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## Land and Literature

### The “Spiritual Resources” of Charles Brasch

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It is one of the ongoing tragedies of New Zealand literary and cultural history that there is, as of yet, no biography of Charles Brasch (1909–1973). Originally, the now Berlin-domiciled novelist Sarah Quigley was going to write it, then the task was passed onto English Literature academic and literary biographer of Bill Pearson, Paul Millar. Alas, the demands of administration and teaching mean the files of Brasch notes sit in my colleague’s office at Canterbury University. While the Pearson biography gives hope for what a Brasch biography could be when it appears, in the meantime we need to reconstruct Brasch’s life and thought from a variety of other sources, including now this wonderful resource.

Quigley did write two shorter biographical pieces: one, originally for the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (vol. 5; Auckland University Press, 2000), is now available on *Tē Ara—The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*; the other, from when she was still named as Brasch’s biographer, is in Donald Kerr’s edited collection, *Enduring Legacy: Charles Brasch, Patron, Poet and*

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*Collector* (University of Otago Press, 2003). This book, which marked the end of the thirty-year embargo of the twenty-five metres of Brasch's papers in the Hocken Library, is as of yet the closest thing to a Brasch biography we yet have. James Bertram, Brasch's friend from their schooldays at Waitaki Boys' High, wrote a monograph on Brasch for the series *New Zealand Writers and Their Work* (Oxford University Press, 1976). The series, as was noted, drew upon what became Brasch's memoir, *Indirections* (Oxford University Press, 1980), which covers Brasch's life until 1947 and the establishment of *Landfall*. Bertram was also tasked by Alan Roddick, Brasch's literary executor, with wrangling into manageable form over 800 typescript pages. (It should also be noted that some of the quotes I include from the journals also occur within *Indirections*, Brasch having naturally drawn on his journals to write his memoir. However, I include them here because I find that *Indirections* is a book a surprising number of New Zealand cultural, literary, and historical scholars and students have never read; in fact the same may sadly be said of *Landfall* issues published under Brasch's editorship.)

Other useful writings that help us work toward an understanding of Brasch include the essay by Peter Simpson in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1988) and Stephen Hamilton's short biographical essay in *Kotare* 7, no. 3 (2008). There is also the memorial collection of writings in *Islands* 2, no. 3 (1973), the journal Brasch helped Robin Dudding establish in 1972 upon Dudding's dismissal from editing *Landfall*, a position he had held following Brasch's retirement in 1966. I believe it can be strongly argued that *Landfall* in fact ceased to be as such once Dudding was dismissed; we should read *Islands* as the continuation of *Landfall* from 1973, until 1987 when Dudding died. Whatever *Landfall* became after 1973, it was never actually *Landfall*, because *Landfall* was Brasch and *Islands* was what *Landfall* became. In the same way that *Horizon* was Cyril Connolly and *The Criterion* was T. S. Eliot, *Landfall* was Brasch and *Islands*, if not "Brasch," was where Brasch's *Landfall* continued under his early patronage and then posthumous influence. It should also be noted that no memorial of Brasch's death was ever published in *Landfall*, a peril perhaps of literary culture in a small country. As well as the above, there are numerous essays and references awaiting a determined and perhaps obsessive reader, many available online via the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* (here especially is noted Bruce Harding's underappreciated essay<sup>1</sup> which sit-

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Harding, "'Man of Words': Charles Brasch: Editor Supremo, Rabbi, and Dutch Uncle of New Zealand Letters," *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 17 (1999): 71–84.

