



*No Fretful Sleeper, A Life of Bill Pearson* by Paul Millar. Auckland: AUP (2010). RRP \$59.99. Pb, 380pp. ISBN: 9781869404192. Reviewed by Cassandra Fusco.

Dr. Paul Millar (1962, Oxford, NZ) lives in Christchurch and lectures in English at the University of Canterbury where he shares his passion for literature (English, Australasian and South Pacific) and literary history. He is especially known for his work on James K. Baxter (1926-72) a poet whose grasp of social process and sense of difference gave impetus to his writing.

With *No Fretful Sleeper, A Life of Bill Pearson*, Millar brings into brimming life another New Zealand writer alert to the validity of differences. The title of this study, coined from the subject's biting essay 'Fretful Sleepers',<sup>1</sup> says it all. William (Bill) Harrison Pearson (1922-2002), was a brave and gifted man; an extraordinary writer, both creative and academic, and an able critic. Why then did Pearson the fiction writer cease writing after one novel, *Coal Flat* (1963)?

Millar's study, drawing upon a cache of previously unpublished material, provides the

answer and reveals that Pearson lived in but survived times darkened by cultural cringe and gross social and political intolerances.

The 1930s (in NZ and beyond) meant hardship for many. Although his home life was troubled and circumscribed, Pearson, (largely due to Labour's expansive educational policies) made it through university in NZ and subsequently in the UK. Thereafter Pearson returned to teach at Auckland University (1959-1986). There he consistently promoted educational opportunities for others, especially Maori artists, educators, politicians and academics. His teaching and academic publications confirm him as a genuine advocate for tolerance and self-determination. Yet Pearson himself lived as a closeted gay man for much of his life, alert to, some would say inhibited by, the pervasive restrictions of his society. Homosexuality was illegal in New Zealand until 1986. This effectively forced on Pearson a life of contradiction and secrecy, marginalising his artistic freedom and voiding the pursuit of published recognition.

'Private layers and public contexts' are laced with dexterity and insight making *No Fretful Sleeper* an important contribution to our literary history and self-understanding. Excellent layout, virtually error-free and a very apt cover design by Keely O'Shannessy.

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<sup>1</sup>: Published in Landfall 1952.