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"I Shall Not Want Another Home On This Planet"
A Study of the Tradition of Elegiac Poetry in the Work of Three
New Zealand Female Poets: Ursula Bethell, Robin Hyde and
Katherine Mansfield

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a discussion of the elegiac poetry tradition as it exists in English literature and how it impacts on the New Zealand literary tradition. The discussion centres around three New Zealand female poets; Mary Ursula Bethell, Robin Hyde and Katherine Mansfield and their participation in the elegiac tradition. The time period which encompasses these three poets reaches from 1915-1945, a period of intense growth and discovery in the literature of New Zealand, as it dissociated itself from the English model and redirected itself in a Pacific direction. Each of the three poets was influenced by the literary beliefs which were cultivated in New Zealand and exhibited this knowledge through their work. Mary Ursula Bethell and Katherine Mansfield composed personal elegies on the loss of companion and brother respectively, yet Robin Hyde composed a more formal elegy on Mansfield's death, though she had not personally known her. One theme runs through the work of Bethell, Hyde and Mansfield, the theme of exile. Bethell was the typical Englishwoman exiled in New Zealand by geography, but also by her education and her upbringing. Mansfield chose the life of an expatriate, yet this was no more than a self-delusion, when after the death of her brother she realised that the New Zealand of her childhood was no more. Hyde also fled to England, like Mansfield, yet her impetus was no more than a schoolgirl memory. She too, as in the case of Mansfield, produced her finest compositions when the idea of exile became reality. In some way, all three poets experienced the intensity of exile, from the known landscape whether of New Zealand or England, and transferred that yearning into their elegiac verse, as they became exiled from all that their loved one represented. For Mansfield, her brother's death ensured she could never go 'home' and yet provided the impetus for her New Zealand stories within which she challenged short story convention and wrote lasting memorials to both her country and her self. For Hyde, her elegy on Mansfield was an elegy to New Zealand and her reality without it. Bethell, after the death of her companion Effie Pollen, became exiled from her physical home in the Cashmere Hills, and, more poignantly, her garden. All three of the poets were faced with a universe which had been altered irreversibly by exile and in elegy attempted to describe and mourn that loss. These three women, though participating in a genre and a tradition which was undeniably male-oriented, expressed themselves as women within a tradition which through its very versatility accommodated both them and their grief.

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