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A READING OF THE NOVELS

OF

JAMES COURAGE

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the requirements for the degree  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines in detail the eight novels of James Courage (1903-1963) expatriate New Zealand novelist. The Introduction provides some biographical details of the author's family, his early life in Canterbury province, and his subsequent years in England. The case is made for seeing each of Courage's novels as part of a developing canon of work in which the themes of family relationships and the ongoing struggle for the child to break free of emotional ties with the parents constantly recur and are imaginatively reworked. The relationship between the mother and son is seen to be of particular concern to the author. While some other literary influences are considered, especially that of D.H. Lawrence, the ideas of Sigmund Freud are seen as a major influence on Courage's thinking about primal relationships between parent and child, and about the establishment of sexual orientation. Some possible reasons for Courage's decision to live in England rather than New Zealand are suggested. The attempt is made to justify seeing the author as a "New Zealand" novelist in spite of his expatriate status. In this process of justification the ideas of H.S. Canby and I.A. Gordon on the relationship between literature and national identity are also discussed. Courage is claimed to be a New Zealand rather than an English writer on the basis of his birth, his use of New Zealand settings in so many of his novels, the constant reworking of his early experiences in this country and his portrayal of the small but distinctive section of New Zealand society which he knew so well. In as much as Courage does seem to fictionalise his own experience his novels are seen as having a biographical basis, although the extent to which this is so cannot yet be determined until primary sources of biographical information become available.

Following the introductory chapter separate chapters are devoted to full discussion of each novel, working in chronological order from the first, One House (1933), to the last, The Visit to Penmorten (1961). Salient features of each novel are discussed and illustrated with references to each text: the points considered fall into the two categories of mechanical considerations such as plotting, characterisation, setting, dialogue, symbolism, and so on, and themes. Links between the novels, particularly in the treatment and development of recurrent themes, are highlighted. It is demonstrated that Courage's novels show his ever-increasing skill as a novelist and his growing self-confidence in treating of new or controversial themes, as well as the persistence of minor

stylistic faults, especially the tendency to use melodramatic or self-conscious dialogue in emotionally-charged scenes.

The chapter devoted to discussion of A Way of Love focuses on Courage's unique status in New Zealand literature as the author of the first full-length novel to deal with the theme of homosexuality sensitively and realistically. The discussion involves consideration of the critical and bureaucratic reception of this novel in New Zealand at the time of its publication. Discussion of this novel and its successor includes looking at the ways in which James Courage was an innovative novelist. These include his concern in the fiction with the actual process of producing the fiction --a concern which is strikingly post-modern--and his use of detached, ironic black humour.

The Conclusion points to areas of James Courage's life and writing in which further study remains to be done. The two Appendices contain useful material, much of it hitherto unpublished, regarding the publication of the novels and circumstances surrounding the "banning" of A Way of Love by the New Zealand authorities in the early nineteen-sixties.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

James Francis Courage was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, on February 9th, 1903. The son of Frank Hubert Courage and Zoë Frances Courage, née Peache, he was the eldest of their five children and was linked by family marriages to such established Canterbury families as the Harpers and the Tripps. As both of his parents had been born in Canterbury, James Courage was a third-generation Cantabrian.

Growing up on the family farm "Seadown", near Amberley in North Canterbury, Courage began formal schooling as a boarder at Mr Wiggin's preparatory school in Christchurch. Later he was a boarder at Christ's College from 1916 to 1921. In this, he followed a family tradition of private schooling: his two Peache uncles had earlier attended Christ's College, while his Peache grandfather had been educated at Haileybury and his Courage grandfather had been an old Harrovian. On a visit to England in 1922 Courage decided to study at Oxford University. He entered St John's College, Oxford, in October of 1923; after taking a second-class degree in English he came down in June, 1927. Of his education Courage later wrote, "From twelve to nineteen I was educated, badly, at Christ's College, Christchurch, New Zealand. I then came to Oxford--St John's College--where I read Eng. Lit. (a useless but delightful school.)"<sup>(1)</sup>

From 1927 on Courage lived in England, apart from brief periods on holiday abroad and one extended visit back to New Zealand some time between November of 1933 and May, 1935. His return to New Zealand followed a lengthy period of convalescence in a T.B. sanatorium <sup>(2)</sup> and the publication of his first novel, One House, in 1933. During the Second World War Courage worked in a book shop, remaining there until the early 1950s. He suffered bouts of mental depression, for which he received treatment at different times, and died of a heart attack at Hampstead on October 5th, 1963, in his 61st year.