uates Brasch as a literary-cultural nationalist Rabbi of New Zealand letters) and various discussions in the overviews of New Zealand literature that sit upon the shelves of our university libraries, sadly and increasingly untouched by the digital generation of students. I should also like to put forward my claim that the best available understanding of Brasch's years editing *Landfall* is to be found by reading *Landfall Country*, his selection of essays, poems and artworks published during his editorship, accompanied by a selection of his editorials. In fact this selection acts as Brasch's spiritual testament, the presentation of the thesis outlined in his opening editorial from *Landfall* in March 1947 wherein he proclaims, "what counts is not a country's material resources, but the use to which they are put. And that is determined by the spiritual resources of its people."<sup>2</sup> As will be outlined later, the term spiritual as used by Brasch is indicative of his influences: a combination of theosophy, idealism, cultural Christianity, and a belief in the creative role of the human spirit. Brasch's spirituality is therefore located primarily in two sources: in cultural production, not in institutions—and in nature and the response of a people to the land; and so it has strong links to Romanticism.

It is in this reference that I recognize what Harding noted in his essay: that Brasch was above all a spiritual writer and thinker, that is, a writer and thinker who focused on the interplay of religious, philosophical, and cultural thought and creation. This means, in a stridently secular land, that *Landfall* was an attempt to publish and give voice to the spiritual resources of the people of New Zealand. Brasch envisioned *Landfall* as the literary and cultural manifestation of his personal ethos and beliefs, beliefs that were evident, as we shall see later, in his 1941 essay "New Zealand, Man and Nature."<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein, Rachel Barrowman's fine introduction to these *Journals* describes Brasch's life as "defined by intellectual, cultural and spiritual exploration" (24), and in this book all three of these elements come to the fore. The value of these *Journals* is precisely due to the fact that they help us understand Brasch's explorations in a wider context, the context of what can be labelled the dislocation of exile. Brasch however, is a double exile and his life, and later *Landfall*, reflects this tension. On the one hand he is a New Zealander born in Dunedin into a prosperous Jewish family. This Jewishness however always puts him at a point of critical difference; not only culturally and religiously is he in the minority, but also the family's wealth and connections put

<sup>2</sup> Charles Brasch, "Notes," *Landfall* 1, no. 1 (March 1947); in idem., ed., *Landfall Country. Work from Landfall 1947–1961* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press 1962), 434.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Brasch, "New Zealand, Man and Nature," *The Geographical Magazine* 12 (March 1941): 332–42.

him in the position of being able to be patron in an egalitarian society. Yet Brasch in this sense does not quite fit in anywhere: in New Zealand he is too cultured, too European in his tastes, not blokey, queer, an aesthete, in many ways a European sensibility dislocated to the Antipodes. Yet in Europe he is always a colonial figure, never attaining the entry of a stellar academic career, homesickness always loitering at hand, aware that he is a New Zealander and a creation of the New Zealand landscape. More than this, I would further argue that he is a South Islander more than a New Zealander and this then gives him a further dislocation within New Zealand that was ever shifting its cultural, social, and population focus northwards. Finally, as I want to emphasize, he was a spiritual seeker in a country suspicious of such questions. It is no wonder that, as mentioned by Barrowman, Brasch's "most significant" artist-patron relationship (33) was with Colin McCahon, another outsider attempting to proclaim his spiritual vision to the secular, settler society.

In the absence of a biography, these *Journals* perform an invaluable service in allowing us to encounter a period of Brasch's life and thought without the double filter of what Brasch decided to make public in *Indirections* and its necessary editing by Bertram. I believe these *Journals* also enable a repositioning, or rather a reemphasizing of Brasch as primarily a spiritual thinker, poet and, importantly, patron. The "spiritual resources of the people" necessary for the cultural nationalism project of post-war New Zealand life and letters include those of Brasch himself. Yet our readings of Brasch and *Landfall* and cultural nationalism more widely have tended to doggedly follow a determinedly secular ethos. In this review of the *Journals* I wish to emphasize a reading of them as spiritual journals, a reading that allows us to reposition *Landfall* as first and foremost a spiritual undertaking for Brasch. I do so because the history of New Zealand spirituality, that is, what should be renamed Pākehā spirituality, needs to be considered distinct from the all-too-familiar orthodoxies of a New Zealand settler religious history that tends to focus on organized religion, its churches, figures, and controversies. Pākehā spirituality is, I argue, primarily a cultural, artistic, and literary production, an expression of settler dislocation and the attempt to be located, often informed by theology and philosophy in a way mainstream Christian life and piety rejects, especially in the years after Lloyd Geering's heresy trial. Precisely because it is the spirituality of settlement and colonization, it is always also political—even if often tragically blind to this fact. This question arose for me over twenty years ago after a seminar on Pākehā identity while studying theology in Dunedin and was posed by the Tūhoe kaumatua Sonny Riini:

