

All the Juicy Pastures: Greville Texidor and New Zealand

By Margot Schwass. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2019.

RRP: \$40.00 ISBN: 9781776562251

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If you type the name Greville Texidor into a Wikipedia search bar, you may be asked if you mean instead ‘grevillea teodor’. Alternatively, you’ll be redirected to biographical websites for Maurice Duggan, one of postwar New Zealand’s most famous short story writers, or Kendrick Smithyman, editor of Greville Texidor’s volume of selected fiction, *In Fifteen Minutes You Can Say a Lot*. To learn anything about Greville Texidor herself, you need to read *All the Juicy Pastures: Greville Texidor and New Zealand*, by Wellington-based writer Margot Schwass. Beautifully written, deeply researched, richly illustrated, this critical biography addresses the question of why we should care about the career of a woman writer born in England in 1902, who died by her own hand in Australia in 1964, and who in her lifetime published only seven short stories, a post-Spanish Civil War novella called *These Dark Glasses*, a few translations of Lorca poems, and a smattering of other non-fiction pieces. Schwass also tackles the question of why we should care about Greville Texidor as a New Zealand writer.

Sex is one answer to both questions about Texidor’s importance as a writer. Greville Texidor was transfixed by scripts of sexual identity and performance, the most obvious element of which was her more or less explicit competition with other women for titles of beauty—she was the ‘most beautiful brunette’ of the All-England beauty queen competition of 1921—and for sexual attention from men. When she moved to New Zealand in 1940 and began writing fiction, the literary institutions and personalities ready to receive her were structured by men and biased towards masculine ideals. Schwass illustrates this in a keen reading of a photograph from 1946 taken by Betty Curnow. In it are four men: Betty’s poet husband Allen Curnow, and beside him Denis Glover, Bob Lowry, and Donald McWilliams. The looming bust of Ingrid Bergman advertising *Gaslight* (1944) provides a backdrop. In Schwass’s words, “It’s not only the conspicuous masculinity that makes this photo so suggestive of its times. It memorialises one of the twentieth century’s most enduring cultural myths; the invention of New Zealand literature by Curnow, Glover, Lowry and a handful of other ‘marvellously talented young men’ in the 1930s and 40s” (15). Schwass helps us see how sexism shapes New Zealand’s literary history by admitting a virtually unknown, talented, and troubled woman writer into our conversations about modern literature and culture. There are no signs that Texidor herself cared to understand the workings of sexism, let alone resist them through feminist politics or through collaboration with other women artists. Her description in a letter to Duggan of her writing as “a cause of my own” communicates the paradoxical quality of her endeavour. How many causes can be won if they are endorsed by one person? Greville Texidor fascinates now in part because she failed to grasp the politics of sexism even as she appears—for a time—to have been an expert manipulator of the politics of sex.

The more literary critical answer to the question of Texidor’s importance is her modernist misplacement, her geographic and stylistic migrations between or beyond the spaces and movements acknowledged by international cultural maps. Her Paparoa stories, “An Annual Affair” and “Home Front,” were published in *Penguin New Writing*, a prestige English publication of the 1940s, as was her Spanish Civil War story, “Santa Cristina.” Sargeson and Duggan were crucial

readers and supporters throughout the composition and editing of Texidor's fiction, first when she was living as an enemy alien with her German husband Werner Droescher in Papanui and in happier years living in Auckland's North Shore community. Schwass's account of Texidor's relations to New Zealand writers throughout the 1940s asks us to consider again the problem of context in determining literary canons and categories. Texidor was a pre-war London party girl who found inspiration for her fiction while fighting fascists in Barcelona but who found literary success while in rural New Zealand; she was a World War Two writer indebted to World War One modernist styles; she was a master of the image—as evidenced by black and white photographs capturing her poses over the course of decades and continents—but she is important today because she mastered words.

Texidor abruptly departed New Zealand for Australia in 1948 and soon found herself to be a writer who could not write. Then, as time passed and she made other departures for other nations, always seeking juicier pastures, she discovered that without writing she could not live. If discourses about modernism cannot make sense of this life, then perhaps as Schwass suggests we can turn to critical discourses of intermodernism—the messy middle movement for writers who due to sex, gender, class, race, or colonial status did not attach themselves to traditions or communities of modernists. Schwass concludes that “it's ultimately more fruitful to consider Greville's literary achievement solely on its own singular terms” (244). This radically individualistic approach to recovery of a woman writer drives and sustains Schwass's page-turner of a literary biography. However, as an approach to revisionary literary criticism it risks complicity with the obscuring myths of heroic self-creation that contributed to Texidor's sense of her “unsuccess.” Arguably, such myths may be responsible for her failure to see herself as supporting or supported by any literary, political, or national community.

