

Cultural Ambivalence: Ngaio Marsh's New Zealand Detective Fiction

Carole Acheson

The New Zealand author Ngaio Marsh is one of the small number of detective writers whose novels are as popular today as they were when she began writing in the nineteen-thirties, at the height of the fashion for detective stories. With her English contemporaries Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, she has earned a permanent place in the history of detective fiction, and is certainly New Zealand's best known writer. In New Zealand, however, her international reputation is something of an embarrassment. No young country, earnestly struggling to establish a national literature, wants to be known for its detective, rather than its serious, fiction. On the other hand, Marsh's work in the New Zealand theater has been eminently respectable, and she was officially rewarded by having a theater named after her, and an honorary doctorate and the title Dame Commander of the British Empire conferred on her.¹

Marsh was well aware that her dual career was rather a liability in New Zealand. She commented in her autobiography in 1966:

If I have any indigenous publicity value it is, I think, for work in the theatre rather than for detective fiction Intellectual New Zealand friends tactfully avoid all mention of my published work and if they like me, do so, I cannot but feel, in spite of it.²

The truth of this statement is borne out by a review of the autobiography in one of New Zealand's leading journals. It is a wonderfully revealing piece which says very little about the quality of the book, but actually amounts to a carping school report on how poorly Marsh measures up as a New Zealand writer:

She has always contrived to write about New Zealand as though she were a visitor, while believing she was a native. She has usually been conscious of writing for an overseas audience, but this is not the whole explanation. Her people were English gentry, or upper middle class Her parents may not even have thought of themselves as exiles (after all they gave their daughter a Maori name), but clearly remained English—which was not too hard to do in Christchurch. Ngaio Marsh was an only child, and shy. It is understandable that when she came to write she could report ordinary New Zealand speech and attitudes with rather less authority than cockney. . . .

It is doubtful whether any New Zealand writer as ambitious as she was could now bring himself to write detective stories, even as a means of making a living³

The charge that Marsh wrote like an Englishwoman rather than a New Zealander is, of course, part of a far more important and complex issue, that of New Zealand's cultural relationship to England.

Historically New Zealand's ties with England have been of the utmost importance. British sovereignty over the islands was proclaimed in 1840, and organized colonization from England began at the same time. Marsh's native city of Christchurch was a planned Church of England settlement. Its first immigrants, in 1850, were a selected cross-section of English society, dominated, as in England, by the gentry. When Marsh was born in 1899 almost half the city's population had come from overseas, mainly from England. This included her father, who emigrated after the decline of his family fortunes and found that a gentleman's education had not equipped him with any of the skills valued in a young colony; he became a bank clerk. Marsh's New Zealand-born mother came from a similar background. The family was cultivated but poor, and like most of their generation, took it for granted that New Zealand was proud to be part of the Empire, that England was Home, and that the colony's predominant culture was British.

In many ways New Zealand's identification with British culture, causes and institutions remains as strong as ever. There is no republican murmur, no movement to sever the connection with Queen and Commonwealth. During the 1982 Falklands war, the government's loan of a warship to Britain aroused surprisingly little controversy; once again, the sporadic debate over whether New Zealand should become involved in the wars of a parent country 12,000 miles away proved to be largely academic. Although immigration is now strictly limited, British immigrants still outnumber those of other nations. It is commonly assumed by these immigrants, with some justification, that what they will find in New Zealand is a Britain of the South Seas, warmer, wealthier and unspoilt, certainly more familiar and less threatening than the climatic extremes and North American lifestyle of Canada or Australia.

At the same time New Zealand has been increasingly concerned to establish a separate national identity and to define ways in which New Zealanders differ from the English. The native Maori culture is often used to lend a touch of Polynesian distinctiveness, but this is largely decorative, a matter of songs and crafts for tourists, Maori symbols for the national airline, a war chant acted out before an important rugby game. There is no question of the *pakehas* (Europeans) seriously adapting themselves to Maori culture; quite the reverse. However, New Zealand's colonial history has provided a more significant source of cultural differences from England, derived primarily from the country's origin as a pioneer society and its consequent pride in being egalitarian, in having rejected the English class system.

Some pervasive national images have emerged from this colonial

background. The stereotypical New Zealander is a sheep farmer; it is important to remember that New Zealand has only 3 million people, but over 60 million sheep. He is a practical, down-to-earth man, living in moderate affluence on a remote sheep station, who treats everyone as his equal and despises affectation and pretentiousness. His suburban counterpart (for most New Zealanders live in cities) comes as close to the back-country life as he can. Regardless of his education or occupation, he spends his spare time on do-it-yourself projects or out in the bush, hunting and fishing. His wife is a model of domestic efficiency, endlessly baking, preserving fruit and making her own clothes. Long before self-sufficiency became fashionable New Zealanders were accustomed to managing on their own, taking pride in the idea of "Kiwi ingenuity":⁴ a New Zealander will somehow find a way to achieve a practical object. It gives him a pleasant sense of moral superiority to observe that the average Briton falls short of this standard of general expertise, and will even go so far as to call in a tradesman; nor is it unknown for a tradesman to explain to his would-be customer how he can do it himself. Self-reliance and practical skills, those attributes most important to a pioneer settlement, are still very highly valued.

