The Multiplex Effect: 
Recent Biographical Writing on 
Katherine Mansfield 

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Katherine Mansfield is the only New Zealand writer, indeed the only New Zealander, who has progressed beyond “the biography” to a crop of biographies, documentations, writings related to biography. There are a number of reasons why it should have happened to Mansfield apart from the obvious one that she is much the best-known New Zealand writer. She is also an English writer, and was associated with a group of writers who have each inspired a similar crop of books. Her husband so imposed his view of her that as soon as he was out of the way there was an urge to lift the veil. Her early death, her sufferings in life, her relationships with her family, with Middleton Murry, with Ida Baker, with numerous others, have coalesced into one of those classic stories — Keats provides an obvious parallel — which can be told and retold. They are the modern equivalent of the folk tale. In those relationships, in her own actions, and in the reflection of them in her writing, there is enough complexity and ambiguity to ensure a variation within the pattern which keeps interest alive. The multiplication of interpretations becomes an aspect of the biography itself. No one writes meta-biography, as it were, with the deliberate intention of casting doubt on the possibility of biography itself. People write new biographies because they believe they have a firmer grasp on the truth of the matter than those who have written before. This confidence, which few other writers share any longer, is one of the attractions of biography to the reader. Yet the more the trick is repeated the more the reader’s confidence must be undermined
in the ability to find and tell all the truth, and even in there being a final truth to find.

Katherine Mansfield, the 24-year-old A. R. D. Fairburn wrote in 1928, was "a woman whom Mr. Middleton Murray [sic] has already done his best to compromise in the minds of the reading public by cramming her incontinently down their throats on every possible occasion. ... My own impression ... in regard to her recently-published 'Journal,' was that I had no business to be reading certain passages. They gave me the feeling that I had burst in upon a lady in her boudoir at an awkward moment." The reaction is quite typical of the time, whereas to the modern reader the most obvious feature of both the journal and the letters in their first appearance is the reticence of their editing. Also typical, and longer lasting, was the implication that "her faintly unpleasant husband" was exploiting his dead wife.¹

The story of Mansfield biography since has been one of progressive revelation. The first book to be called *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* was (according to the title page) written by Ruth Elvish Mantz and J. Middleton Murry, and appeared in 1933. All the research, Murry said in his introduction, "and at least nine-tenths of the actual narrative" was the work of Mantz (an American librarian); "and it has been one of my chief concerns, in revising the text to the best of my ability, not to alter the total picture of Katherine Mansfield's early life which Miss Mantz has created."² How much Murry influenced that picture is left open to question, but from the style it can be accepted that Mantz wrote most of it. The one-word judgement on the Mantz book nowadays is usually "sentimental"; but she was writing under considerable handicaps. Conceived as a prologue to the letters and journals, the book was confined, as Murry said, to Mansfield's "early life." Of 349 pages, 315 deal with Mansfield's first twenty years. At the time of publication her contemporaries were still only in their early forties and many of the earlier generation (relatives, schoolmistresses) were still alive. Mantz assiduously sought these out but had to be discreet. She therefore relied heavily on atmosphere, which she found ready-made in what her subject was writing at the time, the nineties-influenced journals and "vignettes." She recognized that
these, considered critically, were derived and romanticized, yet allowed them to dominate the impression. Only at their face value, however; they did not yield to her what they have recently done to C. A. Hankin. The book is without bibliography or references, and Mantz often failed to let the reader know whether she was quoting from letters, notebooks, or attempts at fiction, or whether the quotations were contemporary with the events or later reminiscence. In spite of these defects, much of what has become commonplace since is there for those with eyes to see, including the lesbian episode with Maata Makupuku (p. 156).

The final chapter, which took the story to 1912, was written by Murry and revealed very little. Murry’s Mansfield was then at her most ethereal. One talks of the Murry view of Mansfield, but of course there was more than one. The commentary to the 1951 edition of the letters is much more matter-of-fact.

