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OUT and ABOUT

CHRISTMAS WITH NGAIO MARSH

Visiting Ngaio Marsh House, Christchurch, New Zealand

A large theatrical mask, eyebrows raised and wearing a quizzical smile, adorns a closed door in the Long Room of Ngaio Marsh House. The mask serves as a metaphor for the life and work of Dame Ngaio Marsh, for her ability to create characters in detective fiction who hide behind 'masks' until all is revealed; and also for her passionate involvement in live theatre in New Zealand.

Devotees of crime fiction will recognise Dame Ngaio Marsh's name immediately as that of one of the 'Queens' of the 'Golden Age' of the genre, along with Dame Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Margery Allingham. While both Christie and Marsh continued to write into the 1970s and 1980s (Christie's last book was published in 1976), the 'golden age' of these writers is usually identified as between the 1920s and the Second World War. Nevertheless, despite their 'vintage' status, and their tendency to reflect the social mores of a bygone era, the books of the 'Queens of Crime' are still read and enjoyed today, and have enjoyed a new lease of life when adapted as movies for television and DVD. Sufficient time has elapsed to have given them a certain nostalgia value.

Born on 23 April 1895 in Christchurch, Ngaio Marsh, in common with many of her generation and social class (the prosperous denizens of the Canterbury region of New Zealand's South Island) identified with the culture of England as much as with that of the land of her birth. She has been criticised for a clear preference in her writing for depicting an outmoded class system, instead of reflecting the social realities of the New Zealand of her times; and for insisting on a 'proper' English accent for actors in her theatrical productions. In Ngaio Marsh's defence, such attitudes were also common among middle-class Australians of her generation: like her, many referred to England as 'Home' until at least the 1960s, not least Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, who was born the year before Ngaio, loved her whodunits, and in the 1960s wrote to tell her so. He died four years before Ngaio's death in February 1982.

While most people on this side of the Tasman know of Ngaio Marsh only in her role as a crime novelist, there is a lot more to discover about this distinguished native of Christchurch. For Ngaio Marsh's early passion was for painting, followed by an equally intense – and influential – passion for directing live theatre, particularly the plays of Shakespeare. It was for her contribution to New Zealand theatre that she was made a Dame of the British Empire in 1966, not for

her literary career, which began in 1934 in England with the publication of *A Man Lay Dead*, followed by 31 other crime novels, short stories, autobiography and travel writing. Her literary productions supported her work in the theatre, from which, along with her training in art at the School of Art at Canterbury University College, she drew inspiration for many of her characters and plots.

Ngaio Marsh's multifaceted life can be explored in a visit to her home in the Christchurch suburb of Cashmere, 'Marton Cottage' – now known as Ngaio Marsh House. As befits the nature of her life and enthusiasms, her former home combines a theatrical experience and a house museum, showcasing both her lifestyle and the many products of her diverse artistic endeavours.



Mask in Long Room, Ngaio Marsh House



Ngaio Marsh (at piano) and friend in the Long Room, Marton Cottage, c.1950
Ngaio Marsh House Archive

The Ngaio Marsh House 'experience' begins at the sign pointing the way up a leafy lane to the house, tucked away out of sight in the quiet streets of Cashmere. The bloody dagger and the masks of comedy and tragedy, backed by

a stylised graphic of Ngaio herself, hint at the drama you will encounter as you proceed through the terraced garden to a modest timber cottage.



Volunteers keep the sloping garden well tended and full of flowers. The house itself was built for Ngaio's parents, Henry Edmund Marsh and Rose Marsh (née Seager) in 1906, to a design by one of Christchurch's leading architects, Samuel Hurst Seager, a cousin of Rose's; and was extended by Ngaio later in her life. Although she spent considerable periods of time in England, this was Ngaio's home – and the scene of much of her painting, writing and theatrical activities – all her life, until she died in 1982, having just finished correcting the proofs of her last crime novel, *Light Thickens*, in which a production of *Macbeth* forms the basis for the plot.



Lupins bloom in the garden of Ngaio Marsh House

The ambience inside the House belies its circumspect exterior. Once inside, visitors find themselves in spaces in which objects related to Ngaio's many artistic interests are arranged in a combination of theatrical *mise-en-scène* and thematic exhibition. Drama is to the fore in the presentation – models of bloody

hands and skulls intermingle with copies of Ngaio's crime novels, paintings and photographs, and scripts for plays. A bust of her beloved Shakespeare presides over playbills and costume designs in the library. The Christmas dinner table in the dining room (with its attractive bay window) is set for the festive meal, with models of food, bottles of wine, crackers, flowers and fruit, and more novels and memorabilia deployed to maximum effect.



A touch of the Gothic at Ngaio Marsh House



Ngaio Marsh's great passion was for producing Shakespeare's plays



(Above and below) Christmas dinner table at Ngaio Marsh House, December 2005



Her bedroom is arranged to create the illusion that Ngaio has just stepped out for a minute or so. Ngaio's slippers and hot water bottle are on the floor, and her breakfast awaits her attention. Around the room are more objects relating to her life and career, including one of her paintings, 'The Quarry'. The kitchen has tea towels drying on an overhead rack, and utensils, cook books and crockery ready for another meal to be prepared.



Scenes from Dame Ngaio's bedroom



'The Quarry' by Ngaio Marsh, on display in Ngaio Marsh House



Utensils in the kitchen

Unlike the presentations in the rest of the House, the interpretation in the Long Room (Ngaio's lounge or sitting room) 'plays it straight', with the room organised much as it was in her lifetime. Here are comfortable chairs, more bookcases and portraits, a piano with photos and memorabilia on the top related to family members and life events, and her writing desk with typewriter and large Random House dictionary. Ngaio Marsh's sense of style and, for her times, boldness in combining paint colours, fabrics and objects, is evident. This is a peaceful and gracious room, with sunlight streaming in from the garden – it must have been heaven to write in. The Long Room is also sufficiently large to have accommodated actors who came to Marton Cottage for last minute rehearsals of the productions that Ngaio staged in Christchurch.



A comfortable corner of the Long Room



Ngaio's writing desk in the Long Room



Ngaio Marsh's portrait in Long Room



Family photos and memorabilia in Long Room



Bookshelves and portrait in Long Room

Ngaio Marsh House is thus a treasure trove of informative and engaging tableaux, interiors and objects interpreting the life of this outstanding New Zealander. A visit to Ngaio Marsh House can be arranged by appointment at a cost of NZ\$10 per person, and visitors can be assured of an enthusiastic and informed presentation of its features. Curator Dr Bruce Harding conducted Dr Linda Young and me through the House last December, and we were able to imagine, as we stood in the dining room and looked at the lavish dinner table, what it would have been like to have Christmas dinner with Dame Ngaio Marsh – if she could have forgiven us our Aussie accents!

Roslyn Russell
MAM Editor



Dr Bruce Harding, Curator, Ngaio Marsh House
Courtesy of Dr Bruce Harding

Ngaio Marsh House is a non-profit, charitable heritage venture supported by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

Bookings: 64 3 337 9248

For more information email info@ngaio-marsh.org.nz or check the website www.ngaio-marsh.org.nz

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