The antithesis of this essentially physical, masculine world is the very much smaller one of artists and intellectuals. National pride supports the idea of universities, music, literature, painting, theatre and so on in principle; in practice these things are often regarded as suspiciously effeminate and elitist. Derisive labels like "arty type" and "effete intellectual" are readily attached to those who patently find the mock-pioneer life irrelevant and unnecessary. The pressure to conform conduces to a double standard of values: whatever his ambitions or achievements, a New Zealander is encouraged to maintain the fiction that he is still just an "ordinary bloke," especially in his speech, dress and social habits. The situation is exacerbated by the smallness of New Zealand's population, for the country cannot begin to offer either the specialized education or the wide career opportunities available overseas. Talented, ambitious New Zealanders, especially those in the performing arts, inevitably move on to Sydney, New York or London, leaving behind them a bland conformity to the national values.

The egalitarian view that every New Zealander is as good as his neighbor naturally extends to the view that New Zealand is as good as any other country, particularly Britain. A nagging doubt that this will be less self-evident to visitors prompts the continual question, "What do you think of New Zealand?" There is only one socially acceptable answer and it must be given quickly and convincingly. Beneath the surface of national pride is a constant desire for recognition and approval of New Zealand's progress as an independent young country. In such a context Marsh's unashamedly middle-class, English, artistic background and outspoken

comments on her country's shortcomings could hardly fail to arouse hostility. What was acceptable earlier in the century, when New Zealand's cultural debt to Britain was taken for granted, now grates on nationalistic and egalitarian nerves.

Ngaio Marsh, after leaving school, had a varied career. She was an art student, an actress with a touring English theater company, and wrote articles for local newspapers. In 1928 she accepted an invitation from English friends (who appear in *Surfeit of Lampreys* as the aristocratic Lamprey family) and sailed for London. She stayed in London for five years, working as an interior decorator, sending articles back to New Zealand, and writing her first detective novel. Recalled to New Zealand by her mother's illness she inevitably found herself "looking at my own country, however superficially, from the outside, in."⁵

Much of what she saw now compared unfavorably with England. She found New Zealand crude, and reacted violently against New Zealand English, which she saw as a direct expression of a people simultaneously "complacent" and "uncertain":

Our voices and our manners have deteriorated to such an extent that many fourth generation New Zealanders have a strong, muddled instinct that prompts them to regard any kind of speech but the indigenous snarl as effeminate and even the most rudimentary forms of courtesy as gush. It is good honest kiwi to kick the English language into the gutter⁶

She went on to reflect on the broader issues of New Zealand's relationship to Britain, and the consequences for New Zealand arts:

The New Zealand-Great Britain ambience [sic] is essentially a family affair. It has all the characteristics: the taking-as-read attitude to British ties and the spontaneous outbursts of irritation: the progression in the colonies from original involvement to casual acceptance and from there to adolescent rebellion with an awareness of the bond that exacerbates rather than reduces the conflict

The Arts in New Zealand, particularly the art of writing, have followed much the same pattern of development . . . the writers have approached problems of their advance to national maturity with extreme self-consciousness They are acutely sensitive to their position, greatly concerned, and rightly so, with the emergency [sic] of an indigenous genre but often disinclined to look beyond it for wider standards of comparison.⁷

Marsh was also very conscious, on her return, of the condition of the Maoris. Although there is no color bar in New Zealand of the kind she was horrified to find in South Africa, it was clear to her that the Maoris were suffering from being caught between two cultures: their own, of which they had to reject whatever the white missionaries and settlers found objectionable; and European culture, which they were expected to assimilate quickly in exchange.

Marsh continued to identify herself as a New Zealander but there was now no question that England was her cultural home. She returned to Europe for a year in 1937 and was then isolated in New Zealand until 1950 by the war and by the need to care for her elderly father. It was during these years in Christchurch that, deprived of the London theater and dismayed by the standard of drama in her own country, she began to direct university students in productions of Shakespeare's plays. This was the start of a lengthy and distinguished career in the theater. Meanwhile her first novel, published in England in 1934, was sufficiently well received for her to continue writing.⁸ Her love for the theater was strong enough to compete with the lure of England, and after 1950 her life fell into a pattern: "So many years in New Zealand, so many in England or abroad. Half the year in the theatre and half writing detective fiction."⁹