Antony Alpers was the first to look further while Murry was still alive. His 1954 biography was the outcome of several years spent in gaining the confidence of people who had hitherto remained silent, particularly Ida Baker but also such as Koteliansky. It was a lively, elegantly written, shapely book, which seemed at the time the definitive work. In retrospect, it is apparent that it owed those qualities at least as much to the fact that Alpers still didn’t know enough, as to what he did know. Those he interviewed didn’t tell him everything and he couldn’t repeat everything they did tell. Above all, they still held their private papers. By the time he came to write the 1980 biography many collections of papers had been deposited in libraries, mostly American. In episode after episode his later account is much less tidy than before, much less integrated with other episodes into a coherent story, and much more convincing.

It was not Alpers himself however who made first use of this new abundance of material. He was forestalled by Jeffrey Meyers, whose Katherine Mansfield was published in 1978. By comparison with Alpers’s half-a-lifetime involvement this book was a “quickie,” but it shows that Meyers was commendably energetic in following leads. Like Mantz and the young Alpers before him he sought out and interviewed many of the diminish-
ing number of participants and corresponded with others. I don't know whether he was the first to discover that Mansfield's movements in Bavaria in 1909 could be traced through the police records of lodging houses but he was the first biographer to make use of them. He still has her being taken by her mother to a convent first (for which Alpers now declares there was no time), and adduces "painful memories of the Bavarian convent" to account for Mansfield's reservations about her Catholic cousins. Meyers was the first biographer to talk openly of lesbian liaisons, though again if one follows Alpers (who quotes evidence) he predates that with Maata by five years, a crucial difference when the question is whether Katherine was sexually active at thirteen or eighteen. More often than Alpers he describes the physical appearance of people. He delves interestingly into contemporary medical, or fringe-medical, theory, such as that behind Manoukhin's irradiation treatment. But whereas Alpers can tell you where Mansfield was and who she was with on almost any day of her life, and includes a chronology to prove it, Meyer's sense of time is much more vague. He makes up for it by being very assured in assigning praise and blame. He is the master of the instant judgement, of every character and every episode as it comes up. His chief target is Murry, to whom he directs all the old indictments: insensitivity, self-pity, meanness, indecisiveness, weakness in not insisting that Katherine submit to sanatorium treatment. (If he had succeeded in getting her to one would she have stayed? Not if one can judge from her reaction to anywhere remotely resembling one. And if she had stayed would she have been cured? This is very doubtful.) Meyers's equally confident though more sympathetic judgements of Mansfield's own proceedings end by confusing both the reader and himself. There are so many twists and turns in her behaviour, and in other people's observations of it, that he is left puffing behind.

Katherine Mansfield's rapid changes of mood can be illustrated by two letters to Murry from Mylor in 1916. On 18 August she wrote, "It is not because you are absent that I feel so free of distraction, so poised and so still — I feel that I am 'free' even of sun and wind — like a tree whose every leaf has
‘turned’.” On the following day: “How I loathe being here alone—It gives me nothing, really. This place is only tolerable because of you, & even then it never inspires.”7 Much earlier, in 1903 when she was fourteen, Katherine had written to her cousin Sylvia Payne: “There are many many people that I like very much, but they generally view my public rooms, and they call me false, and mad, and changeable. I would not show them what I was really like for worlds.”7 Although the 1916 letters had been published in 1928 and Alpers used the earlier one in 1954, it was only later that the characteristic really came into focus. Writing his new biography, when instances had multiplied, Alpers had to confront not only rapid changes of mood and behaviour, but also uncertainties, refractions, different views shown to or perceived by different people. The necessity did much to determine the shape and technique of the book. Straight narrative had often to give way to it. Sometimes it was a matter of unravelling exactly what had happened. A model instance is the Café Royal incident in 1916, when Katherine snatched a copy of D. H. Lawrence’s poems from a group at an adjoining table and left the café with it. In the received version, as derived from Murry and found in Meyers (as well as the earlier Alpers) “the novelist Michael Arlen and composer Philip Heseltine, both of whom had been friendly with Lawrence” were ridiculing the poems. In the new Alpers those at the adjoining table become two black men and a woman assumed to be a prostitute, and their offence lay in such people discussing Lawrence’s work at all.8