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(1) Refer to Appendix A, the Author's Questionnaire completed by James Courage prior to the publication of The Young have Secrets.

(2) There is a discrepancy in available sources about this period. In his Preface to Such Separate Creatures, Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1973, Charles Brasch speaks of a sanatorium at Mundsley, Norfolk, but a letter from Ms Livia Gollancz of Victor Gollancz Ltd, states that James Courage wrote his first novel from a sanatorium in Sussex. (Letter from Livia Gollancz, 27 June, 1989.)

Courage first began writing while still at school <sup>(3)</sup> and continued this interest at Oxford by contributing to a number of student publications and writing musical criticism for The Isis. <sup>(4)</sup> A landmark in his writing history following One House seems to have been the production of his play, Private History, at the Gate Theatre, London, in October, 1938. Any hopes of seeing this play in the West End were quashed, however, by the action of the censor who, according to Charles Brasch, refused permission for further productions <sup>(5)</sup>. The writing of short stories may have been a spur for the production of longer works; Courage submitted short stories to various publications and many of these were gathered together in the collection Such Separate Creatures which was compiled and edited by Charles Brasch and published in 1973. Courage's second novel, The Fifth Child, did not appear until 1948. This was followed at approximately two-yearly intervals by Desire Without Content (1950), Fires in the Distance (1952), The Young have Secrets (1954), The Call Home (1956), A Way of Love (1959) and The Visit to Penmorten (1961).

Courage is undoubtedly a New Zealander by birth and by reason of his early life in this country, but his long years of residence in England make him an expatriate. Not all his novels have a New Zealand setting: the first, and the last two, of his eight novels are set entirely in England with no reference at all to New Zealand; of the others, they are all set in periods earlier than the period at which they were actually written, and none is set in the period after 1935, the date of the author's last visit to the country of his birth. This raises the question of criteria by which Courage can be seen as a New Zealand, rather than an English, writer. Such a consideration is complicated by the fact that Courage appeared to focus in his five New Zealand novels on one particular social group, the group that Frank Sargeson labelled "South Island sheep-farming pukka sahibs." <sup>(6)</sup> This

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(3) "James Courage: A Checklist of Literary Manuscripts held at the Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin" in Journal of New Zealand Literature 5, 1987, p.110 (author not known) mentions a short story, "Checkmated", co-authored by Courage during his time at Christ's College.

(4) A detailed list of Courage's undergraduate writing is given in Cathe Giffuni's "James Courage: A Bibliography" in Journal of New Zealand Literature 5, 1987, p. 95.

(5) Brasch, Preface to Such Separate Creatures, p. 10.

(6) Frank Sargeson "Review of The Fifth Child in Landfall III, 9 (March 1949), pp 72-73.

group was small, landed, wealthy, middle-class, well-educated and especially concerned with farming. Its families were interconnected through marriage, and were strongly "English" in their manners and outlook. Since these facts are so evident in James Courage's novels, the charge might be made against his New Zealand novels that they are narrow in geographic range, focus on a tiny section of society and look back in time, ignoring the conditions and problems that may have existed in this country at the time at which Courage was writing. The three English novels also appear to focus chiefly on the middle classes, while the homosexual themes of A Way of Love set this particular novel even further outside the mainstream of New Zealand life in the 1950s, as M.K. Joseph's description of homosexual relationships as being "outside any possible society" <sup>(7)</sup> shows, an attitude endorsed by the subsequent "banning" of this novel in New Zealand <sup>(8)</sup>.

Consideration of a writer's "New Zealandness" is possibly less important today than it was in Courage's day, when there was considerable concern with the link between literature and national identity. Writing in 1943 Ian Gordon claimed that "A New Zealand author is one who identifies himself with his country." <sup>(9)</sup> In 1945 a visiting American academic, Dr H.S. Canby, wrote "...what makes a book part of a national culture, and especially a new national culture, is the extent to which it expresses the new way of life in the new country." <sup>(10)</sup> Canby saw the author's ability to use the characteristic rhythms of his country's language as a particularly important consideration. Both theorists seemed to believe that fiction should reflect and comment on the broad society from which it stems. Courage's writing certainly meets Gordon's criterion in its strictest interpretation: his New Zealand novels show a sensitivity to the rural landscape of Canterbury and to its seasonal changes. His novels do not reflect, however, the larger centres of urban, industrialised life. They describe the events which would have been important in the New Zealand that he remembered--the various activities on the farm, rural social pursuits,

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(7) M.K. Joseph Review Landfall XIII, 50 (June 1959), pp 176-179.