Marsh's first four detective novels, published between 1934 and 1936, closely follow the conventions established by such English writers of the thirties as Marjorie Allingham and Dorothy Sayers. All four are murder mysteries set in England and solved by a gentleman detective called Roderick Alleyn. Alleyn differs from other gentlemen detectives of the period in that crime is not his hobby, but his job: he is a professional policeman working at Scotland Yard. His impeccable social background—titled parents, Oxford and the Foreign Office—is an asset in disarming middle and upper-class suspects, but causes some personal conflict: detection is a duty, not a game, and it is not always possible for him to keep his hands clean or indulge private scruples. He conceals his underlying sensitivity behind a fashionably flippant manner, especially with his "Watson," journalist Nigel Bathgate. The novels are written mainly from Nigel's point of view, and the emphasis is primarily on the presentation of evidence and the process of deduction.

The conventions of the genre, and especially the concept of the gentleman detective, must initially have seemed to Marsh to be incompatible with a New Zealand setting. Other detective writers had used foreign settings, such as Paris, the Riviera or the Nile, but these were all well-known resorts for the smart and wealthy, and were endowed with a glamour the reader could enjoy vicariously along with his problem-solving. In any case, the sketchily-drawn foreign background was rarely more than a device to bring together and isolate the usual group of suspects: it was all treated lightly as part of the detection game. But in *Vintage Murder* (1937),¹⁰ Marsh's fifth novel and her first set in New Zealand, Marsh takes the setting very seriously indeed, and incorporates into the murder mystery not only her love for the landscape but a good deal of social comment about her fellow countrymen and the ambivalent relationship between Englishmen and New Zealanders.

Alleyn comes to New Zealand on holiday and shares a train journey with a touring English theater company; the actors later invite him to a

birthday party where the host is murdered. When the New Zealand police learn Alleyn's identity, and that he is acquainted with all the suspects, they ask him to work with them on the case. The procedure of investigation is familiar but Alleyn soon realizes that he must consider the crime with reference to English, white New Zealand and Maori values. Because Alleyn is English, and New Zealand is presented from his point of view, Marsh obviously makes the background more accessible to the non-New Zealand reader. But the theme of Alleyn as outsider, a stranger to both the theater group and the New Zealanders, is an integral part of the novel. Alleyn's changing relationship to the landscape also plays an important role in the development and resolution of the plot.

Initially, the landscape serves to emphasize the contrast between the enclosed world of the touring company, interested only in the next theater, and Alleyn's consciousness of being on his own in a new country:

He felt very much an outsider. There was something about these people that gave them a united front. Their very manner in this night train, rattling and roaring through a strange country, was different from the manner of other travellers

A violent jerk awoke him. The train had slowed down. He wiped the misty window-pane, shaded his eyes, and tried to look out into this new country. The moon had risen. He saw aching hills, stumps of burnt trees, some misty white flowering scrub, and a lonely road. It was very remote and strange (*VM*, p. 10).

After the murder Alleyn finds himself caught between the English suspects, who try to enlist his support, and the New Zealand police. Alleyn's Scotland Yard background makes his new colleague defensive: "'I suppose,' thought Alleyn, 'I must give him an inferiority complex. He feels I'm criticising him all the time. If I don't remember to be frightfully hearty and friendly, he'll think I'm all English and superior' " (*VM*, p. 64).

Nonetheless, Alleyn finds the New Zealanders pleasantly straightforward compared with the actors' self-conscious sophistication and continual role-playing. Convinced that the leading lady, Carolyn Dacres, is withholding vital evidence, Alleyn deliberately takes her away from the theater and out into the reality of the forest. At first Carolyn is "an incongruous figure in her smart dress" (*VM*, p. 159), but then she begins to respond to the quiet and beauty of the scene: "He saw her hands move up and pull off the black London hat When he reached her side he saw that she had been crying, . . . he knew that at last the sprightly, vague, delightfully artificial Carolyn had failed her, and that she was left alone with herself and with him" (*VM*, p. 160). Leaving her time to think, Alleyn walks further into the forest and away from the *pakeha* world, becoming conscious of the alien giant trees and dense tree ferns as a living force, part of the old, primal New Zealand before the coming of the Europeans. Alleyn laughs at himself for mentally "repopulating the bush with wandering Maoris" (*VM*, p. 167), but the experience leaves him with a heightened

sensitivity to Maori culture and values, and is an important aspect of the novel's Maori theme.