Other instances are less easily dealt with. In a metaphor used by Alpers several times, “the whole of her story at this point is a story done with mirrors, a thing of quick costume-changes, switches of voice and hemisphere and country, of allegiances of every kind; and I think the only way to tell it is with mirrors, admitting the view of each witness in turn with a sort of Rashomon effect, since only in the multiplex confusion can veracity be found” (p. 73). This comment introduces the events leading to her first marriage. In the 1954 biography one can sense the purring satisfaction with which Alpers scooped the world with George Bowden’s story; yet in 1980 it remained as baffling as
ever. All this explains I think the nature of Alper’s own intrusions, which have irritated several readers, including myself. Abandoning the role of omniscient narrator he is like a television presenter or a circus ringmaster announcing the turns as they come on and exulting in the show swirling about him.

We are left with many permutations for future writers to explore. One group of questions arises from Mansfield’s illness. Can her suspicions, jealousies, and rages against Murry be explained as a symptom of her tuberculosis, as Murry believed (and compare D. H. Lawrence and John Keats), or were they an objective reaction to what Murry had said or done, or a railing against fate displaced on to Murry? Several writers, including Meyers and C. A. Hankin, have consulted books on the psychopathology of tuberculosis and are aware of indications that at a time when nearly everyone was exposed to the bacillus some types of personality were more likely to admit it into their systems. None seems to have explored more recent awareness of the strains placed by long-term illness on patients and those about them.

Even with superficial knowledge one can trace the outlines of classic reactions. Katherine was not above exploiting her suffering, and was aware of it, and determined not to, and did. In Murry and Ida Baker one sees strategies equally common though contrasting. Murry shows distaste, a reluctance to admit what is happening, and withdrawal into his work and books. (An intellectual doesn’t need fantasy, the other common escape: he has books.) Ida Baker shows an emotional dependence on being depended on. The behaviour of both was modified by moral beliefs. Murry made strenuous and only too apparent efforts to attend; Ida submitted to being dismissed from time to time while holding herself ready for the next call. Mansfield saw it all and understood some of it but was more often angered. How could she not be? It was she who was ill, her life which was at stake. Her anger still dictates the terms of the debate, either in accusation or defence. Alpers alone has an inkling which comes out in an almost trite comment: “One can only think with sadness of them all, for what they suffered in their various ways.”

Related to this is the climax, when Mansfield, having gambled
and lost her last hope of a physical cure on Manoukhin’s treatment, went to Gurdjieff’s institute at Fontainebleau. The earliest interpretation was her own: that in and through her suffering she was led to seek purity, and believed that when she was pure she would be healed. Murry was appalled by the move at the time: “Into this realm I could not enter at all”; but came to believe that spiritually at least she had been healed by the time she died. This was the motive for inscribing on her tombstone the Shakespearean quotation, “But I tell you, my lord fool, out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety.” Meyers calls this epitaph “singularly inappropriate” (p. 253), and speaks for many critics to whom anti-mysticism is a knee-jerk reaction. To Alpers,