Boy, you know how we hear all this talk about bi-cultural-ism and identity? Well the trouble is you buggers. We Māori know who we are and so we've got something to say. But you buggers haven't. You Pākehā need to go away and work out who you are and then come and talk with us about bi-culturalism. We can't tell you who you are—and the problem is neither can you.

Brasch is one of those who was attempting to work out who he was, to work out what it meant to be Pākehā, a question that is one of spirit and spirituality—especially if we Pākehā wish to engage bi-culturally. For what does it mean for Pākehā to claim a connection to land that is already that of Tangata whenua? What language and productions of identity and location can we bring to any talks? So Brasch is part of an emergent Pākehā whakapapa, and *Landfall* a resource to draw critically upon.

From the beginning, these *Journals* are a record of Brasch's spiritual life, a spirituality that constantly found itself in tension with “the tempo of modern fast travel and communications (train, aeroplane, cables, the telephone etc.)” (39). Brasch's aim was “for my inner world to be consistently more important to me than my outer world” (41). The basis for this spirituality was, as he noted in 1939 after his sister's death, not based in any belief in either immortality nor “any god except the god in oneself” (49). In fact, it can be argued that Brasch can be included in what today would be labelled New Age spirituality, a spirituality that, as we will see, found its fullest expression in a spirituality of place and landscape. A notable influence upon him is the writer Llewelyn Powys, an influence he struggled to express in 1940 by noting Powys's “noble (yet sometimes inadequate) paganism, his belief in life, the purity of his sensuality—and his prose, now and then so lovely” (63). The issue for Brasch was that “Jung and Freud between them have taken away my belief in a traditional God; but powers we worshipped under his name remain and are as potent as always, and the Christian form is still rich in association, even compelling. I do not think I am looking for a substitute for God” (63). This needs to be read in comparison with his earlier statement of the god in oneself; for this god of self-spirituality is the god substitute, a spirituality also expressed, as in Powys, increasingly in a pagan celebration of place and landscape.

Later in 1940, in conversation with the expatriate New Zealand novelist James Courage, he critiques what he observes as the central material basis of New Zealand society because of “the peculiar position of New Zealand, how

because Christianity has no roots there democracy also has but a tenuous hold and because material prosperity is the one [unacknowledged] aim of the country, all institutions will be made to serve that end even though they appear utterly opposed to the means necessary to achieve such an end" (147). In these views he also acknowledges the influence of T. S. Eliot's recent book *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939).

As an exile, Brasch found that New Zealand and its landscape haunted his thoughts—and I would argue, his spirituality. This haunting is noted in his reading of John Mulgan's *Man Alone*, seeing in Mulgan a fellow exile attempting to express his dislocation in place and time:

John, like so many if us is obviously haunted by the country—its physical nature, the dark heavy bush, the mountain, the fern country. And he is haunted by the sense of man's exile in the world of the Truce: man homeless, without guidance, without allegiance (155).

