of some new thing, that unrolls  
Its question mark like a new wave on the shore.

— JOHN ASHBERY, "Blue Sonata"<sup>1</sup>

I

IT IS WITH A SENSE OF participating in an inescapable continuum of discourse, such as is expressed in John Ashbery's poem, that I contemplate the five books lined up on my desk,<sup>2</sup> and the opportunity they present to consider the state of recent literary criticism in New Zealand.

All five books are miscellaneous collections of critical writing (essays, reviews, lectures, introductions, radio talks, editorial notes, interviews, etc.), much of it previously published in periodicals or pamphlets, and written over a period of at least two decades. Dates of the earliest and latest pieces in each book will indicate the time span involved: Cunningham, *Sargeson*: 1935/1980; Watson, *Brasch*: 1947/1969; McKay, *Baxter*: 1950/

1971; Pearson, *Sleepers*: 1952/1973; Stead, *Glass Case*: 1957/1981. Three collections are posthumous, compiled by editors other than the author, Baxter having died in 1972, Brasch in 1973, and Sargeson in 1982.

Perhaps the most fruitful way to consider these books is as collections which comprehensively document a particular literary period. Documentation is especially full for the fifties and the sixties, with some extension either side of those decades. This was the period during which "New Zealand Literature" as an identifiable collective phenomenon became established, in large part through the development of the kind of literary infrastructure (publishers, journals, state patronage, publicly subsidized broadcasting and education, etc.) which these books reflect.

All five writers are well established practitioners in other literary genres, Sargeson and Pearson as short story writers and novelists, Brasch and Baxter as poets, Stead as a writer of both poetry and fiction. Pearson and Stead as academics are literary critics by profession, but for the others criticism was secondary to their role as writers. In a double sense of the phrase all five are "do it yourself" critics. Criticism is for them a kind of industrial by-product of their primary activity but there is also a tacit recognition that "building a literature" involves something more than just writing poems and stories.

Not all the significant criticism in New Zealand has come from such writer/critics (though much of the best of it has); nor are these five the only such active in the period (Allen Curnow, whose critical essays have not yet been collected, is the most outstanding other example).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless these books are representative enough of the critical discourse which has invented/grown up alongside "New Zealand Literature," to invite reflection on the "literature" as such, and on criticism as one of its constituents.

One of the strongest general impressions conveyed by these books is the intensely centripetal energies of New Zealand writing during the period in question. The diffuseness of earlier periods was rapidly concentrated and focused for several decades before the gyre began unwinding again in the 1970's. The smallness and intimacy of the literary community accentuated this effect,

as did the tendency for many of the writers to double as practitioners and commentators. Comparatively, so few writers were involved that all were acutely aware of each other.

The elaborate network of connections revealed in these books is symptomatic. For example, Brasch, Baxter, Pearson, and Stead all wrote pieces about Frank Sargeson; Baxter and Stead both wrote about Brasch; Pearson, Brasch, and Stead all wrote about Baxter. "New Zealand Literature" has the intimacy and complexity of the relations within an extended family, energized by shifting allegiances and conflicts. Criticism, in this context, becomes a kind of continuing conversation, returning over and over to the same nodes and obsessions, complicated and sometimes confused by clashes of temperament or conviction, but with everyone talking to (and often about) each other.

Confronted by more than a thousand pages of miscellaneous criticism it is impossible to attempt a comprehensive survey. I will confine myself to two questions. First, what is most distinctive and idiosyncratic about each writer's critical "voice"? Second, at which points does each writer make his most decisive and significant contribution to the discourse that is "New Zealand Literature," to the collective "conversation" within which it is located?

There is a particular aptness in entitling Frank Sargeson's critical essays *Conversation in a Train* in that it spans the whole length of his career to connect with the title of his first book, *Conversation with My Uncle and Other Sketches* (1936), and points to an element central to both his fiction and criticism — its grounding in the strategies and idioms of conversational speech.

This can be demonstrated by setting beside each other two exactly contemporary passages from the beginning of his career, 1935. The first is from the title story, "Conversation with My Uncle":

It's very difficult to have a talk with my uncle. It doesn't interest him to listen to what you've got to say any more than it interests him to look into people's faces in the street. But he likes to get going himself. He loves the sound of his own voice and he's all

the time waiting for you to finish so that he can get going himself.<sup>4</sup>

The title is ironic; it is the impossibility of conversing with the uncle that the narrator expresses. The second passage is from "Sherwood Anderson":

One of the things that Anderson understands is the value of repetition. He never explores the important incidents of a story at one hit. He will say enough to set your imagination working, and have you looking for the page where he will return to the incident and fill in the gaps that he has deliberately left you wondering over. (*Sargeson*, 15)

The "voice" in the two passages is recognizably the same (idiom, rhythm, sentence structure). Notice also that the second passage is in effect a commentary on the method of the first, especially as regards the point about repetition. "Anderson" and "my uncle" can be seen as antithetical figures both in ethical terms, and, by inference, in terms of the proper (or improper) relationship between writer and audience. Conversation is the appropriate analogue for literature because it is a two-way process, involving a consciousness of the hearer on the speaker's part, and the built-in expectation of response.