What we are seeing here can be explained quite simply, without any mystery at all. Kass Beauchamp, who was always a Beauchamp, whatever else she may have seemed at times, had been longing for years for the gregarious unthinking active life of her own extended family: Grandma Dyer in the kitchen with her shelves of bottled fruit, Aunt Belle discussing shoulder-straps, Pat Sheehan saddling up the horse or bringing in the cow’s milk — or chopping off the heads of ducks. The other life, that arid life of “being a writer” along with Jack — who scarcely knew such things except through her — had simply gone too far, and the compulsion to regain some life more like her memories of Karori was made immensely urgent by the nearness of her death. C. A. Hankin by a different route comes to a like conclusion. In her account it is a logical extension of that reconciliation with family memories, and of the preoccupation with death, which she finds in “At the Bay.” C. K. Stead is particularly resistant to the notion of redemption through suffering. With his aphorism that “there was nothing mystical about her that antibiotics would not have cured” he asserts that her illness, her suffering, and her “sensitivity” lead to some of her weakest writing, in which her earlier sometimes cruel honesty is vitiated by fear of inflicting on others the pain of which she had become aware in herself. Elsewhere he quotes Brigid Brophy: “The life of the ‘free woman’ which is now being imposed on us as a postwar phenomenon — post our war — was being lived by Katherine Mansfield, and with incomparably more style, before women were properly out
of long skirts.” (Stead comments: “With more style, no doubt; but also without antibiotics and without the pill, and it was very nearly too much for her.”)\textsuperscript{13} But if Mansfield was a late-twentieth-century woman in the early twentieth century, what, really, should we make of her being captured by another late-twentieth-century phenomenon, a religious community, with guru, extended family, mysticism, and all?

So there is no foreseeable end to reconsiderations, among which there are stirrings of a Katherine Mansfield as woman who can truly be understood only by other women.

A recent reinterpreter of at least part of her life is Ian Gordon, who has challenged the received view of her 1907-08 return to Wellington, which derives from Mantz and ultimately from Mansfield herself, as having been spent shut in her room calling down curses on her family. She certainly spent a lot of time in her room, he says, any writer does, but she also spent a busy social life, and he cites the social columns of newspapers to prove it. He also discovered that Katherine enrolled at the Wellington Technical School to study commercial subjects, bookkeeping and typing, thereby intending to prove to her father, he says, that she was capable of looking after herself if he let her return to London.\textsuperscript{14} But it has been clear since the Mantz biography that she had a specific reason for learning to type. Although she owned a typewriter, given her by her father, she couldn’t use it, and had to rely on having her sketches typed, for publication in the \textit{Native Companion} of Melbourne, by her father’s disapproving secretary, Miss Martha Putnam.\textsuperscript{15} In Gordon’s edition of \textit{The Urewera Notebook} we have the full text free of the corruptions which marred the extracts given in Mantz and the 1954 edition of the \textit{Journal} (at least one assumes it is free of them, but the writing, done at speed on a jolting wagon, may be open to other interpretations), placed through his commentary in geographical context. But it is also part of his campaign to represent Mansfield as a self-confident young woman who actually enjoyed her caravanning through the wilder parts of the North Island, except for a time in Rotorua when she wasn’t well. Even there, the famous description of Rotorua as “that little Hell” becomes a reference to a little hill outside the town — though since he
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still allows her to call Rotorua “loathsome” and all her images remain consistent with “a little Hell,” the emendation doesn’t carry the weight it might. The greater importance of the Urewera journey, as Gordon emphasizes, was her introduction to a New Zealand outside the towns and to people outside her usual experience. Equally important, a point he does not make, is how her writing was improved by the pressure of the journey from the conventional “There is something inexpressibly charming to me in railway travelling” near the beginning of the notebook to the tumble of impressions near the end.

Gordon’s picture of the outward Katherine Mansfield is nevertheless consistent with what observers were saying about her soon afterwards in England. The inner view is probably something else — certainly, to C. A. Hankin, author of Katherine Mansfield and her Confessional Stories.16 This is not strictly speaking biography. It is not wholly literary criticism either. For this reason I approached it warily if not suspiciously. In the end I was disarmed. The reason for the suspicion is this: once a generalized pattern has begun to be seen in a reading of the stories and of the life, aided by external theories or truisms — “this is the way a rejected child or one who believes herself rejected is likely to behave” — then symbolism and vocabulary are read in the light of it, the life is further interpreted in the light of what is seen in the stories, and these new interpretations of the life are further applied in readings of the stories. It becomes a circular, self-reinforcing system. There are ample signs that this was indeed the method by which Hankin’s work grew. Nevertheless it works, it justifies itself. The interpretations Hankin relies on are not to be taken as “evidence” as a historian would use the word, and there must always be an element of a critic imposing a point of view even by the vocabulary used; but she makes sense of much in the biography which is otherwise mysterious. The conflicting needs to be dependent and not to be dependent explain many switches of feeling towards Murry and Ida Baker — and, of course, primarily, towards her father. The method is less satisfactory as literary criticism than as biography because the distinction is not always clear between what a story says per se and what it says about Mansfield’s unconscious, and no artist would
be happy in regarding the two as the same thing. Hankin takes no account of one of the commonest techniques of a writer of fiction, that of bringing to centre stage a trait of which she is peripherally conscious in herself. Hankin is best as a critic later in the book when dealing with stories such as "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" in which Mansfield was herself achieving a distance between her unconscious and that of the story. In dealing with these, Hankin leaves her psychological knowledge in the background and achieves a convincing reading. She writes clearly and forcefully and avoids critical jargon.