(8) See Appendix B.

(9) I.A. Gordon "Has New Zealand Any Literature?" in NZ Listener 9, 224 (October 8th 1943).

(10) H.S. Canby "Literature in a New Land." in NZ Listener 13, 321 (August 10th 1945), p. 17.

small town life, the gradual effects of a war which was being fought on the other side of the world, and so on--but pass over other events of national importance such as the economic depression of the 1930s, the Second World War and the post-War period of prosperity. When Courage's work is measured against Canby's statement it might be seen to fall short by an even greater measure. Because of his focus on a very restricted social group Courage's novels cannot be seen as reflecting any new national culture in its totality. Their predominant view might be seen as conservative in the extreme in that they seem to insist on the continuation of a particular way of life which was, in fact, changing by the minute. A closer study of The Young Have Secrets shows, however, the extent to which Courage was aware of the many changes that were taking place.

This discussion does not denigrate Courage's work, however, so much as point up the narrowness of dated views about the literature/nationalism link. Gordon and Canby, both new arrivals in New Zealand, may have been considering the question from preconceived and rather naïve viewpoints, ignoring the complexity which always seems to have existed in our society, in spite of long-cherished notions of egalitarianism. Furthermore, although focusing mainly on one segment of New Zealand society, Courage did not entirely ignore other social groups. With a keen ear for characteristic turns of phrase, and a skill in describing settings and reflecting individual concerns and outlooks on life, Courage created minor characters such as the Warners' servant Kate, Lennox Iverson--the lonely widower struggling to make a go of his farm--and the vindictive laundrywoman, Mrs Nelson, who are as convincingly realised and as memorable as any of his middle-class characters.

It is important to realise that in his writing Courage was not attempting to reflect and justify any broad picture of New Zealand society as it might have been in his day; his particular concern was to answer the fundamental question of who he was and how he came to be that person. In this, it might be argued that he was taking Pope's dictum that the "proper study of mankind is man", and making a kind of object lesson of his own life. He subscribed to Freudian beliefs in the primacy of early childhood relationships and experiences--hence his return, time and again, to the settings and character types remembered from his own childhood. Courage's novels probe the primal relationship between son and mother and, to a lesser extent, that between son and father. He explores the ways in which these

relationships shape the child's nature, and continue to have a lifelong influence on the way that the child perceives himself and other people. In his constant return to the childhood theme Courage illustrates the claim that a great deal of New Zealand fiction is concerned with the child. <sup>(11)</sup>. What Courage shows of family relationships within a particular social group and at a particular period may have relevance to the wider society and to the present, depending on the reader's own interpretations. His creative rearrangements and exploration of early childhood experiences can be seen as a precedent for such writers as Frank Sargeson, Janet Frame and Maurice Gee whose fiction frequently reworks the basic material which is presented in their autobiographical writing <sup>(12)</sup>.

Such a view of Courage's work can encompass those of his novels with a New Zealand setting and those set in England, since both types are concerned, essentially, with the same themes of family shaping and relating. At times they seem to be explorations, through fantasy, of the possibilities inherent in human experience. In this way the author is able to present the very different viewpoints of, for example, a single woman, a child, a homosexual man, a middle-aged mother or a husband, so that each has validity. Similarly, he can reject some of these viewpoints as being inappropriate to his protagonist who so often seems to be a persona adopted by the author so that he might explore these fictional possibilities. Courage may have been a little like James Caspar, the author character he created, for whom writing was a substitute for human relationships <sup>(13)</sup>.

James Courage's writing may also have served as a form of therapy during his years of psychiatric treatment, and provided him with a cathartic outlet. Without recourse to biographical material such as letters and personal papers it is not possible to be certain of this point <sup>(14)</sup>, but it is possible to discern a growing self-confidence in the writing, along with

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(11) See, for example, M.H. Holcroft's Islands of Innocence, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1964. Holcroft looks at The Young have Secrets in the chapter "Rites of Initiation", pp 50-54.

(12) Compare, for example, Maurice Gee's Plumb trilogy with his recollections of childhood in "Beginnings", Islands 5 (1977) pp 284-292.

(13) James Courage. A Way of Love, London: Jonathan Cape, 1959 p. 112.