With the help of a Maori doctor, Rangi Te Pokiha, Alleyn has bought a greenstone tiki, a small native carving of a human figure usually worn as a pendant. The tiki is not merely an ornament but in Maori mythology the namesake and symbol of Tiki, the first man and father of mankind. By extension it also "represents a human embryo and is the symbol of fecundity" (*VM*, p. 41). On an impulse Alleyn gives the tiki to Carolyn at her birthday party, and it becomes the object of facetiousness and coarse remarks from many of the actors. Alleyn, ashamed of his fellow Englishmen, apologizes to Te Pokiha: "'Oh,' said Te Pokiha pleasantly, 'it seems amusing to them naturally.' He paused and added: 'So may my great grandparents have laughed over the first crucifix they saw'" (*VM*, p. 41). The tiki is later found at the place where the murderer set his trap, and there is a hint that Te Pokiha could have committed murder to avenge the insult to the tiki. This solution seems less fantastic as it becomes clear that Te Pokiha is immensely proud of his Maori heritage, and in spite of his own Oxford education feels strongly about the effects of European civilization on his people. He tells Alleyn bitterly: "We have become a side-show in the tourist bureau—our dances—our art—everything" (*VM*, p. 198). Te Pokiha himself comments that the tiki is revenged. Alleyn is sympathetic: through Te Pokiha he comes to appreciate not only the problems of the modern Maori, but the symbolic value of the tiki, which seems to have "a kind of dark wet smell like the native forest" (*VM*, p. 144). By the end of the novel, although Alleyn still finds New Zealanders "very anxious that one should admire their country, rather on the defensive about it" (*VM*, p. 222), he has come to understand and share in the Maori affinity to the land, and has "fallen in love . . . with the country altogether" (*VM*, p. 222).

Vintage Murder is a far more ambitious detective novel than anything Marsh had attempted before, and clearly incorporates many of her responses as a returned expatriate, particularly her feeling for the land, sympathy for the Maoris, and dislike of defensive and self-limiting colonial attitudes. The problem of combining a serious commentary on New Zealand with the stylized format of a detective story is overcome largely by changing the character of Alleyn, and making him the central consciousness of the novel. His former flippancy is dropped: he is now serious and thoughtful, a sensitive observer with a police-trained eye for detail. His personal desire to understand New Zealand and its people is given impetus by the murder investigation, and the usual tension between detective and suspects gains additional depth and interest by the conflict of three cultures. As a result the New Zealand setting is no mere travelogue but a significant and well-integrated element of the story.

Marsh returns to New Zealand in her tenth novel, *Surfeit of Lampreys*

(1941),¹¹ a curious blend of detective story, gothic thriller and comedy of manners. The opening chapters, describing the eccentric upper-class English Lamprey family in New Zealand, and later their New Zealand friend Roberta Grey's arrival in London to stay with them, are largely autobiographical. Much of the humor of the book is derived from practical Roberta's amazement at the Lampreys' total lack of common sense. The Lampreys have come to New Zealand in the vague belief that this will solve their financial problems, and have tried hard, according to their lights, to fit into the New Zealand way of life. Henry tells Roberta about his father's attempt to muster sheep:

"Poor Daddy! When we first got here he became so excessively New Zealand. I believe he used sheep-dip on his hair and shall I ever forget him with the dogs! He bought four, I think they cost twenty pounds each. He used to sit on his horse and whistle so unsuccessfully that even the horse couldn't have heard him and the dogs all lay down and went to sleep and the sheep stood in serried ranks and gazed at him in mild surprise. Then he tried swearing and screaming but he lost his voice in less than no time" (*SL*, p. 18).

While Roberta marvels at the Lampreys' incompetence, she finds their charm and frivolity, the antithesis of colonial earnestness, deeply attractive. She also realizes that whereas she thinks of New Zealand as an extension of England, the English Lampreys find New Zealand an alien place. Henry comments, " 'But you're only once removed from England, and we're not New Zealand at all. Strangers in a strange land and making pretty considerable fools of ourselves' " (*SL*, p. 17). Soon the Lampreys give up and return to their own country.

When Roberta arrives in England the Lampreys welcome her with a Maori war dance on the wharf, and, as she walks off the ship, a parody of New Zealand self-consciousness: " 'Tell me,' said Henry solemnly, 'what do you think of dear old England?' " (*SL*, p. 29). Nonetheless Roberta is conscious of a gulf between their London sophistication and her rural New Zealand background. The murder of Lord Charles Lamprey's brother, in circumstances which suggest that one of the family must be responsible, forces Roberta to reappraise the Lampreys. She retains her affection for them, but from a different point of view, as she matures from being a shy colonial impressed by the Lampreys' English urbanity and elegance, into a resolute young woman who perceives how her level-headedness and practicality can assist her friends. She finds herself discussing the Lampreys with Alleyn, as one adult to another, and explaining how they behave like children. She also reflects drily on their willingness to accept help from her: "Roberta knew that the Lampreys, persuaded perhaps by dim ideas of pioneering hardihood, were inclined think of all colonials as less sheltered and more inured to nervous strain, than their English contemporaries" (*SL*, p. 241). Roberta's changing view of the Lampreys is

a reflection of the changing relationship between the maturing colony and the mother country, and the novel offers a gentle satire on the expectations with which the English and New Zealanders regard each other. It is a theme which Marsh develops to its fullest and funniest extent three years later in *Colour Scheme* (1943).¹²