C. A. Hankin is also the editor of the very useful selection of Middleton Murry’s letters to Katherine Mansfield. These are by no means despicable in themselves. He was an intelligent man writing of matters of interest to them both, even though he couldn’t approach the magic in hers. But their chief value is in adding a dimension to her letters, in showing what she was responding to. Hankin helpfully makes clear which letter was replying to which, a matter by no means self-evident since both Murry and Mansfield might have written half a dozen more before the first arrived. Murry’s devotion to her is clear, and his intentions usually agonizingly good. The reasons for her responses, both of love and scorn, are equally clear.

The most important recent addition to Mansfield biography is obviously the first volume (of four) of the long-awaited new edition of her letters, edited by Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott. The first volume is labelled rather oddly "1888-1917"; in fact the first letters are dated early in 1903 when Mansfield was fourteen. Everything which has survived is included, though in the early years survival is patchy. There are some surprising decisions about what can be described as letters. They include four published letters to the editor of the New Age, one of them written in collaboration with Beatrice Hastings, and one probably intended as a prose poem but maliciously printed in the New Age as a letter. Several are taken from two novels, by William Orton and Francis Carco, in which they were written by Katherine-like characters; the editors accept the authors’ claims that these are genuine letters. Locations of manuscripts (if extant) and previous printings are listed at the foot of each letter. I would sometimes
have liked more information: how do the editors know that the anonymous letter to the anonymous resident of Wellington, of which an extract was printed in the *Evening Post* in 1914, was written by Mansfield to her mother’s friend Laura Bright?

Footnotes provide necessary explanations and identify some very obscure people. After everything biographers have revealed there are still some minor revelations. The Prime Minister, Richard Seddon, besides being a friend of Harold Beauchamp’s, turns out to have been Beauchamp’s brother-in-law’s father-in-law, and therefore grandfather of Katherine’s young cousin Lulu Dyer, to whom the first letter in this volume is addressed. That typewriter which Katherine was learning to use in 1908 is identified as a “Fox Standard,” an American machine first put on the market in 1906. In other words, her typewriter was the very latest thing, which confirms other evidence that in his clumsy way Harold Beauchamp was encouraging his daughter to write, if only as an antidote to the cello.

An occasional footnote shows that the editors don’t see what is beneath their noses. Footnote 2 to the letter to Ottoline Morrell of 27 October 1916 quotes a letter from Dorothy Brett to Lady Ottoline which “quite unaware of the ironies” (say the editors) claims that Katherine is in love, with a man she does not name but could only have been Ottoline’s lover Bertrand Russell. But (taking a cue from Ottoline’s statement that the “she Devil Brett” “sowed her poisonous seed” in her mind and Katherine’s19) what if Brett were well aware of the ironies? We then have, in footnote 1 to the letter of 11 August 1917, another instance of Brett’s mischief-making between Morrell and Mansfield. “To Hell with the Blooms Berries,” said Mansfield to Morrell three days later, and who would wonder.

