

Ngaio Marsh: Her Life in Crime. By Joanne Drayton. HarperCollins, Auckland, 2008. 320pp. NZ price: \$59.99. ISBN 978-1-8695063-5-3.

THIS IS THE SECOND BIOGRAPHY of Dame Ngaio Marsh, playwright and crime writer. The first, a solid, authorized effort by Margaret Lewis, was published in 1991. A more intimate level of portraiture was definitely needed, and one that rebutted Lewis's simplistic and deeply erroneous view of Marsh as a fundamentally insecure and lonely woman. I applaud Joanne Drayton for providing this rebuttal, and for some extremely fine judgements, achieved largely through a careful and discreet use of the letters which Marsh wrote to Doris McIntosh, to John Schroder and to various members of Marsh's inner theatrical circle. On the basis of the letters to McIntosh, Drayton has been able to throw a useful spotlight on aspects of the 'inner life' of Dame Ngaio. Yet none of these justify the broad 'outing' of Marsh as a probable closeted lesbian 'mystery novelist', which is Drayton's core justification for writing this biography.

As HarperCollins still sell all 32 Marsh novels, it is scarcely surprising that this biography is replete with quite often lengthy plot summaries and sometimes tediously detailed excurses on the often parallel doings of the other 'Crime Queens'. It is clear that Drayton is really aiming at what Marsh once called 'detective fiction-mongers', and this means that it informs New Zealanders of the importance to Marsh of, and her global reputation for, her fictional achievements (when her more 'respectable' theatrical attainments have always loomed largest here). This focus is a real strength, to the extent that Drayton's narrative method embeds the writing of Marsh's crime books within the context of Ngaio's lived experience. However, a full-blown, critical biography this is not. For somehow, despite the coy references to 'Ngaio' all the way through, intimate portraiture is too frequently smothered by both the book's oscillating double-track structure (life and writing) and the often unsourced seas of speculation which Drayton serves up about Dame Ngaio's inner life. I am beginning to understand why Marsh once told me she did not want a biography written about her.

Philip Norman's fabulous biography of Douglas Lilburn and Jill Trevelyan's amazingly rich biography of Rita Angus are bench-marks of what Marsh deserved from a biographer. Drayton emphasizes the Marsh-Nelly Rhodes friendship as a variant of *l'affaire* Virginia Woolf-Vita Sackville-West, reporting Marsh destroying correspondence 'that would elucidate any deeply felt emotional or physical nuance in her relationships' (p.36) and to possibly cover her purchase of a *cette monsieur-dame* ensemble to 'play fashionable-butch to Nelly's languid femme', then quickly (and wisely) adding that all this 'is impossible to know' (p.35). Yet she is equally prompt to follow up with vague references to Marsh 'camping it up and testing the boundaries of cross-dressing' (p.36), adding in an interview the contestable statement about Marsh's deep voice: 'If you close your eyes, it's a chap'. In her book Drayton discusses photos of Marsh in 'mannish slacks, tie and beret', asking 'Was it to identify herself as a lesbian?' Drayton forgets that these were practical 'unisex' garments in the artsy set but is right to argue that 'In many ways Ngaio was an orthodox person' (p.57). Discussing Marsh's 'sexual reticence', Drayton is correct to observe that she was 'liberal and accepting of homosexuality yet vigilant in her efforts to remain distanced from its taint' (p.186) and that 'If Ngaio were a lesbian, she could not see the point of living openly as one' (p.277). But what does all this 'possibilist' rhetoric really say? It might *just* possibly be relevant in a parallel manner to John Osborne's aggressively 'heterosex' thrashing of Bernard Shaw and Noel Coward as prudently avoiding passion in their writing — 'Frigidity and caution demand an evasive style'¹ — because, like them, Marsh certainly perfected one, but perhaps it was to retain her own psychic space and not to conceal socially proscribed sexual impulses.

Despite these caveats, Drayton's 'Ngaio', it has to be said, is an androgynous, Third Sex *Mona Lisa* who almost certainly smirks because she has managed — until the advent of

this author–sleuth — to conceal from everyone her secret, special, intimate and lifelong relationship with Sylvia Fox and their shared eternity as a couple beyond the grave. It seems clear that Drayton believes she has solved the central enigma of Marsh’s reticent being and probably cracked ‘the Ngaio code’ of covert sexual inversion despite formally insisting that she could not give closure to such a claim. She *might* be right about Marsh as a woman infatuated with women, but this is asserted at the expense of not exploring some of Marsh’s strong heterosexual ‘interests’ and arguing clearly against the grain of Marsh’s statement to me that she was chary of discussing why she never married for fear of being deemed lesbian, which she insisted she was ‘*emphatically not*’.² I always found Dame Ngaio remarkably truthful and direct, and so I think the friendship between ‘Ngaio’ and ‘Syl’ was probably asexual and less charged than is suggested here. And when Drayton fingers Mrs Marjorie Chambers and the widow Anita Muling as sharing a house ‘and what many people believed was a lesbian relationship’ which involved both women ‘as regular guests’ at Marsh’s home (p.231) I begin to quail. Presumably some kind of associative logic is operating here and yet Drayton fails to quantify how ‘many’ people believed this inflexion to the Chambers–Muling friendship when only one person is sourced (and not a member of Marsh’s circle). Marsh’s secretary for 25 years, Rosemary Greene, has offered her opinion that ‘Ngaio would have coped with [Drayton’s] remarks O.K. as she [had] suffered this kind of thing before, but Ngaio’s very dear friends, Sylvia, Anita and Marjorie, coming from a different generation than that of Drayton’s sex-saturated one, I think would find it very hurtful’.³ Drayton concedes that in Marsh’s lifetime such probing ‘would have been problematic for her. But if she’d carried on living, I think she would have changed and evolved as we all have, and I think she would have been pretty open to it.’ Sorry, but I, who knew Dame Ngaio far better, cannot remotely concur. Let me be clear: I respect Dr Drayton for asking and testing the questions (as Lewis did not in her authorized text). My problem is the hyped marketing and rhetorical over-blow from the author about what amazing revelations she has fashioned when she has not in fact unearthed anything but speculation.

In cautiously welcoming this informative book as an addition to the growing corpus of tomes on the fascinating Dame, I am relieved to know that its author would agree with me that it certainly is *not* the last word on the complex, elusive and iconic Ngaio Marsh.

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NOTES

1 John Osborne, *A Better Class of Person: An Autobiography 1929–1956*, Harmondsworth, p.257.

2 Dame Ngaio Marsh to author (personal communication), 8 April 1979, Marton Cottage.

3 Rosemary Greene, personal letter to Bruce Harding, 18 November 2008.

The History of Epsom. Edited by Graham W.A. Bush. Epsom and Eden District Historical Society Inc., Auckland, 2006 (reprint 2007). xvi + 468pp. NZ price: \$65.00. ISBN 0-473-11102-0.

THE QUINTESSENCE OF HISTORY may well be biography, as Disraeli and Emerson aver. But where, and amidst what surroundings, things happened is scarcely less useful for understanding the deeds, experiences and observations of people. For individual lives occur in and are shaped by place, as well as by time, and are influenced by the lives, interests and avocations of other inhabitants of the locality. Hence, as Graham Bush makes