Here is another example, from 1947:

It would hardly make sense, I think, to talk about a typical New Zealand short story — although it would make quite good sense to talk about a typical Australian short story. I don't know though, that our lack of a strongly marked out tradition in short story writing has been altogether to our disadvantage. Not in recent years, anyhow. I don't know that we should otherwise have had these stories by A. P. Gaskell. It seems to me that the absence of the local type story has had quite a lot to do with their range and variety. Not, of course, that Mr Gaskell is an isolated phenomenon. As a colonial writer he must derive, directly or indirectly, from an older tradition. (*Sargeson*, 25)

It is not just the conversational idioms, the repeated references to "talk," the colloquial contractions, that make this resemble conversation. It is also the impression of an invisible but responsive interlocutor, as if every sentence, every step in the argument is in reaction to some imaginary prompting.

Paradoxically, Sargeson's commitment to the conversational model may well have reflected his isolation. Though he puts on a brave face in the passage quoted above, the conditions he alludes to there — the colonial situation, the lack of a local tradition, the absence of mediating types and conventions — were in fact oppressive in the extreme. Sargeson "talks" to break the silence, as if by positing the reader as a rhetorical strategy he could summon up the presence of a sympathetic audience.

A "difficult preliminary endeavour to discover his necessary bearings" (*Sargeson*, 36) is the central thrust of Sargeson's early criticism. It has two distinct aspects: first in the absence of an established local tradition, the search for a usable alternative tradition elsewhere; second, the struggle to reach an understanding of life in New Zealand, "how on each our social set-up came to be what it is" (*Sargeson*, 72) as he put it in one essay, which could be translated into fictional terms. The two aspects are found together in the Anderson essay in a sentence which might be described as the germ of much of his later criticism:

Anderson has lived his life in an environment similar to our own, raw, aesthetically hostile; yet by his courage and his sincerity he has become a first-rate artist. (*Sargeson*, 16)

Sargeson soon realized that, despite his deep absorption in and attachment to European culture and literature in particular, colonial displacement had rendered this tradition largely inaccessible for the purposes of practical adaptation. Models, if they were to be found anywhere, must be looked for in environments "similar to our own." New Zealand itself had little or nothing to offer. Katherine Mansfield had, in Sargeson's view, placed herself through expatriation in a vitiating "state of suspension," dangerously free "from any sense of social tradition" (*Sargeson*, 32). The harshness (leaving aside the question of the validity) of this point of view (Mansfield is relegated to the "feminine tradition," that is to say, "the *minor* tradition"!) perhaps indicates that her choice of bearings (expatriation) was for one of Sargeson's Eurocentric leanings a temptation to be stoutly resisted.

Sargeson found his usable analogues in other English-speaking post-colonial societies — America (Twain, Hemingway, Ander-

son), Australia (Henry Lawson), and South Africa (Olive Schreiner).

Sargeson's analysis of his social environment ("raw, aesthetically hostile") came to focus, almost to the point of obsession, on what he called "the puritan spirit" or "little Bethel" (*Sargeson*, 37-38). This theme especially preoccupied Sargeson in the late forties and early fifties, where it crops up in a number of essays about his (mostly younger) New Zealand contemporaries (Dan Davin, James Courage, Roderick Finlayson, Janet Frame), and also in some interesting comments on George Eliot and D. H. Lawrence where he traces the condition to its British roots. The following passage (one of many which could be cited) will suggest the almost hysterical tone this topic sometimes provoked in Sargeson:

I mean little Bethel; and the poisonous psychological and social effects that, hand in hand with nineteenth century industrial and finance capitalism, it has produced. . . . You don't escape little Bethel — its ramifications are infinitely more far-reaching than those of any Gestapo; and perhaps those who imagine they escape them do so least of all. (*Sargeson*, 47-48)

In "Writing a Novel" Sargeson talked of the liberating example and "great public influence" of Twain in America and Lawson in Australia (*Sargeson*, 59). Of the latter he wrote:

And Australian novelists read him, and decide to continue on from where he left off — or attempt a somewhat different line of their own, if they feel no further development is possible. Unfortunately, nothing comparable to Twain or Lawson has happened in New Zealand. (*Sargeson*, 59-60)

Fortunately for New Zealand, Sargeson's judgement was partial. Where he had faced a void, for those who came later Sargeson himself was a palpable presence.

In one respect, however, Sargeson's achievement did differ from that of Lawson or Twain. Unlike theirs, his was not a popular success, except among other writers. The bitter and denunciatory stance towards a hostile environment adopted in his fiction did not endear his work to a wide audience, and may, through its influence, have done much to establish an opposi-

tional posture as typical in New Zealand fiction for generations to come.

In Sargeson's later essays it is evident that he has become aware that he had inadvertently established a direction for later writers and was somewhat dubious about the advantages which had accrued. In a 1970 interview he quotes approvingly the remark of an "anonymous girl student" to the effect that there were "two tragedies in New Zealand literature — one was Katherine Mansfield and the other was Frank Sargeson" (*Sargeson*, 153). He suggests that both Mansfield and himself, "instead of opening up something for New Zealand . . . have tended to be constricting influences" (*Sargeson*, 154).

Sargeson especially objected to the notion that he was a "realist," and to the assumption of his paternity to a tribe of social realists. Perhaps it was this experience which lay behind two of the finest of his late essays, those on Henry Lawson and Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat*; in both he argues that the authors have inaccurately been thought of as realists. He said of Lawson:

It is time to forget about his being a "national" writer, certainly time to cease thinking of him as a "realist." (*Sargeson*, 142)

And of *Coal Flat*, a novel widely assumed to be the epitome of literal-minded "realism" or "naturalism," the Old Man (a Sargeson surrogate) says; "we begin to see the novel only when we have forgotten about the naturalism" (*Sargeson*, 188-89).

