New Zealand Modernism

The moniker “New Zealand Modernism” is most frequently used today to describe art and architecture produced in New Zealand from the 1930s through the 1960s and beyond: for example, the paintings of Colin McCahon, Rita Angus, Gordon Walters, and Frances Hodgkins and the architecture of Ernst Plischke, Bill Toomath, Miles Warren, Maurice Mahoney, Humphrey Hall, and the Group architects. In literary studies, by contrast, the only New Zealand authors consistently labelled “modernists” are those who left home to anchor themselves in intellectual currents abroad: Katherine MANSFIELD, who wrote most of her New Zealand-themed stories from self-imposed exile in England and France; Lola Ridge, who represented herself in later life as an Australian-American poet despite, having spent 23 formative years in New Zealand; Robin Hyde, whose longing to see a wider world took her to war-torn China in the late 1930s. Yet New Zealand literature from the 1920s onward was deeply influenced by Anglo-European modernism, often in ways that belie its seemingly provincial character and realist bias. Frank SARGESON at one point aspired to write “a sort of NZ Ulysses”; James K. BAXTER openly admired the works of Dylan Thomas; Allen CURNOW named his son Wystan after W. H. AUDEN; Janet FRAME, who more than any New Zealand writer embraced the intellectual challenges and linguistic opacity of high modernist discourse, repeatedly invoked the poetry of Rainer Maria RILKE in her novels and memoirs. More recently, the writings of pathbreaking Māori writers such as Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, and Keri Hulme explore mythopoetic themes and strike experimentalist poses familiar to any reader of Joyce, Woolf, or Mansfield (indeed, the latter’s status as a New Zealand cultural icon is slyly invoked by Ihimaera in the title of his short story collection *Dear Miss Manfield*.) In a country intent on breaking free of its colonial past and establishing a distinctive cultural legacy of its own, teachers and scholars (with a few notable exceptions) have focused more on twentieth-century New Zealand authors’ pioneering use of local settings and indigenous vernacular than on their links to an international movement. By and large, the label “New Zealand literature” has trumped “New Zealand Modernism.”

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