



# BLOOMSBURY SOUTH

THE ARTS IN CHRISTCHURCH  
1933–1953

PETER SIMPSON

*'Why was it then that out of the hundreds of towns and universities in the English-speaking lands scattered over the seven seas, only one should at that time act as a focus of creative literature of more than local significance; that it should be in Christchurch, New Zealand, that a group of young writers had appeared who were eager to assimilate the pioneer developments in style and technique that were being made in England and America since the beginning of the century... and to give their country a new conscience and spiritual perspective?'* – **John Lehmann**

For two decades in Christchurch, New Zealand, a cast of extraordinary men and women remade the arts. Various between 1933 and 1953, Christchurch was the home of Angus and Bensemann and McCahon, Curnow and Glover and Baxter, the Group, the Caxton Press and the Little Theatre, *Landfall* and *Tomorrow*, Ngaio Marsh and Douglas Lilburn. It was a city in which painters lived with writers, writers promoted musicians, in which the arts and artists from different forms were deeply intertwined. And it was a city where artists developed a powerful synthesis of European modernist influences and an assertive New Zealand nationalism that gave mid-century New Zealand cultural life its particular shape.

In this book, Simpson tells the remarkable story of the rise and fall of this 'Bloomsbury South' and the arts and artists that made it. Simpson brings to life the individual talents and their passions, but he also takes us inside the scenes that they created together: Bethell and her visiting coterie of younger poets; Glover and Bensemann's exacting typography at the Caxton Press; the yearly exhibitions and aesthetic clashes of the Group; McCahon and Baxter's developing friendship; the effects of Brasch's patronage; Marsh's Shakespearian re-creations at the Little Theatre. Simpson recreates a Christchurch we have lost, where a group of artists collaborated to create a distinctively New Zealand art which spoke to the condition of their country as it emerged into the modern era.

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A writer and scholar who now lives in Auckland, Peter Simpson lived in Christchurch for 25 years and both graduated from and subsequently taught at the University of Canterbury. Simpson is the author of six non-fiction books, including *Fantastica: The World of Leo Bensemann* (2011), *Patron and Painter: Charles Brasch and Colin McCahon* (2010), *Colin McCahon: The Titirangi Years 1953–1959* (2007) and *Answering Hark: McCahon/Caselberg: Painter/Poet* (2001). He has edited, or contributed to, many other titles, including books on Allen Curnow, Kendrick Smithyman, Ronald Hugh Morrieson, Charles Spear and Peter Peryer. A former head of English at the University of Auckland, Simpson was also co-founder and part-time director of the Holloway Press, an institution which drew on the small-press tradition of Lowry and Glover.

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## Chapter Three

# Angus, Bensemman, Woollaston and The Group, 1932–38

An old wooden house at 97 Cambridge Terrace, Christchurch, close to the Bridge of Remembrance in Cashel Street, was, in the 1930s, the home and/or studio of four significant Canterbury artists of different generations and artistic tendencies: Sydney L. Thompson, Archibald F. Nicoll, Rita Angus and Leo Bensemman. Between them, and those they knew and worked with, these inhabitants of the ‘house of art’ covered every style and genre, from the most conservative to the most radical, being made in the city during this vital decade.

The house, long since demolished, was owned by Thompson (1877–1973), a leading post-impressionist artist of his generation, who shuttled between New Zealand and France, always using Cambridge Terrace as his headquarters when he was in Christchurch – as he was for most of the 1930s. Thompson bought the property in 1905 after his first return from study in Europe and fitted it out as artists’ studios (with skylights), which he used himself and rented to others. It became the venue for a sketch club of Canterbury artists including Cecil Kelly, Raymond McIntyre, Alfred Walsh, William Menzies Gibb, Leonard Booth and Kennaway

Henderson (the future editor of *Tomorrow*), some of whom taught with Thompson at the Canterbury College School of Art until he went back to France in 1911. His New Zealand reputation was sustained by successful return trips in the 1920s and 1930s, involving well-publicised solo exhibitions in Christchurch (held at 97 Cambridge Terrace), Wellington, Auckland and Dunedin.<sup>1</sup>

Thompson was best known for his landscapes of Concarneau in Brittany and Grasse in Provence, incorporating some of the innovations, especially in colour, of French post-impressionist painting, and for landscapes of New Zealand subjects painted in a ‘Frenchified’ manner, including Lyttelton Harbour, Wellington Harbour, the Southern Alps and St Bathans in Central Otago. As fellow artist Olivia Spencer Bower said of his work, ‘Everyone took notice; he’d brought more colour than had been