It is in such statements that I believe we can see the ethos and, to put it in New Age terms, the spiritual quest that sat behind *Landfall* and that were so autobiographically expressed in his selections for *Landfall Country*: what does it mean for the settler to be haunted by the land while at the same time being aware, as moderns, of being in exile in a world in which all the old guidance, allegiances, and assurance had collapsed? Therefore, to connect with the land, to give expression to and of this attempt, is also to attempt to give expression to that which may, possibly, be able to provide some guidance and allegiance. These issues were given further provocation with the request from John Lehmann, advisory editor for the *Geographical Magazine*, to write an article on New Zealand. Brasch notes that for days he was puzzling what to say until Lehmann, also a champion of New Zealand writing in his series Penguin New Writing, sent him Roderick Finlayson's pamphlet *Our Life in this Land* (203), written as Finlayson states "in full indebtedness to the writings of Walter D'Arcy Cresswell."<sup>4</sup> Finlayson's manifesto has as its central claim that life in New Zealand lacks depth of spirit and identity, arising from our lack of connection with the land, whereby "after one hundred years of settlement we are strangers in a strange land, having no identity in the soil nor any knowledge of it."<sup>5</sup> This is a result of the division of the spiritual from

<sup>4</sup> Roderick Finlayson, *Our Life In This Land* (Auckland: The Griffin Press, 1940), Preface.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

the physical, of the body from the soul, so that Nature is reduced to “merely matter” that is in turn exploited and becomes “a scientific negation.”<sup>6</sup> In such a situation, Finlayson proclaims that a cultured society is impossible, unless we are instructed by Nature and begin to build community and a civilized society.<sup>7</sup>

These themes can all be found, more implicitly than explicitly, in Brasch’s own manifesto piece for *Geographical Magazine*, “New Zealand, Man and Nature.”<sup>8</sup> Here he develops Finlayson’s claims, beginning by critiquing “the apparently temporary and provisional nature of man’s life” in New Zealand, a life that “seems to be lived only on the surface of the country and to have struck no roots.” These issues occur because Europeans had to undertake, by necessity, a “war against nature” in order to live here, but we now need to “forget that old enmity and learn patiently to live with her, as in older lands man lived with nature and from the union civilization sprang.”<sup>9</sup> This is the basis of that editorial manifesto in the first issue of *Landfall*: the spiritual resources of the people must be directed to live with nature in New Zealand and from this a new civilization may spring. Central to this project therefore is the experience of the attempts “when a new country begins to interpret itself for the first time,” a task that will result “in the marriage between the people and the country, and their real maturity” and this requires “a good painter” to fix our seeing, so that we see New Zealand with the eyes “of a born New Zealander.”<sup>10</sup> Yet it must also be noted that Brasch’s New Zealand, in prose and the accompanying pictures, is primarily that of the South Island and in particular that of Central Otago.

If one side of Brasch’s spirituality is tied centrally to the land—and to the land of Central Otago—the other arises from his reading of literature, especially those who have likewise struggled with and attempted to express their post-Christian spirituality in the modern world. In these *Journals*, we read of the influence of Rilke’s *Wartime Letters 1914–1921*. In particular, it is the letter Rilke wrote to Isla Blumenthal-Weiss, from which Brasch transcribes a long passage, that causes him to express what can be best labelled his central statement of spirituality: not only is disbelief in God impossible for him, now too is belief in God seen as unnecessary; rather God for Brasch

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 18–19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 24–25.

<sup>8</sup> Brasch, “New Zealand, Man and Nature,” 12, no. 5 (April 1941): 332–43.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 332.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 342.



“obviously and inescapably IS. God is present always; he is no stranger; in so far as I live I belong to him” (275). In his statement of belief, Brasch delineates himself against a definition of being religious that undertakes acts of piety, prayer, sin and struggle; rather his religion is that of a statement of God IS and “that I myself & the whole creation, sentient & insentient, and permanently is in relation with him, are steeped in his presence” (276). Here we see the first full expression of what becomes Brasch’s pantheism, the spirituality that he attempts to give expression to in *Landfall*. Yet this is a pantheism that continues to draw heavily on modern theology and philosophy, noting in 1941 that “if I had read Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* six or seven years ago,” then he would have been spared “a lot of confusion and distress,” for Niebuhr “puts with convincing clarity the paradox I have long felt but never been able to formulate: the necessity of constant striving for what one knows to be impossible of attainment” (277).