Colour Scheme, set in wartime New Zealand, is essentially a comedy of manners in which the murder/detective element serves only to provide a structure and a climax. The leading characters are an English family, the Claires, who like the Lampreys have emigrated to New Zealand for vague and misguided reasons: “[Colonel and Mrs. Claire] had come to New Zealand from India They had told their friends in gentle voices that they wanted to get away from the conventions of retired army life in India. They had spoken blithely, for they took an uncritical delight in such phrases, of wide-open spaces . . .” (CS, p. 14). The Claires are hopeless immigrants. They work hard at running a spa resort but are incompetent and unbusinesslike. Clinging to Edwardian standards of middle-class gentility, they turn away socially unacceptable customers as often as possible; unsurprisingly, the spa has financial problems. Although Colonel and Mrs. Claire continue to live in an old-fashioned world of their own, their two children have had to cope with growing up in New Zealand, and neither has found a successful compromise between parental and colonial expectations. Barbara, shy and awkward, has chosen to live in middle-class English isolation with her parents; her brother Simon “had attended the Harpoon State schools and, influenced . . . by his schoolfellows’ suspicion of ‘pommy’ [English] settlers, had become truculently colonial, somewhat introverted and defiantly uncouth” (CS, p. 14).

Simon’s New Zealand manners grate on all the family, but most severely on his irritable and outspoken uncle, Dr. Ackrington, who has retired from practising medicine in London. Marsh’s theater-trained ear for dialogue is at its best in presenting the contrast between Dr. Ackrington’s fluent, formal English, Simon’s aggressive New Zealand slang, and the easygoing colloquialism of a particularly vulgar guest, Maurice Questing. When the family suspects Questing of attempted murder, his goodnatured colonial brashness is more than equal to an atmosphere of chilly English disapproval followed by an incensed accusation from Dr. Ackrington. “‘Now, now, now,’ Questing chided, ‘what’s biting you? You come out on the verandah, Doc, and we’ll have a little chat.’” (CS, p. 69).

The family’s attempt to communicate with Questing, on this or any other issue, such as his proposal of marriage to Barbara, is doomed to failure because they literally do not speak the same language. Colonel Claire and Dr. Ackrington naturally assume an air of authority because that is what their middle-class English education trained them to do. They

know their place in the English hierarchy and they know that Questing, judged on their scale of social and moral values, is infinitely beneath them; they also presume that this will be as obvious to Questing as it is to themselves. He is all too clearly, from their point of view, the sort of man who must expect to be berated in public by Dr. Ackrington. But the English class system means nothing to Questing, who is a successful businessman: by his standards the Claires are simply old-fashioned and foolish. With unshaken confidence in his own social and business abilities, he speaks a worldly-wise idiom composed of English, American and colonial clichés, which does indeed carry him through situations which leave the Claires speechless.

The one character who sympathizes with Questing is another colonial guest, Dikon Bell. Dikon, a cultivated and well-travelled New Zealander, is in a position to appreciate the cultural gap between Questing and the Claires. However, he has his own problems; his recent return to New Zealand has forced him into the expatriate's dilemma of feeling torn between two countries: "Dikon, who longed to be in London, recognized in himself an affinity with this indifferent and profound country, and resented its attraction" (CS, p. 39). Dikon has an equal affinity with his English heritage, especially the theater; this brings him into conflict with Simon, who has adopted the New Zealand stance of finding the arts effeminate. He tells Dikon:

"You've been getting round with theatrical sissies for so long you don't know a real man when you see one."

"My dear Claire," said Dikon with some heat, "may I suggest that speaking in the back of your throat and going out of your way to insult everybody that doesn't is not the sole evidence of virility" (CS, p. 99).

Simon goes on to define a "sissy" as "just a chap who's kind of weak. You know, too tired to take the trouble. English!" (CS, p. 99). He is unimpressed by the Englishmen who come to stay at the spa. Their leader is the aged, patrician Rua Te Kahu: the affected, pedantic Septimus Falls, who is actually Alleyn working undercover as a wartime intelligence agent; and Dikon's employer, the distinguished actor Geoffrey Gaunt. Beneath his superficial charm, Gaunt is insufferably arrogant and superior. At one point, when he feels he has been treated with less deference than his international fame deserves, he sneers, "As far as I'm concerned this country doesn't exist" (CS, p. 181).