(14) Personal papers held by the Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, will not be available for general reading until AD 2005.

a concern to explore human anguish and psychotherapeutic methods of resolving this. In the early novels characters fail to face up to the causes of their unhappiness: like Catherine Wanklin they travel abroad to escape themselves, or like Leo Donovan they turn their backs on family and head for an uncertain future in the city; other characters like Florence Warner and Celia Donovan settle back into their marriages with a grim acceptance of the lot they have chosen, or like Mrs Kendal they fabricate their own rosy versions of the past and seek solace in religion. It is only in the later novels that characters are able to discover and accept the causes of their pain, and to take steps which open up the possibility of a happier way of living. Norman Grant performs his own psychoanalysis in a primitive manner before resolving to return to England and qualify as a psychiatrist so that he can help other people; Bruce Quantock, the middle-aged homosexual who loves and then loses, epitomises the confidence and self-determination typical of the later novels; his younger lover, Philip, reflects the characters of the earlier novels, and possibly also reflects the author in his youth in his reluctance to accept the truth about himself and his inability to choose the most appropriate course of action. The final novel focuses specifically on the processes and benefits of psychotherapy, and reaffirms the basic need for humans to be involved with other human beings.

Courage remains ambivalent in his attitude towards England. His first novel was set firmly in English county life, but he seems to have felt dissatisfaction with his achievements in this novel, confessing in a later interview that his roots in English life at that time were too shallow for him to be able to write as an English writer <sup>(15)</sup>. In spite of this, in subsequent novels he creates characters who constantly yearn for the English way of life which they see as a refined contrast to the rough, "colonial" ways of New Zealanders. For many of these characters, such as the elderly Garnetts, the difficulty is that their lives have become rooted in the colonial setting and it is no longer possible for them to return to the country they yearn for. In Courage's novels England stands for refinement, for education and advanced thinking: both Ronald Warner and Paul Warner travel to England to begin medical studies, while Norman Grant must return there if he wants to study psychiatry. Courage's own ambivalence towards

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(15) Interview with Phillip Wilson in NZ Listener XVII, 698 (21 November 1952) p. 12.

England must have been shaped, at least in part, by his family background and his early experiences. Grandparents on both sides of his family came out to New Zealand with the avowed intention of investing capital in the new colony for no longer than the time necessary to increase their fortunes before returning "Home" <sup>(16)</sup>. The Courage grandparents achieved this ambition, but Grandfather Peache died at too early an age to realise his dream, leaving a large amount of money behind him. Again, both sides of the family were well-rooted in English society through mercantile interests such as brewing, shipbuilding and trading in exotic timbers, through family connections with the Established Church, and by descent from English aristocracy <sup>(17)</sup>. Such family claims must have been important considerations in the young settlement of Canterbury, that most "English" of New Zealand settlements. Education at an institution modelled on the great public schools of England would no doubt have further influenced Courage's attitudes towards England and his country of birth.

There are further considerations in Courage's choice of expatriate status. The cultural climate in New Zealand during much of his lifetime may not have been conducive to a writer of his outlook. Heather Roberts argues that the same pioneering spirit that had tamed the physical environment was perpetuated in New Zealand fiction for many years <sup>(18)</sup>. She claims that our literature was dominated by the white, pioneering male ethic and so reflected only the experience of the dominant Pakeha male, excluding the experiences of those groups--women, Maori, homosexual--who did not belong to the dominant group. She further claims that this attitude continued to have an effect for a long time after the initial pioneering period. Bobby Pickering's explanation of the critical reception of Courage's work has

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(16) Refer Sarah Amelia Courage Lights and Shadows of Colonial Life, Christchurch: Whitcoulls, 1976, and Constance Gray (compiler) Quiet With the Hills: the Life of Alfred Edward Peache of Mount Somers, Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1970. Both books contain invaluable background to the Courage and Peache families.

(17) Zoë Peache's great-great-grandparents had been Sir Robert and Lady Diana Sheffield who were descendants of the 1st Marquis, later Duke, of Normandy; this ancestor built Buckingham House which the Hanovers later transformed into the present-day Buckingham Palace.

(18) Heather Roberts, Ph.D. thesis: Public and Private Realities--The Subjective Novel in New Zealand. Canterbury University, 1979.

affinities with Roberts' thesis <sup>(19)</sup>. Pickering claims that Courage's work was deliberately ignored because it was the work of a homosexual writer who did not belong to the literary mainstream of his day, a writer whose writing threatened any attempts to impose a uniform view on society. While both Roberts and Pickering have particular biases, it cannot be denied that James Courage must have felt very alien in his home country. The family ties to England may well have assisted his decision to live there permanently. In England's older, larger and more varied society it is possible that Courage felt himself freer to live and write as he wished than was possible at that time in New Zealand. Elizabeth Caffin certainly takes this view when she writes, "Courage had grown up in a society which, though well established in a new land, had continued to keep one eye on England. He now stayed on there, an understandable escape by a writer and a homosexual from a New Zealand milieu not tolerant of difference." <sup>(20)</sup>