*Rita Angus with Leo Bensemman and his sister Peggy at 97 Cambridge Terrace in 1938, photographed by Lawrence Baigent (a portrait of whom, painted by Bensemman in 1937, can be seen on the wall behind). The Breton furniture belonged to Sydney L. Thompson.*



*Sydney L. Thompson's Lyttelton from the Bridle Path (1937); and the man himself with one of his many studies of almond blossom in Provence.*

in the place. Even though a lot of his colour was not like New Zealand colouring. He probably knew far more about it; he was influenced by Cézanne and the post-impressionists. He gave impetus to the local art world and one noticed from that time a bold change in the colour of local artists.<sup>2</sup>

Thompson was an establishment artist: he was vice-president of the New Zealand Society of Artists in 1934, president of the Canterbury Society of Arts (CSA) from 1935 to 1937 and a member of Christchurch City Council's advisory committee on art; he was given an OBE in 1937. He was also the expatriate artist par excellence, at a time when success overseas carried great prestige in New Zealand, but unlike Frances Hodgkins and Raymond McIntyre, he always kept one foot in New Zealand and exploited his 'European' reputation.

Archibald F. Nicoll (1886–1953), who rented a studio at 97 Cambridge Terrace, was a decade younger than Thompson, who had been one of his teachers at the art school from 1905 to 1907. Their paths also crossed in Europe. Nicoll in turn, though

he lacked Thompson's patina of extensive European experience, became an establishment figure in Christchurch. He taught briefly in Auckland, before travelling to Europe for further training in London and Edinburgh. He exhibited at the royal academies of London and Scotland before the war, in which he fought: he had a leg amputated at the Battle of the Somme. In 1920 he was appointed director of the Canterbury College School of Art and oversaw its expansion and built its reputation as the country's leading art school, before retiring in 1928 to become a full-time artist. In 1934, however, he went back to teach at the school, under the directorship of Richard Wallwork, until finally retiring in 1945. As Neil Roberts has written, 'In the 1920s and 1930s, Nicoll's reputation as a landscape artist and strong identity as an interpreter of the Canterbury landscape in particular made him a leader of what was to become known as the "Canterbury School".<sup>3</sup> He was also a well-known portrait artist, who completed more than 100 commissioned portraits of such dignitaries as



*Archibald F. Nicoll, photographed about 1931. He painted The Hilltop in 1943.*

businessman Robert McDougall and musician and professor J. C. Bradshaw.

Nicoll never exhibited with The Group or the New Zealand Society of Arts but was a working member of the CSA from 1905 until his death in 1953; during the 1930s and 1940s he was one of the society's dominant members, serving twice on the council and once as president (1943–44). He was also adviser to the city council on matters relating to the Robert McDougall Gallery and a central figure, along with Richard Wallwork and Cecil Kelly, in the notorious *Pleasure Garden* affair of the late 1940s (discussed in Chapter Nine). Nicoll became an OBE in 1947, the year before the Hodgkins brouhaha.

In 1936 a new painter joined the older artists at Cambridge Terrace. Rita Angus (1908–70), who was 30 years younger than Thompson and 20 years younger than Nicoll, was known at that stage as Rita Cook, from her four-year marriage to fellow painter Alfred Cook, which had ended in divorce in

1934.<sup>4</sup> Angus had come to Christchurch from Napier in 1927 to attend the art school, where her main teachers were Wallwork (composition, drawing), Leonard Booth (life drawing) and Cecil Kelly (still life, landscape). The academic training there, conservative in nature, was closely based on that of the Royal College of Art in London. As Angus's biographer Jill Trevelyan has explained, students 'emerged with a sound academic training in the essentials of their craft: draughtsmanship, composition and design, perspective, geometry, anatomy and colour theory'.<sup>5</sup> Angus left before completing her diploma but took night classes later. She became a regular exhibitor at the CSA from 1930, joined The Group in 1932 and was a member of the New Zealand Society of Arts in 1933–34.

After her marriage ended, Angus lived alone in flats in Cranmer Square and Chancery Lane until November 1936, at Thompson's invitation, she moved into a vacant flat at number 97. She brought with her



## Chapter Four

# Douglas Lilburn and Music, 1934–47

In the *Festschrift* for Douglas Lilburn, published when he retired from Victoria University in 1980, his long-time friend Allen Curnow remarked:

From the start – as far back as the thirties, but more especially the forties – a few of us poets, and painters, and musicians realized that in Douglas our New Zealand generation had found its composer. Poet or painter would hardly have done so, but for Douglas's own understanding of what we were up to, and up against, in those days . . . That music might *originate* here . . . had hardly occurred to anybody, least of all to those who were busiest making it.<sup>1</sup>

Curnow emphasised the reciprocal relationships between Lilburn as composer and the artists, poets and musicians who were his friends, contemporaries and collaborators. As he told fellow composer Jack Body, Lilburn himself understood the importance of this mutually supportive environment.