A different cultural point of view is provided by the large cast of Maori characters. In *Vintage Murder* Marsh was anxious to demonstrate the lack of racial discrimination in New Zealand. Perhaps feeling that she had bent over backwards with the scarcely typical Oxonian Dr. Te Pokiha, in *Colour Scheme* she presents a cross-section of the Maori community living near the spa: "Rua . . . had witnessed the full impact of the white man's

ways upon a people living in a stone age. He had in turn been warrior, editor of a native newspaper, and member of Parliament. In his extreme age he had sloughed his European habits and returned to his own sub-tribe ... (CS, p. 34). Rua is intensely loyal to Britain and regrets that he is too old to fight in the war; most of the tribe's young men are overseas, serving in the Maori Battalion.¹³ At the same time he is well aware of the problems caused by the British colonization of his people: "'Our people,' Rua said, 'stand between two worlds. In a century we had to swallow the progress of nineteen hundred years. Do you wonder that we suffer a little from evolutionary dyspepsia? ... You speak of the young people Sometimes they are taught very bad tricks by their *pakeha* friends'" (CS, p. 38).

The way in which Rua's people have assimilated various aspects of British culture is shown by the Maori concert which is held to honor Geoffrey Gaunt. The intricately carved meeting-house is decorated with "tree-fern, exquisitely woven cloaks, Union Jacks and quantities of fly-blown paper streamers. On the back were hung coloured prints of three kings of England, two photographs of former premiers, and an enlargement of Rua as an M.P." (CS, p. 133). For the occasion Rua wears a feather cloak over his suit and an elderly lady wears a flax skirt over her European dress. Gaunt is greeted outside the meeting-house by a ritual Maori welcome; the entertainment includes Maori songs and dances, Irish ballads and Gaunt's recital of speeches from *Henry V* and *Macbeth*. The Maoris, with their strong tradition of oratory, are especially delighted by the Shakespeare. The concert episode emphasizes that the Maoris who are secure in their own cultural traditions share none of the colonials' ambivalence towards British culture.

In the relationship between Maori and *pakeha* characters it is the Maoris who behave with the greater tolerance and make the more concessions. At the concert the meeting-house becomes very hot, "and the Maori people thought indulgently that it smelt of *pakeha*, while the *pakehas* thought a little less indulgently that it smelt of Maori" (CS, p. 135). Even when Rua discovers that a sacred ancestral adze has been stolen by Questing, he compromises his sense of what is due to restore the adze to its former sanctity, and submits to having it held as police evidence. The extent of his sacrifice is not really appreciated by the *pakehas*; Mrs. Claire murmurs, "'Oh dear. One of those *silly* superstitions. Sometimes one almost loses hope. And yet, you know, he's a regular communicant'" (CS, p. 228). Superstition or not, Questing's death in a pool of boiling mud, the tribal legendary fate of those who commit sacrilege, does not strike the Maoris is wholly unexpected.

Although Marsh paints an observant and sympathetic picture of English, colonial and Maori manners in *Colour Scheme*, the tone remains light and amusing. Her next novel, also set in wartime New Zealand, is a

complete contrast. *Died in the Wool* (1945)¹⁴ is a somber book and to some extent suffers from taking itself too seriously. In this novel, Marsh extends several themes touched upon in earlier books, particularly the affinity between land and people, and the cultural problems arising from New Zealand's English heritage.

Died in the Wool is set in the foothills of the Southern Alps, on the remote Mount Moon sheep station. Alleyn, still on his mission to find enemy agents, comes to Mount Moon to investigate a report of espionage, possibly linked with the unsolved murder of Flossie Rubrick, the station owner's wife. Alleyn's inquiries increasingly focus on the running of the sheep station and the Rubricks' attitude as landowners, and Mount Moon becomes the central image of the novel, symbolizing the multiple role the sheep station has played in New Zealand's history: bringing settlers to the secluded hill country; making sheep the backbone of the nation's economy; and creating a new landed gentry out of the wealthy station owners.

Although by colonial standards Mount Moon is an impressive old estate, Marsh satirizes its pretensions as both an English stately home and as a triumph of civilization over the wilderness:

Mount Moon homestead was eighty years old and that is a great age for a house in the antipodes. It had been built by Arthur Rubrick's grandfather, from wood transported over the Pass in bullock wagons The house bore a dim family resemblance to the Somersetshire seat which Arthur's grandfather had thankfully relinquished to a less adventurous brother The garden had been laid out in a nostalgic mood, at considerable expense, and with a bland disregard for the climate of the plateau The dining-room windows looked down upon a queer transformation of what had been originally an essentially English conception of a well-planned garden. But beyond this unconvincing piece of pastiche—what uncompromising vastness! (*DW*, p. 26).

The attempt to reproduce an English environment is a curious mixture of sentiment and expediency: no large house in England would ever be built of wood, which at once suggests impermanency to the English mind, but few other concessions have been made to the new land. Nevertheless Mount Moon is ultimately rendered insignificant by the emptiness and magnificence of the mountains surrounding it.