The most beneficial effect the publication of these essays could have would be to initiate a long overdue reevaluation of Sargeson's place in New Zealand writing. It is time to stop thinking of Sargeson as a "national" writer and as a "realist." Perhaps a hint could be taken from the Lawson essay, where Sargeson argues that "the 'realism' he is concerned with is to be found inside himself" (*Sargeson*, 121), and the hypothesis pursued that he was primarily a poetic and metaphysical writer whose inheritor in New Zealand fiction was less "the reality gang" (to borrow a phrase from Roger Horrocks) than the changeling Janet Frame.

Of the thirty selections in *Conversation in a Train* almost half were originally published during the twenty-year period (1947-

66) in the quarterly *Landfall* when its editor was Charles Brasch. A considerable proportion of Pearson's and Stead's books, also originally appeared in *Landfall*, and Baxter, too, was a contributor, though mostly of poems. The editing of *Landfall* in its "classic" period was probably the most substantial of Brasch's various contributions to New Zealand art and literature. Brasch was chiefly a poet, but otherwise most of his energies were absorbed by the journal, to which he contributed editorial notes in every issue. A selection of these notes forms a substantial part of *The Universal Dance*, which also includes a published lecture, *Present Company*, plus a number of unpublished lectures. While of some interest to students of Brasch's poetry, this unpublished material does little to alter my impression that Brasch's importance as a critic is almost wholly bound up with *Landfall*, and I will concentrate on this aspect of his work.

*Landfall* is a literary review. Its chief concern is with the arts, of which literature is one. But the arts do not exist in a void. They are products of the individual imagination and at the same time social phenomena; raised above the heat and dust of everyday life, and yet closely implicated in it. Any serious consideration of them is bound to involve an inquiry into their place in society and the social functions which they fulfil — what part they play in life, what use they are. (*Brasch*, 166)

So begins Brasch's editorial "Notes" to the first *Landfall* in March 1947. Much that was to characterize *Landfall* was present from the outset — its sobriety, seriousness, deliberateness, breadth of perspective, and sense of cultural mission. As editor Brasch was neither tentative nor self-effacing; he led (literally) from the front, using his notes not only to articulate journal policy but also to establish its tone.

The editorial manner came easily to Brasch, so that all his prose (and even some of his poetry) had an editorial timbre — measured and earnest in tone, given to weighty generalizations, somewhat pontifical both in praise and denunciation, relentlessly high-minded. Bill Manhire, in a suggestive essay on James K. Baxter, has argued that New Zealanders have a penchant for the editorial stance. To illustrate his general point, Manhire refers to the prominence accorded editorials in *Landfall*, and remarks: "I



have heard people observe that the best things about *Landfall* were Brasch's editorial notes, as if this proved some far more general and really rather satisfactory truth."<sup>5</sup> Manhire goes on to argue that Baxter, especially in his early poems, was liable to editorialize: "The poems pontificate, are rehearsals of what's already known."<sup>6</sup>

If this is true of Baxter, it is perhaps even truer of Brasch, especially in longer, discursive pieces such as "The Estate" (1957). For example:

Day after day I wake and wonder at waking  
 What makes one day of our lives distinct from another,  
 What is our sense of life unless in such difference.  
 We live in action only if action expresses  
 The inward being, the self-awareness that watches  
 With us and over us, calm voice, careful companion.  
 Action that silences it or tries to evade it  
 Or glosses its silence, must if not false be mechanical . . . <sup>7</sup>

From waking to wondering, from "I" to "We," from "is" to "must" — such transitions are common in Brasch's verse. It would not be difficult to write such passages out as prose and slip them without obvious dislocation into a *Landfall* editorial, just as it would be relatively easy to recast passages from a *Landfall* editorial into the loose blank verse of "The Estate."

Brasch and Sargeson, for all the difference between the "editorial" posture of the one and the "conversational" stance of the other, share a common perception of the artist's role in New Zealand. His task is to face, and to somehow make sense of, a "raw, aesthetically hostile" environment. Writing, for instance, about the religious paintings of Colin McCahon (in which traditional Christian subjects — annunciations, crucifixions, depositions, etc. — are depicted against New Zealand landscapes) Brasch argues that the paintings "reflect with painful accuracy a rawness and harshness in New Zealand life which are too easily passed by or glossed over" (*Brasch*, 90). Appropriately, Brasch goes on to compare McCahon's paintings to Sargeson's stories.

The "rawness" referred to by both Brasch and Sargeson implicitly assumes a "cooked" perspective; life in New Zealand is

measured by implicit comparison with the parent culture, established, ancient, rooted, civilized — the perspective is Eurocentric and *provincial*, a term used (in much the sense that I intend here) by both Brasch and Sargeson. “We are provincial,” Sargeson told an interviewer in 1970, “and if you’re provincial certain things happen” (*Sargeson*, 165). In his inaugural *Landfall* notes Brasch quoted E. H. McCormick to the effect that to be cut off from Europe “‘would be to condemn us to a sterile and ineffectual provincialism’” (*Brasch*, 168). While Brasch supported this view he also believed that provincialism “in the best sense” was the appropriate and necessary posture for New Zealand culture:

To think of this country as a *mere* province, a poverty-stricken outpost where nothing original can be expected to arise, is false and stultifying and the best way of ensuring that in fact nothing will arise. Every province has something to contribute to the centre . . . provided it does not imagine that it can be self-sufficient. (*Brasch*, 169)

In the words of W. H. Oliver, Brasch was “an evangelist, and *Landfall* . . . was his testament. Regularly, in each issue of the journal he propounded a cultural ideology that was eurocentric and elitist.”<sup>8</sup> But Brasch’s brand of provincialism, while committed to eradicating the “sterile and ineffectual provincialism” of a culture cut off from its roots, was liable to a sterility of its own. The pontifical didacticism of Brasch’s *Landfall* editorials has not worn well, but perhaps the worst features of his outlook show up in the lecture *Present Company*, a kind of aesthetic manifesto delivered in 1965 as Brasch was coming to the end of his editorial reign.