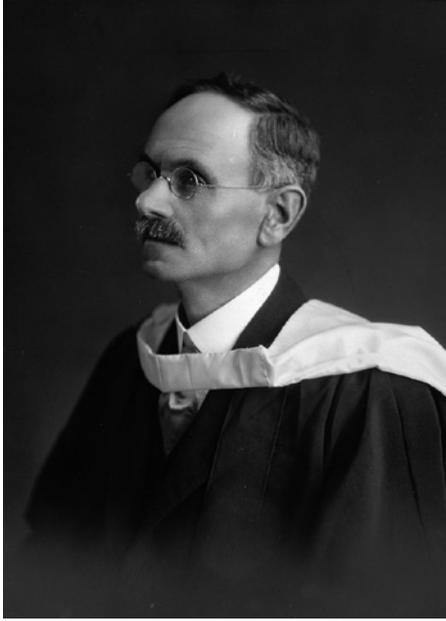
[In 1941] I picked up the old Christchurch context I'd known and it was a very good one indeed . . . There were excellent people at the Caxton Press like Denis Glover and Leo Bensemann – other people like Lawrence Baigent, excellent painters like Rita Angus, poets like Allen Curnow. I mean it was a very

civilised context . . . All those writers and painters I knew listened readily to music and could talk very intelligently about it and in fact they gave me a lot of encouragement at that time and of course I was learning a tremendous amount from them too.<sup>2</sup>

\*

When Lilburn arrived in Christchurch in 1934 as an eighteen-year-old Canterbury University College student, the musical life of the city was dominated by Dr John Christopher Bradshaw, as it had been since his arrival from England in 1902 to take up the post of organist and choirmaster at the Anglican cathedral. He became, simultaneously, the university's first and initially the sole lecturer in music; later he was dean of the music faculty and eventually, from 1937 to 1941, the inaugural professor of music. As a choir-master Bradshaw extended his activities beyond the cathedral to many other choral groups in the city and was also well known for his public organ recitals. According to Frederick Page, who was a student of

*In Rita Angus's Douglas Lilburn (1945), Lilburn is depicted against the background of South Brighton Spit as seen from the cottage on Clifton Hill above Sumner where Angus lived from 1943 to 1953.*



*J. C. Bradshaw, photographed in 1922, who ruled over music in Christchurch for three decades but did not encourage original composition. His student Frederick Page – seen here in a drawing by Evelyn Page (c. 1932) – became a critic, pianist and concert organiser and a friend and supporter of Lilburn.*

his in the 1930s, Bradshaw ‘was a martinet and kept up standards. The standard of singing at Evensong was as high as any I’ve ever heard in England . . .’ As an organist, he was ‘a very able player indeed’ and ‘amazing’ particularly with the works of Bach.<sup>3</sup>

Bradshaw, a traditionalist, had the respect if not the admiration of progressive students such as Page and Lilburn, who were frustrated by his conservatism – ‘There was one good 20th century composer, Elgar; all other music was decadent if not mad’<sup>4</sup> – and what music historian and critic John Thomson has called his ‘remorseless concern for “the rules”’. Lilburn rejected Bradshaw’s offer of £40 a year to join the cathedral choir: ‘I was antagonistic to notions of the Establishment and unwilling to give up freedom of time, especially at weekends when I enjoyed walks on the [Port] hills.’<sup>5</sup>

Students had to find out about modern music on their own, mainly through gramophone records and in Page’s view Bradshaw’s approach

to harmony, based on conservative English textbooks by C. H. Kitson and Percy Buck, ‘cultivated no harmonic sense whatever . . . A more stultifying course was hard to imagine.’<sup>6</sup> Lilburn, speaking in 1946, was more generous in his assessment: ‘I should like to pay Dr Bradshaw the tribute of saying that he looked after our training with an excellent thoroughness. The aim of it all seemed to be that keeping your nose hard on the Kitson grindstone for two or three years, at the end of which time, you were likely to become a Bachelor of Music, and then you were at liberty to do some composing.’<sup>7</sup>

