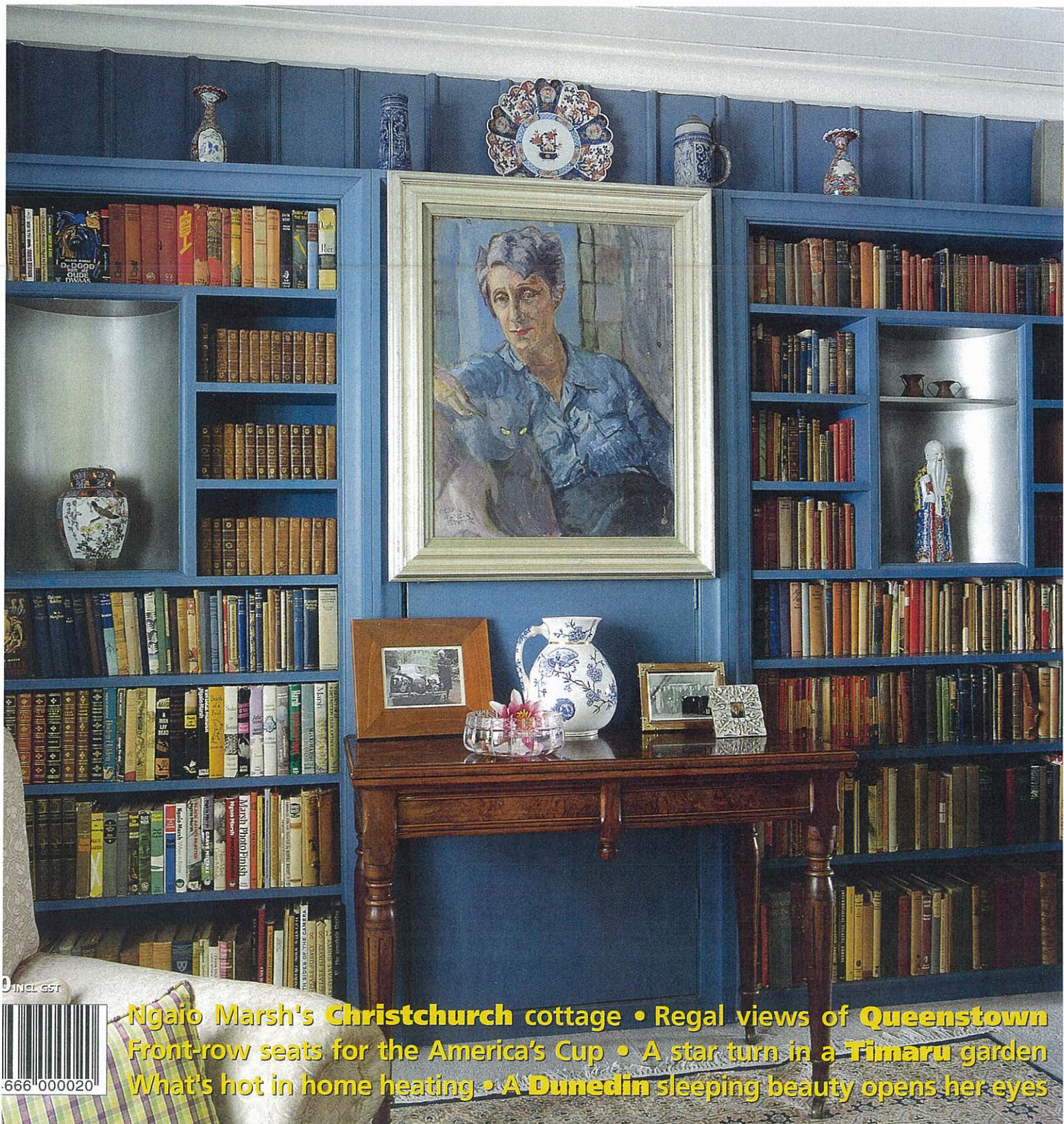


NZ HOUSE & GARDEN

APRIL
1998



**Ngaio Marsh's Christchurch cottage • Regal views of Queenstown
Front-row seats for the America's Cup • A star turn in a Timaru garden
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A Literary Life