*Present Company* illustrates in extreme form Brasch’s tendency to use the masterworks of European culture as a stick to beat the raw and skinny buttocks of New Zealand life. Rhapsodic catalogues of masterpieces (“ . . . Dante and Piero and Donatello and Shakespeare and Monteverdi and Tolstoy and Wagner and Rodin . . . ”; there are references to more than a hundred artists within the first six pages) alternate with passages of contemptuous abuse of New Zealand (“this uneducated land — this land of uneducated hearts — with its barbarously ugly towns and cities

...” (*Brasch*, 20, 28). The worshipful adulation of European culture seems as craven and precious as the loathing of the provincial environment seems snobbish and hysterical.

It would be unfair to close my remarks on Brasch on such a sour note. The attitudes to which I am objecting were widespread among Brasch’s generation, although he may be said to have held them and expressed them in extreme form. There were also many positive consequences deriving from the cultural mission in which Brasch and his fellow writers were engaged. A mandarin and enfeebled colonialism was snuffed out; writing became accepted as a vocation as distinct from a civilized pastime. Higher standards in everything from typography to book reviewing as well as in poetry and fiction were established. A version of the Modern revolution in both its “creative” and “critical” manifestations was rapidly acclimatized in New Zealand. “New Zealand Literature” became a going concern and *Landfall* contributed to and was sustained by this process.

The immediate beneficiaries were a younger generation of writers — among whom can be numbered Pearson, Baxter, and Stead — who emerged during and after the Second World War, and who were seen by their elders as a kind of confirmation and validation of their collective enterprise. Writing in 1948 Brasch argued that his generation had provided “a starting point or a point from which to break away,” so that young writers

can turn in the wilderness of experience to one modest oasis of order, the first green shoots of a native tradition.<sup>9</sup>

As for the point of view of the young writers themselves, Janet Frame can be taken as representative. The discovery that there were authentic writers in her own country and journals such as *Landfall* to welcome her own early compositions (her story “Alison Hendry” appeared in the second issue under a pseudonym), altered her previous perception that “New Zealand literature” existed but was only to be spoken of “as if it were a shameful disease,” and gave her “a feeling of having been an orphan who discovers that her parents are alive and living in the most desirable home — pages of prose and poetry.”<sup>10</sup>

This provides a suggestive context within which to read the

criticism of Pearson, Baxter, and Stead. Distinct family resemblances between them relate to a common inheritance among the writers of the previous generation. Each of them adapted and modified this inheritance according to his lights. More particularly all three can be seen to have inherited and taken over the cluster of attitudes I have called provincial, and, becoming aware of certain distortions or occlusions, to have sought a variety of alternative ways out of the limitations of a provincial viewpoint.

## II

Bill Pearson belongs to the progeny of Sargeson. He was one of the signatories to the Sargeson birthday letter in *Landfall* in 1953 and later edited Sargeson's *Collected Stories*, 1964 (the introduction is included in the volume under review).

Pearson spent several years as a graduate student in London in the early 1950's, when he wrote his first major essay, "Fretful Sleepers," for *Landfall*. In 1960 he noted: "It was the difference in atmosphere between London and New Zealand that generated 'Fretful Sleepers' and I couldn't have written it in New Zealand."<sup>11</sup> The London perspective merely intensified the raw/cooked dichotomy inherent in the provincial outlook. "Fretful Sleepers" carries the subtitle, "A Sketch of New Zealand Behaviour and its Implications for the Artist," and, comparably with Sargeson's criticism, it is motivated by the desire to account for the social "set-up" in New Zealand and the conditions it imposes on the artist; even the terminology is the same:

We are the most puritan country in the world . . . We need an art to expose ourselves to ourselves, explain ourselves to ourselves, see ourselves in a perspective of time and place. But the New Zealander would shy from it because he is afraid to recognize himself. (*Sleepers*, 10, 12)

The oppositional stance, the negative tone, the sense of disabling deficiency, the resolute realism, the prophetic and functional view of art—all are characteristic of the provincial outlook. Perhaps one thing which distinguishes Pearson is his fear of the isolation attendant on the artist's alienation: "What I want to say is that if we continue to alienate ourselves from the people

we live amongst we will etiolate our art" (*Sleepers*, 26). The strain of trying to love what he hates twists and complicates the texture of Pearson's prose. It also helps explain his admiration for Sargeson whose fiction is stretched on the same rack.

