REVISITING KATHERINE MANSFIELD: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET SCOTT

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The following interview offers a fresh approach to New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield from the perspective of a woman who could read the almost unintelligible writing of Mansfield’s journals and letters. Although Margaret Scott is not devoted to the world of academia, her hard work for years on Mansfield’s autobiographical material and disjointed notes gives her a privileged position in the discussion of Mansfield’s work and life. This interview sheds light on some controversial issues in Mansfield studies: her figure as a writer both inside and outside of New Zealand, her zeal for the short story form, her style, the autobiographical elements in her fiction, her achievement as a writer, and her questionable bisexuality. Scott even dares to offer a hypothesis about the possible direction Mansfield would have taken as a writer had she not died so young. The interview also reveals visible signs of discomfort when dealing with Wellington academics.

Margaret Scott is manuscripts librarian at the Alexander Turnbull National Library in Wellington (New Zealand). Her importance in the field of Katherine Mansfield studies is undeniable through her transcription of Mansfield’s autobiographical material; namely, her journal and letters. We owe her the fact that nowadays we have access to Mansfield’s epistolary and journal production. Mansfield’s handwriting was practically unintelligible and due to Margaret Scott’s and Vincent O’Sullivan’s joint efforts, we can read this material. Together with O’Sullivan, who is nowadays a honorary member of the Katherine Mansfield Society, Scott edited Mansfield’s five volumes of collected letters, a time-consuming project that has taken 24 years to be completed (1984-2008). She has also edited and published Katherine Mansfield’s *Notebooks* (Canterbury, New Zealand: Lincoln University Press, 1997). More than four decades later, with Scott’s complete and unselective transcription of the material bequeathed to

1. The present interview to Margaret Scott took place on 15th June 2002 in her residence at Diamond Harbour (Christchurch, New Zealand).
John Middleton Murry (Mansfield’s second husband), the real Mansfield finally emerges in the first unexpurgated edition of her private writings. The *Notebooks* are fully and accurately transcribed by Scott, almost becoming a postmodernist exercise of scattered material that comprises drafts of letters, previously unknown diary entries, introspective notes on scraps of paper, unfinished stories, half-plotted novels, poems, recipes, and shopping lists. Thanks to Scott’s edition, we overcome the unified image offered by Murry’s Definitive Edition of Mansfield’s journal and discover the complete and eclectic portrait of a complex woman, neurotic and sexually voracious, fascinated with the minute details of daily life and obsessed with death. In 2001, she published her study *Recollecting Mansfield* (Auckland: Godwit, 2001) where, autobiographically, she explains her link with Mansfield and collects her own conversations with Ida Baker (Mansfield’s lifelong companion through her tuberculosis). Scott was the first person to win the prestigious Mansfield fellowship to Menton.

Transcribing Mansfield’s impenetrable letters became Scott’s life’s work and helped her go through the emotional turmoil of her husband’s sudden death on Mount Cook in 1960, while she was pregnant with their third child. But for Scott Mansfield’s letters and journals might have remained inaccessible, or been poorly transcribed by less sympathetic scholars. Margie Thompsom (2001) quotes Scott in this respect:

> The illegibility of Mansfield’s handwriting is legendary. It varies from day to day, page to page, and, because she never fell back on clichés to express herself, the word you are trying to decipher is never an easy, expected one.

Scott thus becomes a figure of vital importance to approach Mansfield due to a life devoted to transcribing her handwriting and knowing Mansfield’s deepest thoughts and feelings before the reading public.

**MS:** Margaret Scott

**GRS:** Gerardo Rodríguez Salas

**GRS:** You are widely acclaimed for your time-consuming task of becoming the editor of Mansfield’s often undecipherable letters. How did you develop your interest in Mansfield and ultimately decide to embark on the editing process?

**MS:** Well, long time ago I was appointed first manuscripts librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington. It took my breath away to discover that I was in charge of masses of Mansfield manuscripts (my interest in Mansfield arouse back in school, when a teacher read “The Doll’s House”). Soon after, a friend recommended me to Oxford University Press editor as a potential editor of the letters. ² I was both thrilled and terrified. I signed the contract and started the hard task of tracking down Mansfield letters all over the world, held

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² The literary critic Eric McCormick.
in libraries and also by people, still living, with whom Mansfield was known to have corresponded. In 1970 I won the first Mansfield fellowship to Menton, which enabled me to travel to the northern hemisphere and, in particular, to meet Mansfield’s friend, Ida Baker. When I returned to Wellington, I began to feel overwhelmed by the size of the task, which I had to undertake in my spare time after working full time and raising three children. I accepted an offer of help from Vincent O’Sullivan, and contacted OUP asking that he be included in the contract.

3. During our conversation, Scott suggested to me that this arrangement with O’Sullivan ultimately proved to be a disaster for her. And, as Thompson testifies in her article (2001), this arrangement “resulted in [O’Sullivan’s] name taking priority over hers on the resultant book jacket. ‘Failing to soldier on alone was a piece of cowardice for which I paid dearly,’ she writes”. Thompson further clarifies that while some academics agree that Scott’s role in the collected letters has not had the acknowledgment she perhaps deserves, others are firm that she did not have the scholarly practice or background to by herself carry off the project with its requirement for an enormous amount of contextual footnoting (Thompson 2001).