Ngaio Marsh House reflects the style of an internationally lauded crime-fiction writer, an accomplished painter and a distinguished theatrical producer. Kate Fraser takes a tour



Photographs: Paul McCredie

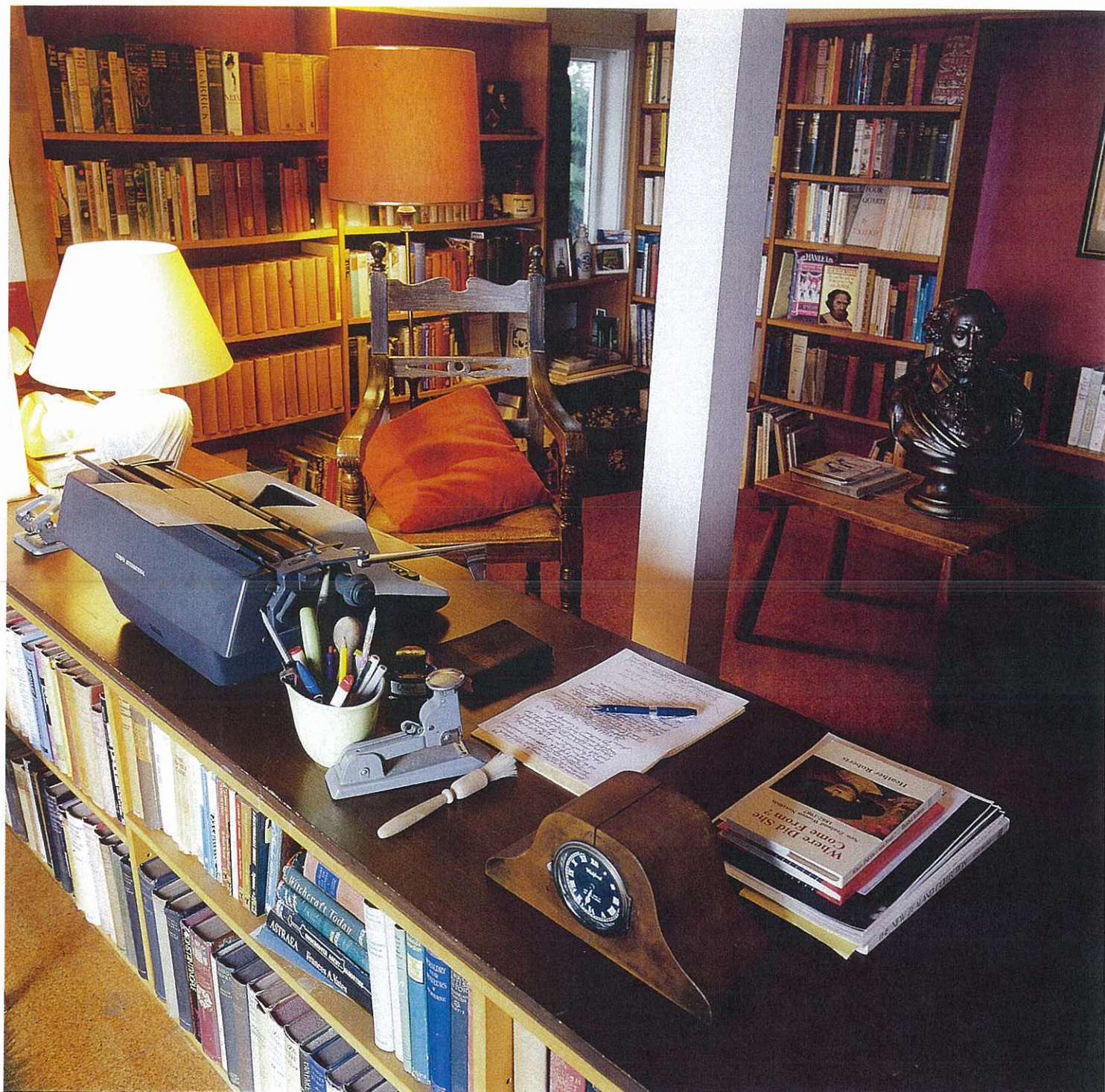


In 1904 Henry Edmund Marsh Esq. purchased a 0.3-hectare site in Valley Road, Cashmere, and asked his wife's cousin, architect Hurst Seager, to design a small bungalow for him, his wife Rose and their ten-year-old daughter Ngaio.