Looking back at "Fretful Sleepers" now, I am struck most by its monoculturalism, the almost complete lack of reference to the Maori presence. This is striking partly because New Zealanders in general are so much more aware of a Maori perspective than thirty years ago, and partly because Pearson himself has done much towards the raising of Pakeha (white) consciousness; it is the dominant preoccupation of the latter part of his book. The occlusion of Maori culture in Pearson's early writing was in part inherited from a similar ethnocentrism among the older writers. The evolution of his own consciousness is tacitly embedded in the essay "The Recognition of Reality":

If it was a tenet of critical theory in the 'forties that New Zealanders had yet to come to terms with a landscape alien and unfriendly, it was overlooked that the pre-European Maori had in myth and settlement already come to terms with it. . . . The recognition (in something like its political sense) of another contiguous culture has not been easy for pakehas generally, let alone their writers. (*Sleepers*, 144-45)

Pearson pursued this recognition through a variety of topics. He explored attitudes to the Maori in both historical and contemporary New Zealand fiction; he made up for the imbalance of "Fretful Sleepers" by focusing his insights on Maori society in "Under Pressure to Integrate: the Situation of Maoris in 1962"; he was among the first to recognize the emergence of a significant Maori literature in English, in writers such as Hone Tuwhare, Witi Ihimaera, and Patricia Grace. This immersion in Maoritanga provided Pearson with his personal way out of the dilemmas outlined in "Fretful Sleepers," not least by making him aware that the "reality" imposed by a provincial perspective was largely a mythic construct, a mind-forged manacle from which it was possible to break free.

The shift in Pearson's consciousness has to do with what constitutes the "reality" it is the artist's task to "recognize" and communicate, not in how that task is conceived. Habitually in

his criticism Pearson looks beyond the literary text to the reality it is supposed to reflect, and his prime aesthetic principle is always the "truth," "accuracy," "honesty," "realism" with which this supposed reality is signified. Maurice Duggan's stories "don't seem to add up to a recreation of New Zealand"; Maurice Shadbolt's stories offer "a rather distorted reflection of New Zealand"; O. E. Middleton stories are praised because "the language acts as a faithful medium of transmission . . . At no stage does it come between the reader and the experience" (*Sleepers*, 45, 79, 73). In terms of criticism Pearson saw the need to change the words of the song, but he is still singing the same tune.

The family metaphor seems even more compellingly appropriate to describe the relations of James K. Baxter to his predecessors. The central thrust of Baxter's criticism was his attempt to argue against and break away (after initial acceptance) from what he considered to be a critical orthodoxy in New Zealand as represented in particular by the anthologies (and associated critical essays) of Allen Curnow and by *Landfall* as edited by Brasch.

I mentioned earlier how the appearance of a new generation of writers was taken as a sign of validation by older writers that their efforts were not in vain. The precocious emergence of the conspicuously gifted Baxter with publication of his first book, *Beyond the Palisade*, in 1944 (when he was eighteen) was the beginning of this process. It was seized upon by Allen Curnow in the introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45* (1945), the anthology which first gave poetry in New Zealand a coherent identity, as a kind of confirmation of the beginnings his collection substantiated. An admiring (though not uncritical) review by Curnow of Baxter's second book, *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness* in *Landfall* in 1948, confirmed Baxter's acceptance as favourite son and prime continuator of what his elders had started:

The way in which certain conceptions of his country haunt the background of Mr Baxter's poetry . . . encourages the belief that something of continuing effect was achieved by them [the older poets]: it is, of course, a shared achievement, which needed good

poets for its beginning, as it has waited for a good poet to point towards a consummation.<sup>12</sup>

For his part Baxter, as his early essays make clear, initially reciprocated the admiration and the assumption of continuity. Before the consummation devoutly wished by Curnow had occurred, however, Baxter had rebelled against the ideas of his elders, initiating a conflict which was to dominate New Zealand criticism (at least as regards poetry) for nearly two decades.

I have written elsewhere of the changing relationship between Curnow and Baxter as critics and poets.<sup>13</sup> Space here permits only summary reference to a complex literary conflict which involved many other writers as well as these two but which reached its sharpest focus in their exchanges. There were many elements at work in this conflict, some of which remained below the surface of the discourse itself and even below the consciousness of those participating in it. There were regional, generational, personal, and literary political dimensions as well as the aesthetic and critical terms in which the conflict ostensibly conducted.

A short list of publications which need to be taken into account to provide an adequate history of this debate would include *Landfall* during Brasch's editorship (1947-66); Allen Curnow's 1945 anthology, especially in its second edition of 1951; Baxter's "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry" (1951), the *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook*, edited by Louis Johnson between 1951 and 1964; Curnow's reviews of the first two issues of the *Yearbook* in the Auckland journal *Here & Now*; Baxter's 1954 lectures, *The Fire and the Anvil*; *The Oxford Anthology of New Zealand Verse*, edited by Chapman and Bennett (1956); a second anthology by Curnow, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, including a lengthy and controversial introduction (1960); a review of this work by Baxter, "The Kiwi and Mr Curnow"; C. K. Stead's lecture "For the Hulk of the World's Between" ((1961) — more of this later); Curnow's essay, "New Zealand Literature: The Case for a Working Definition" (1964); the anthology *Recent Poetry in New Zealand*, edited by Charles Doyle (1965); and, finally, Baxter's lecture "Aspects of Poetry in New Zealand" (1967). Emergence of a generation of poets

posing a radically new set of critical questions at the end of the sixties had the effect of hastening the end of a debate already flagging through the exhaustion of the protagonists. Baxter's main contributions to the debate — his lectures of 1951, 1954, and 1967 — form the backbone of McKay's selection.