Regardless of whether one accepts the reasons put forward by such writers as Heather Roberts and Bobby Pickering for the lack of attention accorded James Courage's novels in his home country, one has to recognise that his talents have been underrated. The neglect of his work may well be partly attributable to the limited numbers of his editions; apart from reruns of The Young have Secrets and A Way of Love, his novels appeared in relatively small editions and to date only The Young have Secrets has been reprinted posthumously <sup>(21)</sup>. One novel was adapted as a radio play <sup>(22)</sup> in 1982 but there have been no film or television adaptations of any of Courage's work, with the result that his novels are now hard to find and little known.

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(19) Bobby Pickering "The Conspiracy Against James Courage", Pink Triangle 18 (December 1980), p. 5.

(20) Elizabeth Caffin Introduction to The Young have Secrets, Wellington: Allen and Unwin, 1985, pp ix-x.

(21) See Mr Michael Bott's letter of 9 October 1989 in Appendix A for print runs of Courage's last four novels, also Livia Gollancz's letter of 27 June 1989 in Appendix A for print runs of One House. Unfortunately an inquiry to Constable Ltd elicited no response, so no figures are available for Courage's other novels.

(22) The Fifth Child was adapted by Bill Baer and broadcast by the BCNZ National Programme on June 16 1982 at 8.45 p.m. NZ Listener CI, 2211 (June 12 1982) p. 24 carried an article about Courage's life and work as background to the broadcast.

There are, undoubtedly, stylistic faults in Courage's writing; the most noticeable of these is the tendency to employ a high-flown "romantic" style when describing exchanges between lovers, and a habit of resolving all plot threads rather too neatly and not always in a convincing manner. These criticisms aside, his skill as a writer is considerable. He is able to evoke period and setting in such a way that the reader has a strong impression of the background to each novel's actions. His plots move forward at a good pace to a satisfying point of conclusion, and characters are developed in a credible way by means of a number of devices among which dialogue is the most noteworthy. Although plots tend to become rather more complex as writing ability and confidence grow, there is usually economy in the telling, with little that is extraneous to the main narrative line. While much of Courage's style can be described as realistic, he is also an experimental and innovative novelist in several ways, most strikingly in A Way of Love. In this novel he breaks new ground for a New Zealand writer both in subject and in technique. In the case of the first he does this by choosing to write about the development and decline of a homosexual relationship. He faces his theme squarely, refusing to make his points by subtle suggestion which might be open to any ambiguous interpretation, and does not attempt to idealise the world he chooses to describe. He does this in the face of the negative attitudes that were held about the subject in his day so that this particular novel stands as a monument to the novelist's strength of character and ability. Only now, after the passage of some thirty years and the 1985 Homosexual Law Reform Bill are other New Zealand writers beginning to deal with this theme at equivalent length. He also diverges from the realistic mode by having his narrator/author explore the purposes and processes of writing at the same time as he is unfolding the narrative; in this way a form of metafiction is created, in which the reader is constantly reminded of the choices and decisions that must be made when a fiction is being created. In his final novel, A Visit to Penmorten, Courage again demonstrates the extent to which he differed from other writers of his day by chronicling in a sensitive way the process of psychoanalysis; at the same time he is able to operate on two levels, developing reader sympathy for the young protagonist whilst introducing a note of ironic black humour in his depiction of some of the other characters.

I have decided not to examine the short stories, collected in the volume Such Separate Creatures, in this thesis, though a comparison of those

better-known short pieces with the eight novels could be a worthwhile future area for study.

The following chapters look closely at the individual novels in Courage's canon, approaching them in chronological order. The attempt is made to examine themes, as well as mechanical considerations such as settings, characterisation and plot development in such a way as to demonstrate that Courage's central concern in his fiction is with self-discovery through the exploration of primal child-parent relationships or substitute equivalents of these. It is seen that Courage's writing was influenced by Freudian notions about human psychology from the very first novel; this is seen particularly in the Freudian symbols which are incorporated into the narrative, and eventually turns into a concern with the benefits and the actual process of psychotherapy. It is also seen that while Courage was influenced by other literary sources, in particular the possible influence of popular drama and the writing of D.H. Lawrence, he possessed writing strengths from the very start of his career, and gradually evolved a very confident and distinctive style of his own.