It was a simple house with a sitting room, two bedrooms, a bathroom and kitchen. A bay verandah off the front porch overlooked the city of Christchurch and views stretched as far as the Southern Alps. In the manner of the times, an

outside laundry-cum-coal house was a step or two from the back door.

Marton Cottage, as the house was called, was not, is not, a grand house, and it would be an exaggeration to call it an architectural gem, although it does display the skills of an important Edwardian architect and the craftsmen who built it. Its real significance is its link with a leading figure in the arts, Dame Ngaio Marsh, who lived here from the age of ten until her death in 1982 aged eighty-six.



Above: The downstairs study is an addition designed by Christchurch architect Don Donnithorne. The typewriter is identical to one used by her secretary of twenty years, Rosemary Green.

Facing page: The Long Room is part of the 1955 additions designed by architect Guy Cotterill. The piano was bought with money from the sale of a portion of the original 0.3-hectare block. The green chair was Dame Ngaio's writing chair.

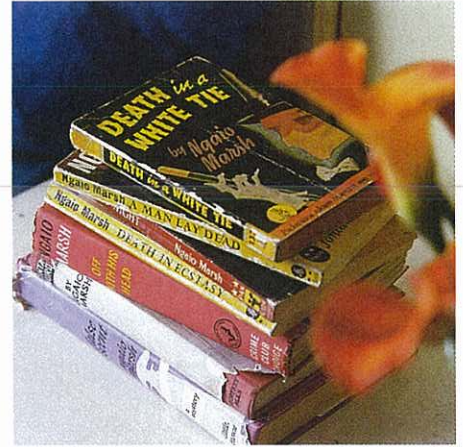


The original kitchen, updated in the Fifties, was further modernised with the installation of the Moffat stove in the late Sixties.

Facing page: Hurst Seager's Arts and Crafts style is evident in the dining room. The oil painting is by Vy Elsom, a friend of Dame Ngaio's. The dining table was originally a semi-circular 'stirrup table' used for serving stirrup-cup or hunt breakfasts.

Dame Ngaio had a matching half made in Christchurch.

Far right: Part of Dame Ngaio's legacy: novels, and a painting from 1935 with two titles: *Relief Workers* and *In the Quarry*.



On her death the property was bequeathed to her second cousin John Dacres-Mannings who, in 1992, decided to sell, and the house and grounds were offered to the NZ Historic Places Trust at the government valuation price of \$240,000. Unfortunately, the trust had a moratorium on the acquisition of property, but the then deputy chairman of the district committee, Christchurch solicitor Colin McLachlan, believed the house must be saved for posterity.

He formed an independent committee to negotiate its purchase and, with assistance from the Christchurch City Council and Trustbank Canterbury, Ngaio Marsh House and Heritage Trust was established.

With support from The Friends of Ngaio Marsh society, restoration work began. This included recreating the interior of the house as it was when Dame Ngaio was in residence. The project took five years and the official

opening of Ngaio Marsh House was held on November 15, 1996.

Honorary curator Dr Bruce Harding, who had a close association with Dame Ngaio during the late Seventies, was responsible for the placement of books, paintings and furniture.

“Her life and writing was the subject of my MA thesis and she was very generous with her time, allowing me to make frequent visits,” says Bruce who, along with other members of the Friends, acts as guide for visitors to the house. His knowledge provides an invaluable link between past and present.

Furniture and general household items belonging to the house are leased to the trust at no cost by John Dacres-Mannings, and books, paintings, photographs and personal items have been lent or donated by supporters. Colin McLachlan says his wish to have the house look “as if Ngaio had just popped out to the shops”, has been realised.



Right: One of Dame Ngaio's favourite silk dresses. It was given to a friend, Pamela Mann, who was delighted to donate it to the trust which has it on display in her bedroom, along with her travelling trunks.

Below: A theatrical dressing table in Dame Ngaio's bedroom is offset against Fifties wallpaper. The print on the left is by Louise Henderson.