Allen Curnow saw "certain conceptions of his country" in Baxter's poems as evidence of poetic continuity between generations. But it was precisely on these "certain conceptions" that Baxter departed from the older poets after a period of youthful acquiescence. Already in 1951 there are signs of impatience when he identifies with a group of younger poets which

seems in the main to have stepped free from the schizophrenia of the New Zealander who cannot distinguish himself from his grandfather. (*Baxter*, 4)

Like Pearson, Baxter was becoming restive under the limitations of a provincial outlook with its excessive deference to European models and values. Increasingly he came to see the older writers as constructing a myth:

The myth of insularity, however, by which New Zealand became an island in time and in human culture as well as in the visible Pacific, though cogent for the thirties, has proved something of a stilthouse against the tide of new development. (*Baxter*, 53)

Unfortunately for the clarity of the debate, Baxter came to transfer his impatience with certain attitudes towards New Zealand (identified with Curnow and Brasch) to an impatience with the regional referent itself, as when, reviewing Curnow's Penguin anthology of 1960, he identified himself with the poets who

seceded from the self-conscious New Zealandism of their immediate predecessors and began to write simply as people who happened to live in a given time and place. (*Baxter*, 196)

This argument was at least potentially in conflict with Baxter's own practice as a poet which was as dependent on the local or regional referent as that of either Curnow or Brasch. Before long the argument pitted the supposed "nationalism" of some writers as against the supposed "internationalism" or "universalism" of others, a terminology so misleading and confused with regard to



the practice of either party as to turn the debate into shadow-boxing.

Perhaps the main interest of Baxter's criticism now is that in his struggle to swerve away from the decisive influence of the "fathers" (especially Curnow, and to a lesser extent Brasch) he was driven to formulate new readings of New Zealand literature which, at best, are as persuasive as the orthodoxy he sought to subvert. Thus, to take one instance, "Symbolism in New Zealand Poetry" (one of the 1954 lectures) in its determination to deconstruct the authority of Curnow's criticism by exposing its claims to truth as a mythic construct, uncovers a vein of symbolism in New Zealand poets never before subjected to this kind of reading. At one point the essay's underlying strategy as a kind of inversion of Curnow almost breaks the surface. In his 1945 introduction Curnow wrote in one of the most influential and controversial passages in his criticism:

The idea that we are confronted by a natural time, a natural order, to which our presence in these islands is accidental, irrelevant . . . that idea, or misgiving, occurs so variously and so often, and in the work of New Zealand poets otherwise so different, that it suggests some common problem of the imagination.<sup>14</sup>

The second half of this sentence is unconsciously echoed by Baxter as he argues for the existence of a pattern of symbolism in New Zealand poetry by which he intends to subvert "the reality" of Curnow's thesis:

the symbols recur so frequently in the work of poets otherwise quite dissimilar in intention that one must conclude that some deep connection exists between these natural features and certain areas of spiritual experience. (*Baxter*, 61-62)

Thus both overtly and covertly Baxter as critic was caught up in a dialogue with his predecessors. His inescapable involvement in the discourse they had established is never so evident, nor so creative, as in his attempts to deny or evade it.

In an autobiographical essay of 1974, C. K. Stead revealingly chose to place himself historically by reference to both Allen Curnow and Frank Sargeson. During the war years, wrote Stead (who was born in 1932 and still at school in 1945), Curnow, and Sargeson

must have seemed like literary cartographers, each charting country that had never been charted before. (*Glass Case*, 260-61)

Stead can be observed here naming his ancestors, consciously locating himself within a literary continuum to which he would eventually contribute. It is appropriate that as a practitioner in both Curnow's medium and Sargeson's (and as a critic interested in both poetry and fiction) Stead should have provided himself with double "parentage" in this fashion. Younger by some years than Pearson and Baxter, and a decade later in starting his career, Stead might be depicted as a "younger son," decisively influenced and shaped by his elders but able more easily to win independence and strike out further in his own direction. Where older "siblings" were fixed in postures of repetition or reaction, Stead was able to pass through and beyond disputed ground, moving critical discourse into new territory, the site of later and other debates. The lines of this critical fiction are largely confirmed by *In the Glass Case*.

In arranging his essays for publication Stead has dispensed with a chronological ordering which would focus attention on the development of his critical thinking, in favour of a generic and author-centred principle of organization. Subtitled "Essays on New Zealand Literature," the book derives its structure from the literature which is its subject, an emphasis which accords the literature a substantive identity seldom assumed by earlier critics, and which confers a kind of canonical authority on the author's choice of topics. The presence or absence of an author implicitly becomes an act of choice, of discrimination. Thus, in the Fiction section, the emphasis on women writers (Mansfield, Frame, Ashton-Warner) and on figures outside or on the edge of the Sargeson inheritance (Duggan, Ballantyne, Morrieson), together with the avoidance of well-established figures closely allied with the Sargeson tradition (Gaskell, Pearson, Gee, for example), represents an act of critical discrimination as important and challenging as anything that the essays themselves actually say. On the other hand, the absence of a substantial essay on Sargeson ("Two Small Tributes" are included), and, in the poetry section, the absence of any but passing reference to Kendrick Smithyman,

are omissions from which it would probably be wrong to read critical inferences. In these cases the book fails to realize fully the authority its structure implies. In general, however, one can only admire the coherence which Stead has been able to discover in a diverse and casually accumulated body of work and the good judgement which enables him to invest his choices with enviable authority.

