

E.W. Herd

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In an encomium of this sort it is customary to talk of warts and all, but in fact the warts seldom appear. Here, too, the occasion scarcely calls for mention of blemishes - *de vivis nil nisi bene*. On the other hand, fulsome tribute concluding with: 'Long may you continue, Eric, to contribute to German studies in New Zealand and the wider world' would serve neither the addressee nor the general reader. It would be more interesting to see him, perhaps, as a singular element and yet type, in New Zealand society and (high-flown as it may sound) the culture of the Western world.

From the date and place of birth we can assume he was born in provincial England into what Lukács would call 'das spätbürgerliche Zeitalter' - a society based on the sanctity of property, assuming that merit is rewarded within moderation, approving competition and thrift, which in turn implies subordinating short-term to long-term satisfaction. It believed in the value of education - appropriate to one's social origins - with a vestigial deference to the Classics. It believed it was progressive, although of course never radical, but, given a choice in elections for example, chose the status quo. And although Staffordshire was near the heart of an empire on which the sun never set, the sun nevertheless rose and declined in the nature of things on a large number of unemployed. It was in fact a society of some frustration and humbug, where one's origins and one's accent stereotyped one and yet a society which allowed a considerable freedom of expression and action, even reward of talent. The paradoxes and contradictions of British society, its class structure reflected and perpetuated, as in most societies, in its education system, and in particular the role of the gifted lower or middle-class grammar school child in the evolution of democracy and discharge of authority still call for an historian.

Eric Herd's early career is not untypical of this particular class of child between the wars - success at school followed by a scholarship to Queen's College, Cambridge. It also fits well into the contradictions of British society that like many volunteers and conscripts in the war he helped to make the world safe for democracy by defending British India - a class and racist society if ever there was one. He was wounded in the desert, served in India and in Europe, and was demobilized with the rank of major.

One might speculate that he belonged to that very large group who found their war ideals expressed not in the rhetoric of political speech writers or journalists, but in the Labour election victory of 1945. And yet outwardly he seems on occasion to be a sardonic parody of the establishment figure - cricket (in someone from Staffordshire of all places), a military moustache, his monocle, the mention in *Who's Who* of the Royal Garwhal Rifles, and his lectureship, later senior lectureship at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. One has wondered occasionally how far conformity was in conflict with principle, but he belongs to a class and a generation which assumed that more was achieved for oneself and one's beliefs by adaptation than by rejection.

Eric Herd came to Otago in 1953, was appointed to the chair of Modern Languages in 1956. There is a hint in some of the academics who have come to New Zealand of the beachcomber, but there was also a tradition of intellectual and institutional vitality in the constituents of the University of New Zealand. The beachcomber and the scholar were not necessarily far apart. It meant a touch of unorthodoxy and experimentation which contrasts refreshingly with the Anglo-Saxon pattern elsewhere.

The University of Otago, when Eric Herd arrived, was in fact merely a teaching college, which did not give its own degrees nor even set its own examinations. From the end of the 'fifties the old brick and stone veneer buildings - nowadays, as elsewhere in New Zealand, invested with a piety which their squalor did not justify - were gradually superseded or dominated by large concrete structures. Similarly the academic industry gained the advantages of scale - a second, even a third and fourth teacher of the subject, funds for books and research, visitors from other universities and abroad. Every university in New Zealand and Australia has been through these 'Gründerjahre' of the 'sixties, some with delusions of grandeur which cause a wince or a smile elsewhere. Otago remained the smallest of the old foundations with a unique atmosphere and links with the town, the conventions, values and aspirations of whose citizens were still recognisably those of the country from which they had migrated.

Eric Herd's teaching was, in the 'fifties and 'sixties, immense in range, and specialisation virtually impossible, as he pointed out in his inaugural lecture.¹ And yet his department has produced more doctorates than all the other German departments in New Zealand put together. He has never gone for numbers - not possible in Dunedin, anyhow; he has gone for scholarship.

One of his early articles assessed the reverence for Ernst Wiechert. It accepts Wiechert's literary merit and his courage which led to imprisonment in Buchenwald, but "one must examine the effect of Wiechert's work upon the political outlook of his readers. If, as I have tried to show, the effect is to produce a state of apathy and pessimism, which always serves as a hot-bed for the growth of political abuses, then . . . he is not a great writer."²

This was not doctrinaire: it was a commonsense reaction which no one else had managed to formulate to what was pernicious in and about Wiechert. In

the 'seventies he did something similar to the New Zealand Prime Minister by a textual analysis of *The Rise and Fall of a Young Turk* in an after-dinner speech to the N.Z. Association of Language Teachers. Common to both these and to all his work is the sharp intellect, the sensitivity to language and the implicit sense of values which so often expresses itself not in strong moral indignation but in irony.

Over the range of his scholarship and teaching, the three main areas - Broch, narrative technique and the interest in contemporary literature, in particular that of the DDR long before it became fashionable, when reading it was, indeed, still a form of masochism - concern themselves ultimately with the essence of literary studies, values and morality.

As for his sensitivity to language and its misuse, one meets it again and again. For example, he speaks of the "self-willed flight from reality into the intoxication of the word",³ and "this is not literary criticism but surrender to the imprecision of high-flown phrases . . ."⁴ Or, with a shaft which grazes two at the same time: "even Martini seems to be hypnotised into talking about Broch in Broch's own language".⁵ It is part of his hostility to falsity and 'lack of accuracy in details'⁶ which anyone who has seen a report of his on a thesis will recognise. It is remarkable in someone otherwise so tolerant, even on occasion flippant - a flippancy reflected in the lunch-time cricket in the departmental corridor, against the frosty disapproval of those who thought a bat was a mammal. But the two sides are there and the response to him as scholar or teacher is closely linked to and enhanced by the response to his social charm - ambiguous word, a possible wart.

This charm and humour account in some measure for what might be called his provincial success, as Pro-Vice-Chancellor and as City Councillor. Here in the acceptance of responsibility is that initial middle-class assumption that a society does not have to be destroyed to be improved, that it is better to adapt than to reject.

A revolution - whether manifested in the decay of class distinction by accent and its replacement by sporting a tattoo, by the split infinitive or the political impossibility of subordinating short term to long term satisfaction - has, nevertheless, taken place. It is doubtful if this revolution, which is still going on, is affected by groups' chanting in chorus and jostling politicians. Its momentum, in fact, is not influenced by any single individual. In this context, what seems to be remarkable in Eric Herd is not necessarily the scholar, recognised by his Gastprofessur in Tübingen, by the award of a gold medal or by the distinction of a *Festschrift*, but the quiet retention of certain modes and assumptions - not even values - in an Antipodean society. It is the transmission of these assumptions which may eventually be significant.

Notes

- 1 E. W. Herd, *A General Education through Specialisation. The Challenge to Modern Language Teaching in New Zealand*. University of Otago, Dunedin 1957, pp. 10-11.
- 2 E.W. Herd, "The 'unpolitical' outlook of Ernst Wiechert", *GLL* 7 (1953-54), p. 271.
- 3 *GLL* 14 (1960-61), p. 125.
- 4 *AUMLA* 36 (1971), p. 265.
- 5 *GLL* 13 (1959-60), p. 262.
- 6 *AUMLA* 36 (1971), p. 266.