The accounts of Flossie Rubrick which Alleyn hears describe an ambitious, hard-driving member of Parliament who sees the Mount Moon station and its gracious homestead solely as a fitting background for her political career and social status. As woman representative of a rural constituency, Flossie is asked to write an article on women in the back country. It is a task she promptly hands over to her secretary:

[Flossie] came into the study and talked a good deal about the beauty of women's work in the home "A noble life," Flossie said, ringing for Markins, "'they also

serve—” but the quotation faltered before the picture of any cocky-farmer's wife, whose working-day is fourteen hours long and comparable to that of a man under a sentence of hard labour. “Look up something appropriate, Miss Lynn . . . I want to stress the sanctity of women's work in the high country” (*DW*, p. 90).

Flossie is quite aware of the reality of a woman's life in the back country but is indifferent to it; she has no sense that her position as landowner and politician entails responsibility to the land and its people.

In her role as gracious station owner's wife she has found a protege, Cliff Johns, the musically talented son of her station manager. Cliff's socialist father resents Flossie's interference, but “his wife, persuaded by Flossie, overruled him and Cliff went off to boarding-school with sons of the six runholders scattered over the plateau” (*DW*, p. 38). At sixteen Cliff rebels, and although Flossie had planned to send him to England to study music, he leaves school and goes to work mustering sheep. Flossie is furious, not least because Cliff has grasped that her real interest is not in himself or his music, but in her own importance as his patron.

Cliff is now unhappily caught between two worlds: that of the Rubricks, British-oriented, well-travelled and appreciative of the arts, in which he is intellectually at home; and that of his parents, narrow, inward-looking, dismissive of the arts, but sincerely attached to him. On his return to Mount Moon it is some time before the other men will accept him as a fellow musterer: “They were inclined at one time to look upon him as a freak. His schooling and tastes aroused their deepest suspicions, of course. In this country, young men are judged almost entirely on their ability to play games and do manual labour” (*DW*, p. 104).

By contrast, Cliff finds in the English visitor Alleyn a sympathetic audience for his views on music: “‘That's what I wanted to do. With music, I mean. Say something about this.’ He jerked his head at the vastness beyond the window and added with an air of defiance, ‘and I don't mean the introduction of native bird song and Maori hakas into an ersatz symphony’” (*DW*, p. 140). Cliff is not the only character who is inspired by the landscape. After his death it is discovered that Flossie's husband Arthur has written about the “implacable” nature of the land where men and sheep merely “move over the surface of a few hills” (*DW*, p. 90). Arthur, unable to find an appropriate modern style, has searched through his literary heritage and adopted a sixteenth-century prose style based on Hakluyt's *Voyages*, written at a time when men were more conscious that they moved on sufferance over the surface of an indifferent land or sea.

In *Died in the Wool* the New Zealand/British relationship is no longer a comedy of manners but a serious issue in the young nation's search for a national identity. To the older generation, like Arthur Rubrick, England still sets the social and cultural standards, modified only slightly to suit New Zealand conditions. The younger generation, like Cliff, are torn between rejection of England's cultural dominance and recognition that

New Zealand is not yet able to offer an acceptable alternative. Cliff's decision to muster sheep instead of studying music is, Marsh suggests, only an adolescent gesture of defiance: in maturity, Cliff's generation will help to create a new national culture.

Died in the Wool reflects Marsh's interest in a matter of increasing importance to New Zealanders involved with the arts: the desire to encourage an indigenous culture without lowering the standards set by the parent country. In the first issue of an influential literary magazine launched in 1947, Marsh, now established as a serious director, contributed a caustic essay on the quality of New Zealand drama.¹⁵ It is an essay which marks the dichotomy Marsh was now to preserve between her detective writing and theatrical careers, between England and New Zealand. In future, Marsh's comments about New Zealand would appear in essays, reviews and an autobiography, whereas almost all her post-war novels are set in an unreservedly middle-class English world that scarcely notes the existence of the antipodes. Correctly considering that her earnest fellow countrymen had little tolerance for a New Zealand version of an essentially bourgeois, British form of popular writing, Marsh simply rejoined the mainstream of British detective fiction.

Marsh does return briefly to New Zealand themes in her last two novels, though neither *Photo Finish* (1980)¹⁶ nor *Light Thickens* (1982)¹⁷ shows her writing at its best, and both are reworkings of earlier plots. *Photo Finish* is a more superficial version of *Vintage Murder*, with a group of international opera singers substituted for the English theater company. Once again Alleyn finds the unspoilt New Zealand scenery a refreshing change from the affectations of his suspects; once again there are hints of Maori vengeance which add to the tension without becoming unconvincingly explicit; but the setting is never an integral part of the story as it is in *Vintage Murder*.