The reconstitution of Stead's essays into chronological sequence, however, while it runs counter to the logic of this particular selection, nevertheless throws interesting light on his development as a critic and contribution to the collective discourse.

All but one of the essays on poetry were written in or prior to 1972, while all but two of those on fiction were written subsequently. Most of Stead's early essays were reviews for *Landfall*, almost all on the poetry of the older generation, often occasioned by the publication of selected or collected editions. Stead was the thoroughbred among Brasch's stable of *Landfall* critics, a fortunate coincidence of critic and occasion.

In most of these essays the poetry and criticism of Allen Curnow is a constant point of reference. Brasch's poetry is described as not having "the dazzling intellectual quality of Curnow's" (*Glass Case*, 187). Baxter as a "discursive poet" is contrasted with Curnow as a poet of the "total Image" (*Glass Case*, 211). Mason is author of "obscure" poems, as distinct from Curnow who writes poems which are "difficult" (*Glass Case*, 180). Perhaps not surprisingly, Stead's essay on Curnow (1963) was his central critical statement to that stage:

*A Small Room With Large Windows* [a selection of Curnow's poetry] is a work of literature because it is the public record of a number of private occasions when a man was willing to face the reality of experience, and had the ability to embody its complexity in words. The "reality" must be, as Mr Curnow remarks in the introduction to his Penguin anthology, "local and special at the point where we pick up the traces." If it is "real" enough it will speak to all men, irrespective of place: it will be "universal." Mr Curnow's poems are an illustration of that simple principle, which stands at the centre of his criticism. (*Glass Case*, 190)

Here (as throughout the essay) Stead is an admiring expositor of Curnow's thought and practice, so it is not surprising to find him taking Curnow's side in the debate between Curnow and Baxter referred to earlier. He does this explicitly, for instance, in "For the Hulk of the World's Between" (1961, the title comes from a Curnow poem), a lecture contributed to a symposium about the effects of remoteness on New Zealand, shortly after Stead had returned from several years post-graduate study in England. Like Pearson's "Fretful Sleepers," Stead's essay was written out of first-hand exposure to the contrasts between New Zealand and England, experience which in both cases intensified a provincial sense of disability and strengthened affinities with the outlook of the previous generation. "It is the combination of remoteness and *insignificance* which New Zealand writers feel," writes Stead. The New Zealand writer is committed, he adds, "to a country he is frequently prompted to describe in terms of its limitations" (both the limitations and the commitment being characteristic of the provincial perspective) (*Glass Case*, 246, 247). Stead goes on explicitly to defend Curnow and the writers of his generation and outlook against the strictures of younger writers (led by Baxter) whom he sees (not very convincingly) as vitiated by a facile optimism.

However, a more independent shift in Stead's critical stance began to show up in the mid-sixties. The dutiful defender of his elders struck out on his own line in a way that somewhat parallels Baxter's development a decade earlier. While Stead has never wavered in his admiration for Curnow's verse he came increasingly to question Curnow's judgement of some of his contemporaries, notably Brasch, Glover, and Fairburn. Invited to review a selection of Glover's work in *Landfall* in 1964, Stead declined when his review "insisted on taking a negative turn" (*Glass Case*, 207). But in 1966 when confronted with Fairburn's *Collected Poems*, Stead took the bull by the horns and gave full and honest expression to his negative views. It was tantamount to a declaration of independence from his elders. For instance, Stead takes issue with Curnow's concept of an "historical divide" in New Zealand literature separating the period beginning in the 1920's from the decades which preceded it:

What does this "historical divide" signify if Katherine Mansfield, for example, stands on the far side of it, and Fairburn on the near? (*Glass Case*, 162)

Stead depicts this as, in effect, an historical myth designed to privilege the achievement of Curnow's contemporaries. This depiction as "myth" of ideas presented as "facts" was precisely the strategy Baxter had adopted in his conflict with his elders.

Subsequently Stead's attention as a critic of poetry moved away from the work of his elders towards certain poets of his own generation (Baxter, Fleur Adcock, Hubert Witheford) and eventually to poets younger than himself (for example, David Mitchell) who began to emerge at the end of the sixties. Stead felt an affinity with these younger writers (notably Ian Wedde) because of their interest in Modernism (especially as it had evolved in America through Pound and William Carlos Williams) as distinct from the British influences (Yeats, Auden, Dylan Thomas) which had prevailed in New Zealand previously. This interest eventually culminated in Stead's most substantial theoretical statement, the 1979 lecture "From Wystan to Carlos — Modern and Modernism in Recent New Zealand Poetry," in which for the first time he explicitly articulated a critical position distinct from Allen Curnow's.

In this essay Stead differentiates between a poetic which he calls "Modern" (and identifies with Curnow, and, behind him, W. H. Auden) and "Modernism" (identified with Wedde, and, behind him, William Carlos Williams). The essence of the argument is that the "Modern" emphasizes the "truth" or "reality" beyond the poem of which the poem is "vehicle," as distinct from the "Modernist" emphasis on

the poem as imaginative act rather than as vehicle . . . language as the material of an art not the servant of an idea. (*Glass Case*, 145)

From this new perspective Stead was able to argue that behind Curnow's and Baxter's differences about "content" lay an essentially similar "Modern" poetic which allowed for a separation of "form" and "content," a distinction not conceded by "Modernism." At the same time Stead recognized that both poets in their

later work had begun to move towards the "Modernist" position.

