

Charles Brasch. Journals, 1938–1945

CHARLES BRASCH

*With an introductory essay by Rachel Barrowman**Transcribed by Margaret Scott**Annotated by Andrew Parsloe*

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Not least among Charles Brasch's many contributions to New Zealand's cultural life and development – his poetry, the editorship of *Landfall*, the support given to individual writers and artists, the gifts of books and paintings, and his generous endowments – was the bequest of his papers to the Hocken Library. Covering almost every aspect of his personal and literary life from early manhood right up to his death in May 1973, they are rivalled in fullness and significance only by those of his near contemporary Frank Sargeson (1903–1982), now in the Turnbull Library. Last year their importance was recognized by inscription in the UNESCO Memory of the World's New Zealand Register.

At the collection's heart is a series of personal journals that Brasch kept intermittently from 1931, but then more or less continuously from 1938 to 1973, thirty-six volumes in all. Scholars had long been aware of the journals' existence, keenly anticipating what they might reveal of Brasch's intensely private life, as well as possible revelations about New Zealand's literary world. However, they were balked by the thirty-year embargo imposed by Brasch himself that was not lifted until 2003. To an extent, this lack of access was mitigated by the posthumous publication (1980) of *Indirections*, his elegantly written autobiographical memoir. However, this ceased with Brasch's return to New Zealand in 1946, shortly before he began his editorship of *Landfall*, the first issue appearing in March 1947.

Now we have the partial publication of the journals themselves, comprising the eight volumes covering his years in England from 1938 to December 1945. They are the natural starting point for publication, as these were the pivotal years in Brasch's search for a purpose and direction to his life. As a man of substantial independent means, or at least the prospect of them, as Rachel Barrowman points out in her excellent introductory essay, on the face of it he had many more options than most. He was, however, limited by his father's business expectations (eventually shaken off), an overwhelming attachment to New Zealand that was to preclude an expatriate life, a less than robust

physical constitution, and though possessed of a strong poetical impulse, an almost debilitating lack of confidence in his own talent.

The backdrop was the lowering clouds of war that were to envelop Europe. For the next seven years, the conflict's progress was anxiously followed by Brasch, and perversely it gave him time to find a path. His main occupations were working with problem children at the Abbey School, first at Little Missenden and then Grayshott. After wrestling with his conscience, he registered for military service in July 1940 only to be rejected on grounds of ill-health (emphysema). He then enlisted for a short while as a firewatcher with the ARP, before finding employment for the rest of the war as an intelligence analyst at Bletchley Park. However, these (especially the last) figure lightly in the entries. Rather, it his personal, social and literary life, including his difficult attempts at poetry and other writing that are the journal's main preoccupations. The entries, sometimes daily but made at least every few days, comprise, as one reviewer has already put it, a kind of extended conversation by Brasch with himself about himself and those around him.¹ The cast of available friends and relations was impressively large (289 are listed), including his close friends Roger Cox – 'artist-philosopher', the classical scholar Colin Roberts, poet Edith Scovell, and John and Anne Crockett (playwright and dancer respectively) amongst others. He also developed a long and close connection with the Adelphi Players, for whom he was to write and even tour. Also on hand were his older cousins: Esmond, Mary and Dora de Beer. Denis Glover, then in the navy, would appear sporadically, as did his much younger cousin Tim Thompson, serving in the merchant marine. On the scene, too, were Jack Bennett and Ian Milner, old Waitaki friends. By far his closest relationship, however, was with his young sister (Lesley) Lel, who for a time had flatted with him in London. Her death there on 22 January 1939 at the early age of twenty-seven from a tubercular condition precipitated the journals' most harrowing entries, so full of remorse and anguish that they are almost unbearable to read.

That Brasch originally wrote with an eye to publication is doubtful, but he wrote with intense feeling for person, place and season, always economically and generally gracefully, at times poetically. His entry for 1 August 1943, for example:

We gathered plums & apples from trees that stood among the wheat. The lavender in flower beneath the kitchen window, small pink convolvulus twined through it. I wore shorts, my Hawaiian short, & no shoes — and O the luxury of going barefoot.

His introspection and lack of self-assurance are well reflected in a passage from 1 May 1941:

How hard it is to live one's *own* life. Continually I find myself trying to live other people's lives, fragments of theirs that have broken into me & pushed mine aside; once it was Shelley's; & there was Katherine Mansfield's; Virginia Woolf's when I read her books (as I have been rereading *To the Lighthouse*); and often Rilke's, when I read him — or still more when I read about him. But it is false; none of them are me. And yet, where is my life? What is it?

Yet, in the end Brasch did find a way; a direction and purpose suited to his talents began to emerge. As early as 1943 Denis Glover and then Jack Bennett were raising the possibility of his editing a New Zealand literary review, necessitating return to the land of his birth. Combined with the option of writing there his own, New Zealand poetry, this was an increasingly attractive proposal. Till then, the journey had been long and tortuous, but it is still one well worth following through a most remarkable journal.

The journals have been handsomely produced, a credit to those responsible. Their publication has been a labour of love, a family affair almost. The Hocken Collections was Brasch's best loved of institutions; the transcriber, Margaret Scott, who made her reputation transcribing Katherine Mansfield's letters, was a close family friend; whilst her daughter Rachel is the Otago University Press's Editor. As well as Barrowman's essay, Andrew Parsloe has annotated the entries with exemplary conscientiousness and provided extensive notes, greatly adding to the journals' usefulness.

There are just two caveats, however. The most surprising is the lack of a full index. While this is in part offset by Parsloe's list of *dramatis personae* in alphabetical order with biographical notes and page references, there is no provision for subject or place entries, for example, the Adelphi Players or Bletchley Park. Here one has to have recourse to the chronology, but this is at best a partial substitute. A second drawback is the absence of a clear statement of editorial policy, particularly in relation to the transcriptions. These have every appearance of thoroughness and care, but in a publication of this kind it would be helpful to know, for example, how corrections, omissions, expansions, contractions and normalisations have been handled. This is, or should be, standard documentary editing practice. And little is said about the nature of the original manuscript journals.

None of this, however, detracts from an impressive achievement in bringing before us one of the great personal documents of twentieth-century New Zealand.

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Endnote

1. Lawrence Jones, *Otago Daily Times*, 21 December 2013.