“One aspect a reader may remark on initially in this edition,” the editors say, “is the difference between the present text and those that have been published heretofore.” The editors are of course familiar with the whole corpus to a degree a reviewer could not be; but spot checks revealed no startling differences. The 1928 edition of the letters was a selection; there were large gaps. Pointed personal comments were usually omitted, unless they were about Beatrice Hastings. A gentlemanly Murry in-
cluded many complaints against himself but deleted all the love-passages, often from the same letters, which revealed the delight Katherine took in recalling every feature of his darling body. This imbalance continued to colour reactions to Murry even after the passages were restored in the 1951 edition. Meyers makes the same kind of selection, and then concedes in a note that "To be fair to Katherine — and to Murry — most of her letters to him ... were kind and loving."20 But those passages which were used in 1928, as well as the fuller versions in 1951, show Murry to have been a careful and scrupulous editor, provided one knows that his conception of editing allowed him to correct her punctuation, capitalization, and so on. Discrepancies in actual words are surprisingly few, considering the notorious difficulty of her handwriting. There are almost as many slight differences between Murry's versions of 1928 and 1951 as between either and the new edition, and in these cases the latest editors agree about half in half with the earlier versions.

(The same comparison highlights the deterioration in printing over the last thirty years. The new book has loose photosetting and other typesetting vices. The machining is grey and imprecise compared with the crisp tight letterpress of Constable's 1951 edition.)

The restoration of Mansfield's punctuation is not a trivial matter, however. The dashes, the ampersands, the shortage of commas, all give a flavour of the headlong rush of her writing.

Because this is the first volume, sheer excellence of writing is rarer than it will be in the later three. Katherine from the first wrote better than most adolescents, and some of the most revealing and most quoted passages come very early, but the earliest letters most often show how well she had learnt from Miss Swainson's School and Queen's College to write a letter suited to the recipient and the occasion. This spills over into a characteristic of her letters which may have been given more emphasis by the critics than is warranted: her habit of adopting a persona and writing in a style appropriate to each of her correspondents. There is nothing unusual about this: only the grossly egotistical or insensitive write in exactly the same manner to everyone; but in Mansfield it has raised doubts of her sincerity. Her letters to
her father in wartime, for example, provide the only evidence that she followed the news from the front with intelligence and concern. Or only for that occasion? The loving, contrite letters to her father have long raised similar doubts. Murry wrote to Alpers after the publication of his first biography in 1954: "The only letters of K. which make me thoroughly uncomfortable are those to her father. They are so obviously faked."21 (Alpers takes this to be an accusation that Beauchamp forged them. Surely Murry meant that Katherine had faked the emotion?) In Hankin's analysis of the relationship it becomes plausible that they were meant as well as written by Mansfield.

The voice she used for the Blooms Berries was quite the opposite. Explaining a silence to Ottoline Morrell in 1917 she said, "There are three unfinished letters to you in my writing case — one is even five pages long. I could not re-read them but I know why they were not sent.... I heard my own little mocking, mechanical voice, loathed it, and chose silence." The editors in a note to this letter (p. 324) point out that there were other reasons for her silence, but her own comment remains valid. Letters to Bloomsbury predominate in 1917 — Mansfield and Murry were living apart but seeing one another frequently and not writing — and that little mocking, mechanical voice is very insistent. It was above all to Murry, though of course not only to him, that the energy of her impressions of places and people, of her emotions, her gaiety, her intellect, and her critical acumen was directed. Even in this first volume there are so many of these rewarding passages that the temptation is to begin quoting and not to stop. "Oh Tig, what wonderful letters you do write," exclaimed Murry in 1915.22 He was right, and this volume brings the biographical excursion to its proper terminus. The letters are above all part of the works. All the biographers would justify the attention given to Mansfield by the quality of her work (though if it were not for the independent fascination of the life they might not bother). All turn critic in varying degrees and with varying conviction. But the biography has lately tended to dominate and the letters, with Antony Alpers's new edition of the stories,23 redress the balance.
NOTES


7 O’Sullivan and Scott, p. 8.


15 Mantz, pp. 271-73.

16 See Note 12.


18 See Note 6.


22 Cited by O’Sullivan and Scott, p. xxiv.