Part of this striving was to be realized, this being the striving for something to do of note post-war, a task influenced by reading Eric Gill’s autobiography (317, 326) and undertaken in a series of conversations with Denis Glover during Glover’s periods of leave in London (326). Brasch’s hope is to be able to balance the common New Zealand emphasis on “kindness or common humanity” with an acknowledgment of “the quality of a person’s beliefs and intellect” for “a country of course needs both of these; either alone is fatal.” What becomes *Landfall* is seen by Brasch as the attempt to provide the cultural and spiritual vehicle where the practicality of the type of New Zealand intellectuals as represented by Glover becomes balanced by Brasch’s sensibility of the pursuit of truth gradually revealed, of life in New Zealand being that of more than material purpose (326). By April 29, 1943 this can be reduced to a single entry in his journal: “the place of man in nature; nature and the divine; the divine and the human” (384).

Yet before this he is unclear as to what exactly he can do. At one stage influenced by Eric Gill’s autobiography he thinks perhaps of becoming a printer “recloting the thoughts of great men past and present & not a mere passive business of admiring, analysing and cataloguing” (326), while nine months later in January 1943 he writes “the one congenial job I can think of in New Zealand would be that of editing the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, for which I have no qualifications” (363), concluding a month later, “The J.P.S idea now seems to be rather wild” (371).

It was in further discussion with Glover in 1943 that the possibility of what would become *Landfall* was initially outlined. Important for our re-

consideration of *Landfall* as an expression of Brasch's spirituality is his statement that, as well as being of "a high standard" and being distinctly "of New Zealand without being parochial," *Landfall* "must also, in my view, take its stand as definitely theist, at the least, & definitely radical; though of course it would not exclude good work by those who were neither. It should attempt to explore, in Holcroft's phrase, 'the local nature of reality'" (385). Brasch and Holcroft were, from antipodean locations, both working toward a spiritual response to New Zealand land and life, Holcroft in *The Waiting Hills* (1943) commending Brasch's "New Zealand, Man and Nature" and both being an significant influence on the cultural nationalism of Allen Curnow, an influence that Curnow, in the case of Holcroft, was keen to later downplay. Yet it should also be noted that Curnow did explicitly acknowledge the debt he and others owe Holcroft's attempt to articulate a national and nationalist consciousness—and the religious framework he takes—in the poem "To M. H. Holcroft" from his 1949 collection *At Dead Low Water & Sonnets*,<sup>11</sup> a poem excluded in his later editions of collected poems. Upon his move north to Auckland, Curnow's South Island spirituality, while still present in his later work, was dominated by what could be termed secular mudflat modernism. This is, however, an aside in the larger debates concerning spirituality in New Zealand life and letters wherein Holcroft has become an embarrassment in our literary history; and in fact Brasch also seemed to have turned against him quite early within *Landfall* by publishing a critical review of his work in 1952.<sup>12</sup>

Yet in 1943, Brasch saw Holcroft as offering a way forward, especially as a counter to what he saw as the limitations of most New Zealand intellectuals, writing of Glover, Curnow, Mason, and Fairburn that, "their lives and aims, as I see them through Denis' eyes when he talks of Christchurch and Curnow, are of a spiritual barrenness which terrifies me..." (403). To overcome this spiritual barrenness, to provide a means to express a view of life as tragic in the Christian sense, yet not as Christian in its expression, becomes his aim, even if, as he acknowledges of this outlook "to Denis and his kind it would be meaningless." Brasch further notes his own tension between "the pagan liking for an earthly paradise to be built up, as it must be, on memories of New Zealand" (403) and the realization that he is "not a Christian; but that

<sup>11</sup> Allen Curnow, "To M. H. Holcroft," *At Dead Low Water & Sonnets* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1949): 29.