The support that Texidor valued most was that of her mother, the painter Editha Greville Prideaux Foster, who followed Texidor all over the world. Mrs. Foster's death at age 87 was a gentle tragedy of aging from which Texidor would never recover. Texidor may have shed the outward appearances of conformity and conventionality when she left her childhood home in suburban Wolverhampton for London, but Mrs. Foster's ghostly appearances throughout the biography, turning up in a parenthetical phrase when least expected, demonstrate how Texidor depended on her mother for whatever fragile sense of security she forged in a dangerous world. Mrs. Foster's unflagging emotional and financial support, including what seems to have been years of caring for Texidor's oldest daughter Cristina, is the real love story of this book. It is the untold tale behind the tale, the hidden woman's story behind the rebel daughter's storytelling. The told tale, the one Schwass uncovers, is a lonely one. Its literary critical redemption, if there is one, will be found in tracing its impacts on other lives, in finding social meanings around and beyond Texidor's “cause of my own.”

The roots of Texidor's singular literary cause can be found in her rebellion as the teenaged Margaret Greville Foster against constraints faced by middle-class girls in early-twentieth-century Britain. When her father committed suicide in 1919 in the midst of a legal scandal, she left Cheltenham Ladies' College, “cropped her hair, plucked her eyebrows into thin arches and took up smoking” (36). Her mother and sister Kate accompanied her to London, where the Foster women counted D. H. Lawrence as a family friend and routinely socialized with artists Sydney

Carline, Stanley Spencer, Mark Gertler, Dora Carrington and Marjorie Hodgkinson (later Gertler). While her mother and sister drew and painted, Greville lived her art, modelling for Augustus John, dancing in West End theatres, acting in the silent movie *Moonbeam Magic* (1924), and eventually touring Europe and the Americas as a chorus girl. Somewhere in the American Midwest she performed with and became the lover of a mysterious German or American contortionist who got her addicted to heroin. She also found herself married for two weeks to a man who might or might not have been named Mr. Wilson. This Roaring Twenties lifestyle would, in the tales she told in Auckland as a refugee from war-ravaged Europe, transfix Sargeson, who along with other North Shore writers longed to feel part of Texidor's more literary, more cosmopolitan life. But it was her marriage in 1929 in Buenos Aires to the dashing Barcelona businessman Manuel Texidor that gave her the name Greville Texidor. This name best represents her independent, self-fashioned writer's identity among all the other identities she assumed as she went from man to man, country to country: Margaret Foster, Margot Greville, Margarita Texidor, Mrs Treasure, Margaret Droescher.

What makes this female shapeshifter a New Zealand writer? Schwass points out that it was only in New Zealand that she wrote fiction that would be published, only in New Zealand, "this seemingly uncongenial place" (243), where she found a muse and mentor in Frank Sargeson. Schwass's treatment of this relationship makes for fascinating storytelling. We get a sense of its dimensions from a quoted passage from Sargeson's memoir, *Never Enough: Places and People Mainly*. Recalling a 1941 visit to Texidor and Droescher, both classified as wartime enemy aliens and exiled to the backblocks of Northland, Sargeson writes: "At home in the decayed old house there was the remarkable (not to say remarkably beautiful) woman who was to become known to discriminating New Zealand readers as Greville Texidor. . . . Her manner was enchantingly friendly (how well she knew her dark eyes were not just for seeing with!)" (105).

Always alert to Texidor's compelling performance of self or selves, Sargeson would fondly address Texidor as "La Texibubble" or "dearest Greville you lovely Thing" (137). Theirs was a real friendship, not just a literary relationship, one that led them on excursions for oysters in Auckland pubs and joint holidays at Mount Maunganui. Maurice Duggan complicated this relationship in productive ways. He was one of Sargeson's "enslaved male disciples" (9), briefly Texidor's lover, the younger third of a triangle that, in Schwass's words, "looks very much like a more informal and non-institutional version of today's university-based creative writing workshop" (140). This informal creative writing workshop might have depended on Sargeson for its confidence and institutional connections, but its accomplishments were created out of the intersecting visions and ambitions of each of these distinctive New Zealand writers. What Sargeson saw in Texidor, Schwass lets us see too: the relations between sex, language, image, and geography that turn *All the Juicy Pastures* from an exploration of Greville Texidor and New Zealand into an exploration of New Zealand literature and the world.