

JOHN BRODIE

The sudden death of one in the prime of his powers is always tragic. The news of it brings a sharp stop to mind and heart in the daily pulse of life. And circumstances made the death of John Brodie ("John Guthrie") at forty-nine, especially grievous. After some years' absence, he had returned to New Zealand on a short visit. He had succeeded not only as a writer, but in the far more exacting task of accommodating an athlete's mind and body to a cruel injury received in early manhood. He had recently married. On his visit he had renewed old friendships, spoken wisely on the craft of writing, and left a strengthened impression of a writer who still had his best work to do. We all took it for granted we should see him again. And then, without any warning, came the news of his death.

John Brodie was lovable. The strong but gentle kindness that was in him shone in his face and sounded in his voice. He had come to the best of terms with life, so that there was no self-pity in him. He took a wide, deep and understanding interest in his fellows, and saw life with a mingled sense of beauty and humour. These qualities show in his books.

As with a best-seller, the surest way to fail with that mirage of ours, the New Zealand Novel, is to try deliberately to write it. If New Zealand novels of high rank by world standards come at all, it will be out of trial and error, out of a ground

fertilised by much effort, good and bad. By writing novels of a new kind, John Brodie made an important contribution to our common stock. When he revisited us, he said the day of the quiet pastoral novel had gone and we needed an Arnold Bennett and a Theodore Dreiser. That meant he had noted changes in our New Zealand life. He also expressed the opinion strongly that there was a fine future here for the regional novel. In his presentation of domestic detail, John Brodie had some affinity with Arnold Bennett, and his trilogy of novels about New Plymouth, so thinly disguised as "Paradise Bay", enriched our store of regional fiction.

The first of these "The Little Country" is studded with faults. Scene and action dart about like a fantail; villains and solution by violent death, are conventional. It is the first story of a young man filled with zest for life and resolved to throw everything in. Yet one observes at once signs of originality. True, it opens with quite a lot of information about "Paradise Bay", New Zealand, but the conveying is unforced. One does not feel that the author has decided of set purpose to inform English readers. He does not apologise for his country. What he says fits easily into the tale and is illustrated by his characters. It is as if someone was writing of his native Plymouth or Whitby. Then there is the brightness of the descriptions, the humour of the situations, the wit of the observations - the general gaiety. Humour and gaiety are rather rare in our present-day literature, and wit is apt to have a bitter flavour. In the "Paradise Bay" books, one laughs at the

social peculiarities of the Bay folk, but the satire is kindly. The author clearly thinks that life is by no means devoid of fun.

"So They Began" is a better novel, and "Paradise Bay" better still. The construction is tighter, the backbone stronger. "Paradise Bay" is the most sophisticated of the three, but it continues to tell us, vivaciously and with distinction of style, about a life, even when it is of the past, with which we are familiar. John Brodie did not belong to the school that regards fiction as a branch of sociology, as something that must uncover, analyse and instruct. He was of the school, which the public will always prefer, that writes to entertain. He is more widely read than talked about.

"Paradise Bay", written abroad, is less consciously New Zealand than "The Little Country", and when we come to "The Man in our Lives" we feel the scene might be anywhere. If I remember rightly, New Zealand is not mentioned till the end of the book. This may be his best work. Perhaps it would not have been written if Clarence Day had not written "Life with Father", but it stands on its own merits, and is a more subtle study.

John Brodie was the first New Zealand writer, or one of the first, to have a novel ("The Seekers") filmed by magnates of the screen. As an expatriate, he neither misjudged nor lamented, but saw his country clearly and loved it. His work was impressive and formative.