<sup>12</sup> D. M. Anderson, "Mr Holcroft's Islands," *Landfall* vol. 6, no.1, 1952, 5–20

I am not wholly a pagan is to be attributed to what I inherit from my Jewish ancestry” (404).

It is from such comments in these *Journals* that I want to argue for *Landfall* as first and foremost a journal of Brasch’s spirituality, a type of tragic panentheism, post-Christian in the contemporary expression of the term, that sought to reconcile settler and the land they found themselves in, and in the process express a new culture. By Easter Monday 1944, the spiritual task of a journal of literary, cultural and spiritual national rebirth is proclaimed: “New Zealand is becoming fused in my mind with the promised land of Moses, Joshua and Caleb, & the unattainable land of Vaughan’s ‘My soul, there is a country’? I am making plans for the revived Phoenix, starting a list of subjects for articles etc—and assuming that the planning of it will be mine” (474). In this statement we read of Brasch’s tensions between the exilic hope and Christian-derived tragic spirituality that was to provide the spiritual basis for *Landfall*. New Zealand was a promised land that was never yet to be attained and it is not surprising that it is the harsh semi-desert of Central Otago that was to continue to be the basis of his panentheistic spirituality.

The promised land for Brasch was what *Landfall* wandered toward but would never achieve, a failure because of its spiritual quest in a secular society; but a failure that succeeded in being the embodiment of the Christian tragic outlook of the unattainable land. In this task he was also influenced by Stephen Spender’s view on the poetic task in *Horizon* (October 1944),<sup>13</sup> stating in response “all that matters is to write about what is real to oneself with such concentration and truth that it becomes real to others” (506). Here too can be discerned the spiritual basis of Brasch’s task with *Landfall* and what he attempted to do: that is, make *his* New Zealand real to others, a New Zealand I claim can be best seen in his selections for *Landfall Country*.

This task, as I am constantly stressing, because it is so underplayed in our literary and cultural history, was for Brasch a spiritual one. So it is worth quoting Brasch from 1944 in full as to what would become the aim and ethos of *Landfall*:

As God made the world—of necessity, because such is His nature—so men are driven to make worlds of their own; to recreate the actual world of man and society which is the passion in youth that is of the best and most generous natures, and later

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Spender, “Recent Poetry,” *Horizon* 10, no. 58 (October 1944), 281.

to make their own small private worlds within the world, or to create worlds of the mind to which they may refer all their experience and whatever happens outside them. This last, I now see, is what I am constantly striving to accomplish: to discover or recreate a world which shall be mine while at the same time embodying aspects of the real world; a home for the spirit. (508)

There is perhaps no better way to sum up what Brasch sought to accomplish in *Landfall*—for himself and for New Zealand—than as expressed in the phrase “a home for the spirit.” As my reading of these *Journals* shows, Brasch was an intensely spiritual man, seeking a way to express his spirituality of what can be termed the exilic panentheist. *Landfall* is in this respect a spiritual journal and was, as emphasized here, necessarily so for Brasch. Yet our literary and cultural history is one that has tended to emphasize a secular reading—especially for Pākehā. So these *Journals* are an invaluable resource for a reconfiguring and reimagining of our cultural and literary life in these islands, a reminder, as scholars of religion know, that religion and the secular *always coexist* in necessary tension and that the culture and literature that arise in these modern tensions are the undertakings of what can be termed spirituality.

There will be many other readings of these *Journals* that differ in their emphases and claims. Yet the value of these *Journals*—and the ones that are hopefully to follow—is that they allow new access to the life and mind of a figure who in his *Landfall* allowed the reimagining of New Zealand to occur. We think of New Zealand in new ways because of *Landfall*, both in its wake and also in necessary criticism of its limitations. For *Landfall* was, from the start, the actualization of an intensely personal vision that sought to embody aspects of “the real world,” aspects of a world in which the spirituality of “New Zealand, Man, and Nature” could be expressed in a new civilization.