It is certainly no fusty relic. Friendly yet sophisticated, the house is welcoming but it has secrets. Like a mystery novel, nothing is straightforward; twists and turns and unexpected add-ons appear. Ngaio Marsh was a private person and the house allowed her to retain her cherished privacy yet present a welcoming appearance. Her favourite rooms vibrate with colour and, although the tones have faded with the years, a sense of theatre prevails.

The bedroom, with its dressing room-like make-up bench and mirrors, Russian red icon alcove, Casa Pupo wall hanging and bedspread, is a set piece from the Sixties. Previously her parents' room, she took it over in the mid-Fifties. By then the verandah was demolished and the resultant space incorporated into the bedroom with glass louvres and a large window facing north-west.

The Long Room is an extension of her original bedroom on the south-east side of the house, and is invisible from front and back entrances. In true crime-fiction manner, it has a secret entrance.



The larger painting on the wall in the bedroom is a still life by Dame Ngaio. The smaller work is by Douglas McDiarmid, a student actor in her first production of *Hamlet*. Also of note is the Casa Pupo wall hanging and bedcover and an upholstered Porter's Chair.

Following the revamp of the wash-house to studio/study, the pathway separating it from the kitchen door was artfully concealed as a plant-lined conservatory with a cupboard-like door at the far end opening into a tiny foyer with yet another narrow door opening into what was the main reception and entertaining room.

It evokes the charm of an English country house drawing room with its bowls of flowers, antique furniture, low casement windows and handsome Hanmer marble fire surround. But it also catches the colours of the Pacific with a bold colour scheme of rich blue and white paintwork. A recessed lightwell displays a collection of Venetian glass and light shimmers through the room.

In 1906 when the house was built, Hurst Seager was well into his Arts and Crafts design period and oiled panelling, deep window recesses, handworked door and window latches and inglenook fireplaces are features of the bungalow.

The dining room at 37 Valley Road is an excellent example of Seager's domestic interiors. This room opens immediately from the front door and was the original family living room. Dame Ngaio recalled it in her autobiography *Black Beech and Honeydew*: "The living room was biggish. There were recesses in its bronze wooden walls and there was a pleasant balance between them and the windows."

There is a wistful grandeur in the decor of this house, but a user-friendliness as well – bookcases with the top shelves in easy reach, generous display areas,

paintings hung to capture the best light, and comfortable chairs everywhere.

For many years Ngaio Marsh's writing area was a favourite green chair where she sat to write her novels in longhand; "A thousand words every morning," according to Colin McLachlan.

The kitchen has a lowly status in this house, but aficionados of the Fifties will appreciate it. Black and white linoleum floor tiles, 'Arctic Green' paint, sturdy refrigerator, chip burner, and stainless steel bench indicate its last facelift. An Edwardian drying rack adds to the timeless ambience.

Sunlight and window views were poorly appreciated by Edwardian architects but additions to the Marsh home made much of both. Alterations in the Seventies provided a ground floor suite enabling Dame Ngaio to spend most of her last two years in a study flooded with sunlight and with a favourite view over the garden to lower Cashmere and the distant mountains. A lift connected the addition to the main house although its owner was heard to growl that "it takes three minutes to travel eight feet".

As a summation of the essence of the house, Dame Ngaio's autobiography says it all: "From the beginning we loved our house. It was the fourth member of our family and for me who still lives in it, it has retained that character; it has been much added to, but I think that its personality has not changed." □

For an appointment to view the house, contact the curator, tel (03) 337 9248.

The Ngaio Marsh House and Heritage Trust is actively working to reduce the mortgage it has on the house and warmly welcomes government support and corporate sponsorship to remove this debt and commence an interior conservation programme. Bequests, gifts and donations are always appreciated in moving the house and garden towards National Landmark Property status. Sponsors and benefactors are invited to contact the Trust chairman, Colin McLachlan, PO Box 4403, Christchurch.

The curator, Bruce Harding, is keen to hear from people with Marsh memorabilia, in particular photographs, theatre programmes and American or foreign editions of her novels, and wishes to locate all extant paintings by Dame Ngaio to create a full listing.



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