Light Thickens is a sequel to *Death at the Dolphin* (1967)¹⁸ and concerns a London production of *Macbeth*. A principal theme in the novel is the effect of superstition, and Marsh portrays this from three points of view: the superstition within *Macbeth*; that of the actors taking part in what is often thought to be an unlucky play; and that of the Maori actor who plays First Witch. London-trained Rangi Western, whose name indicates his dual cultural background, introduces some traditional Maori gestures into his part to emphasize the witches' primitive and savage nature. Gradually he develops qualms about profaning his Maori heritage, which are reinforced by a series of unpleasant incidents culminating in murder. The Maori element is used partly to increase the characters' fear and uncertainty; and partly to illustrate the Maori dilemma of how far it is possible, or even expedient, to retain Maori beliefs in a predominantly *pakeha* world.

It is fitting that Marsh's last two novels should reiterate the main

concerns of all her New Zealand fiction: her love for the land and her sympathy for the Maori people, particularly for their difficulties in adapting to an alien culture. She had considerably less sympathy for the *pakehas'* rejection of British culture, and felt nothing but distaste for the self-imposed parochialism resulting from the mixture of complacency and uncertainty she saw in many New Zealanders. In a 1978 interview she commented on her own divided loyalties. Of England, she said: "I do call it Home. My generation did. It does feel like home." And of New Zealand: "I love New Zealanders. I'm a New Zealander myself. I just wish they wouldn't be what they are being sometimes. English is such a superb language and really they do bastardize it."¹⁹

If her presentation of New Zealand speech sometimes reaches an extreme of colloquialism and inarticulacy, and her colonial characters seem unduly Philistine, it is not because, as the reviewer mentioned earlier suggested, her English background limited her to reporting "ordinary New Zealand speech and attitudes with rather less authority than cockney,"²⁰ Marsh, professional writer, actress and producer, had a keen ear and an observant eye, but she was not purporting to write serious, realistic novels. She was a writer of popular fiction who took the opportunity in her books of saying not only what she liked about New Zealand, but of satirizing what she perceived to be its shortcomings, especially those arising from New Zealand's cultural ambivalence to Britain.

Notes

¹The University of Canterbury (Christchurch, N.Z.) awarded Marsh an honorary D. Litt. in 1963; she was made Dame Commander, Order of the British Empire, in 1966; and the Ngaio Marsh Theatre, at the University of Canterbury, was opened in 1967.

²Ngaio Marsh, *Black Beech and Honeydew: An Autobiography* (1966; rev. ed. Auckland: Collins, 1981), p. 227.

³Dennis McEldowney, [Review of *Black Beech and Honeydew*], *Landfall*, 79 (Sept., 1966), p. 295.

⁴A kiwi is a flightless bird native to New Zealand; the word is commonly used to denote a native-born New Zealander.

⁵*Black Beech and Honeydew*, p. 205.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 202. ⁷*Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁸Ngaio Marsh, *A Man Lay Dead* (London: Bles, 1934).

⁹*Black Beech and Honeydew*, p. 205.

¹⁰Ngaio Marsh, *Vintage Murder* (1937; rpt. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1980). All quotations are from this edition; page numbers are given in the text, preceded by *VM*.

¹¹Ngaio Marsh, *Surfeit of Lampreys* (1941; rpt. London: Collins, 1973). All quotations are from this edition; page numbers are given in the text, preceded by *SL*. This novel was first published in the United States as *Death of a Peer* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940).

¹²Ngaio Marsh, *Colour Scheme* (1943; rpt. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1982). All quotations are from this edition; page numbers are given in the text, preceded by *CS*.

¹³New Zealand declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. On 5 September the Cabinet authorized the raising of troops to form the nucleus of the 2nd N.Z. Expeditionary Force, and Maori members of Parliament suggested that Maoris be permitted to volunteer for military service as a special unit. This unit became known as the Maori Battalion and served with distinction in Crete, North Africa and Italy.

¹⁴Ngaio Marsh, *Died in the Wool* (1945; rpt. London: Pan, 1954). All quotations are from this edition; page numbers are given in the text, preceded by *DW*.

¹⁵See Ngaio Marsh, "Theatre: A Note on the Status Quo," *Landfall*, 1 (March 1947), pp. 37-43.

¹⁶Ngaio Marsh, *Photo Finish* (1980; rpt. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1981).

¹⁷Ngaio Marsh, *Light Thickens* (London: Collins, 1982).

¹⁸Ngaio Marsh, *Death at the Dolphin* (London: Collins, 1967); first published in the United States as *Killer Dolphin* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966).

¹⁹Helen Paske, [Interview with Ngaio Marsh], *Listener* (N.Z.), 89 (8-14 July 1978), p. 15.

²⁰See note 3.

Carole Acheson is a freelance writer in Christchurch.

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Dr. G. Cordery, Dept. of English, University of Canterbury.