Stead's essay has, in recent years, become the focus of critical debate much as Curnow's criticism was twenty years ago. He has been instrumental in shifting the terms of discourse to new ground, a process which has re-opened the field to fresh investigation on the part of younger critics.

"From Wystan to Carlos" confirmed a shift in Stead's critical thinking which began in the mid-sixties. The first substantial evidence of this shift can be found in the fiction essays on which he concentrated in the seventies. Fiction in New Zealand has never generated as much critical debate as poetry. No comparable "conversation," involving statement and counter-statement, challenge and response, has occurred. Attention has focused on Sargeson's achievement of a so-called "national" style, and the development after him of a convention of critical realism. While in practice various alternatives to realist conventions have been explored (notably by Frame, Maurice Duggan, and Ronald Hugh Morrieson), these have not generated a comparable discourse about fiction to that stimulated by poetry.

In these circumstances Stead's relatively belated entry into the field of fiction criticism has been especially welcome, though lack of a vigorous existent discourse to provide bearings has made his contribution less decisive and coherent than his essays on poetry. His fiction essays are more catholic, more heterogeneous in method, less centripetal in their concerns, more subject to the vagaries of personal taste. One explanation for this diffuseness is that there is no figure comparable to Curnow in relation to whose theory and practice other writers are placed. Sargeson might have provided such a point of reference, but Stead is manifestly uninterested in the mode of critical realism which derives from Sargeson and there is no substantial discussion of Sargeson himself.

If there is a focus to this section it is in a variety of fictional alternatives to this mainstream tradition, such as are represented by Mansfield, Frame, Ashton-Warner, Duggan, Ballantyne, and Morrieson. Virtually the only thing this disparate group has in common is perhaps their avoidance of the critical realism associated (however inappropriately) with Sargeson's legacy. Some-

thing which all these writers do have in common, however, and which Stead consistently highlights in his essays, is their foregrounding of language and *style* as distinct from the functional stylelessness presumed to approximate a mimetic fidelity to social reality. It might be argued, in fact, that it is precisely their concern with style which makes of this group (excluding Mansfield of course) the "true" inheritors of Sargeson's legacy. What Stead says of Duggan might well be applied to them all:

Duggan was not content to make language either a mirror, or a vehicle for ideas . . . If he worked at something we call "style" . . . it was because through style, and through it alone, was to be transmitted something approaching the fulness of the writer's sense of life. (*Glass Case*, 121)

There is a clear parallel here with Stead's mature ideas about poetry. In poetry the liberation from a "Modern" preoccupation with verse as a vehicle for "reality"; in fiction the liberation from the limitations associated with "realism" — these are common impulses, and in them can be discovered the crux of Stead's aesthetic position. This refocusing of attention on the literariness of poetry and fiction involves also, I believe, a liberation from the provincial legacy of an art compelled to attend to the "raw, aesthetically hostile environment" in order to become established. The evolution in Stead's criticism from the provincial perspective in which he started out can stand as representative for a general development in the literature itself.

Stead, Baxter, and Pearson (and behind them Sargeson, and Brasch, more distantly) all, in their varying ways, point towards the post-provincial "now" we occupy. To read these books in 1985 is to be plunged, somewhat disconcertingly, back into the past (alternately remote-seeming and too close for comfort) out of which "our features, / Our opinions are made." The piece of literary history they collectively document is, for New Zealanders, a part at least of "our destiny / No matter what else may happen to us."

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John Ashbery, *Houseboat Days* (New York: Viking, 1977), p. 66.
- <sup>2</sup> Bill Pearson, *Fretful Sleepers and Other Essays* (Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974); Frank McKay (ed.), *James K. Baxter as Critic: a Selection from his Literary Criticism* (Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978); J. L. Watson (ed.), *The Universal Dance: a Selection from the Critical Prose Writings of Charles Brasch* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 1981); C. K. Stead, *In the Glass Case: Essays on New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1981); Kevin Cunningham (ed.), *Conversation in a Train and Other Critical Writing by Frank Sargeson* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1983). Subsequent references to these works will be given in the body of my text, where the following abbreviations will be used: *Fretful Sleepers* . . . : *Sleepers*; *James K. Baxter* . . . : *Baxter*; *The Universal Dance* . . . : *Brasch*; *In the Glass Case* . . . : *Glass Case*; and *Conversation in a Train* . . . : *Sargeson*.
- <sup>3</sup> I am currently preparing an edition of Curnow's critical writing for publication by Auckland University Press under the title *Look Back Harder*.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Stories of Frank Sargeson* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1973), p. 9.
- <sup>5</sup> *Islands* 31/32 (June 1981), 106.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Brasch, *Collected Poems*, ed. Alan Roddick (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 64.
- <sup>8</sup> W. H. Oliver, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 431.
- <sup>9</sup> *Landfall*, December 1948, p. 244.
- <sup>10</sup> Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table* (Auckland: Hutchinson, 1984), pp. 70-71.
- <sup>11</sup> *Landfall* 53 (March 1960), 64.
- <sup>12</sup> Allen Curnow, review of *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness*, *Landfall* 7, September 1948, p. 233.
- <sup>13</sup> "The trick of standing upright": Allen Curnow and James K. Baxter to be published in *World Literature Written in English*, Spring 1985.
- <sup>14</sup> *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*, ed. Allen Curnow (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1945), p. 52.