His academic instruction may have been uninspiring, but Lilburn was greatly stimulated by the cultural environment of the university and the city. ‘I was lucky again to be a university student in that Christchurch of the thirties, less, retrospectively, for its music than for its ferment of poetry and painting and politics . . . it was positive, stimulating, energising’.<sup>8</sup> His biographer Philip Norman has



*George Chance's 1933 photograph of the Cloisters, Canterbury University College, where Lilburn studied from 1934 to 1936. As Curnow wrote in a verse letter to Glover: 'I wonder if half our worries / Were 19th century Gothic. / These were the stones laid on us'.*

documented the creativity and intellectual vigour at the college in those Depression years among both students and the more enterprising and dynamic members of staff, including the rector, Professor James Hight, classics teacher L. G. (Greville) Pocock, Shelley, Sinclair and Rhodes. Beyond the university were choirs and orchestras, *Tomorrow* (to which Lilburn contributed in 1937), the Caxton Press – just getting started when Lilburn came to town – and The Group. He quickly formed firm

friendships among the younger writers, such as Curnow and Glover, and among musicians such as fellow students Ina Buchanan and Baigent.

Lilburn got a kickstart in composition through an initiative of the touring Australian-born composer Percy Grainger, who in 1936 offered a prize for an original composition by a 'native-born' composer. When Lilburn submitted the tone poem, *Forest*, written that year after a holiday at Peel Forest in South Canterbury, he told Grainger:



## Chapter Five

# Ngaio Marsh, Shakespeare and the Little Theatre 1932–46

Through her insightful Shakespearean productions (with their musical assistance from Lilburn), Ngaio Marsh dominated theatre in Christchurch in the early 1940s. But she was preceded in the 1920s and 1930s by another energetic promoter of drama, Professor James Shelley, without whose achievements Marsh's great Shakespearean productions of the 1940s may not have been possible.

Born in England in 1884, Shelley, who was a Cambridge graduate, had a passion for art and theatre as well as for education and had gained much experience as an actor and director of student productions in Manchester and Southampton of plays by Ibsen, Masfield and other modern writers. Frustrated in Christchurch by bureaucratic and academic opposition to his plans for educational reform, Shelley taught the required courses at the university but turned his abundant energies in other directions. As a firm believer in the democratic potential of education for ordinary citizens, he strongly supported the college's WEA programmes. A compelling speaker, he was said to have given over 1000 lectures to WEA and other organisations during his sixteen years in Christchurch.

He was also a gifted actor and reader: on arriving in Christchurch he immediately initiated extra-curricular discussions of modern plays and weekly readings in which he played all the parts himself. Within a year he had set up the Canterbury University College Drama Society (CUCDS) and begun producing plays with student casts. Shaw's *The Man of Destiny*, with Shelley himself as Napoleon, was an early success in 1922–23.

In 1926 Christchurch Boys' High School, which shared the central city site with the university, moved to new premises in Straven Road, and Shelley seized the opportunity to provide the drama society with its own theatre. He persuaded the college authorities to modify an upstairs assembly hall into a small theatre, adding a stage and an upstairs gallery which increased the audience capacity to around 200. 'What the Old Vic was for the slums of London,' proclaimed Shelley, 'we want this Little Theatre to be

*Key figures behind Ngaio Marsh's 1943 production of Hamlet in Modern Dress: Dundas Walker (the Ghost), Marie Donaldson (Gertrude), Ngaio Marsh, and Jack Henderson (Hamlet).*



*John Masefield's Good Friday was the first production in the Canterbury University College Little Theatre, in 1927.*

for those in Christchurch who are capable of appreciating the best of modern drama.<sup>1</sup> The opening in March 1927 was followed by a solo performance of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.

The Little Theatre had some serious deficiencies: there was no backstage, no wing-space and only one side entrance. Improvements were gradually made by installing a fairly primitive lighting system and an up-to-date cyclorama, of which Marsh would make impressive use. An early production was a revival of Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*, previously performed in several South Island towns.

Not content with these achievements on campus, Shelley moved in 1928 to establish a second theatre

group outside the university – the Canterbury Repertory Theatre, with the general intention of presenting plays that would appeal to 'the man in the street'. For its first production the CRT borrowed the Little Theatre but in 1929 acquired its own venue, the Radiant Hall, a newly constructed Spanish-Mission-style building in Kilmore Street.<sup>2</sup> One of their boldest early shows was Karel Čapek's expressionist play *R. U. R.*, produced by Shelley in 1929, though the aim was generally to employ professional producers.

With Shelley frequently called upon to act and/or produce for the CRT, and with his absence on a United States lecture tour in 1932, the CUCDS



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