GRS: How do you perceive Katherine Mansfield within the literary canon of New Zealand? Do you think she is a national icon here, or is she perceived more as an outsider?

MS: She is perceived as a national icon. There is no doubt about that. She was the first New Zealand writer to make a name for herself outside the country, and that is very important to New Zealanders, because we tend to feel small and isolated, far away and unnoticed, and if one of us goes overseas and makes a splash, we are delighted. So, she has definitely become an icon.

GRS: What do you think is the relationship between Katherine Mansfield and the short story form? She tried to write a novel several times, but she never managed to complete it. Do you think there was a particular choice of that genre in this author?

MS: Stories are what came naturally to her. As a school girl she wrote little vignettes and jottings and gradually developed the skill to write stories. She thought that the next step would be novels, and if she had lived long enough, she might have done that. But I think it is doubtful, because the little picture she paints in a story is what she was good at. She changed the whole world view of what a story is and how it could be written.

GRS: What kind of writer do you think she would have become had she lived longer? Someone close to Virginia Woolf or a more regional writer by coming back to New Zealand?

MS: Well, of course it is impossible to know. I could imagine that, if she had not been ill, she would have come back to New Zealand herself, and that might have made her decide that she had finished with that material and did not want to use it any more, or it might have made her decide that this is the richest vein in her
experience and should keep on using it. In her short life she developed so rapidly and changed so much in her work that I am sure she would have continued to do so but, in which direction? We will never know.

**GRS:** In connection with the novel, you said that she would have probably ended up writing one.

**MS:** No, I do not say probably. It seems unlikely to me that she would have. I think novels were not just her cup of tea.

**GRS:** Yes, but sometimes you can depict a small picture within the span of a novel. This is what Virginia Woolf did. So, probably she could have done that too.

**MS:** Yes, maybe. And she did review so many novels that it is clear that she had done a great deal of thinking about what a good novel is. And so, I suppose she might have tried later.

**GRS:** Would you qualify Mansfield’s style as “delicate and feminine”?

**MS:** Yes, in some respects, and in others she was anything but. She was “delicate and feminine” and also partially masculine. Middleton Murry concentrated on the first part of the dichotomy, but Vincent O’Sullivan has written about how she was bold, hard, and resilient. And that is true, too. In other words, she was a very complex person. But although she had a masculine side, she was not sexually ambivalent. There is no proof of that. Wellington critics believe that she was bisexual.⁴

**GRS:** What about her early affairs with women?

**MS:** Well, everybody has those. I was mad on a girl at school. But I am not bisexual. One of the people she was very keen on when she was at school was E. K. Bendall. She was ten years older, and she was a person who expressed herself physically by embracing people, something which Mansfield was terribly deprived of from her own mother.⁵ It was a mother relationship that she was responding to in that case.

**GRS:** Do you think there is any separation between the female characters that she creates in her fiction and her own position as a woman?

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⁴ Due to her bittersweet relation with O’Sullivan, during her interview she showed visible signs of discomfort when dealing with Wellington academics.

⁵ This autobiographical detail finds an expression in her stories “Prelude” and “At the Bay” in the practically inexistent emotional relationship between Kezia and her mother Linda, which is channeled through Kezia’s close link with her grandmother.
MS: It is pretty clear that when she creates them, she is inside them; she can see what they are feeling and seeing, which suggests that she has been there herself. However, at some point she made a decision to break away, and that is a time difference: once she was in that position that later she was not.

GRS: What do you think is the role of autobiography in her fiction? This is a key issue. Every time in Mansfield studies you find critics speaking about the autobiographical material in her fiction. Was it just that she was drawing on what she had experienced, or did she use it as a strategy to create an image of herself?

MS: I think it was not that at the beginning, when she was young and wrote “Juliet”, for example. That was simply an account of what had happened to her. The novels that she tried to write were perceived by her as autobiography. The Maata story (in her notebooks) is a different part of her life, but it is still her life, when she came back to London after having gone from school. But as she developed and grew older, she learned how to transmute that material and so, in the great stories like “At the Bay” and “Prelude”, although she draws from her own memory, they are not meant to be pictures of her or her life. They are created anew into themselves. It is just an immaturity thing. Naturally she had a sense of being pretty unusual, rather special, and amazingly interesting, and she wanted other people to know how interesting she was, and how many boyfriends she had had. But she did learn quite soon after that. You cannot call her good writing autobiographical, although she does draw on memories of her childhood.

GRS: What is the role of the child in her fiction? Why is it so predominant?

MS: She found children very charming. She thought she was interesting as a child, and she observed a whole lot of things that nobody realised that she was observing.

GRS: But at the same time, by using these children so often in her fiction, she is sometimes thought to be immature and childish.

MS: Well, that is nonsense. Of course, a good writer can be allowed to write about children without being accused of being immature.

GRS: Probably it is the connection between this immaturity of children and that feminine side we referred to before. They connect this delicacy of the stories with the immaturity associated with children.

MS: A good writer can choose to write about anything in the world. Many writers can write about criminals without being thought to be criminal.

GRS: What is her best achievement as a writer?
MS: The best achievement is her letters really, because they are freer than her stories and not as crafted, more spontaneous and more complex because they are witty, sad, happy, funny, perceptive, angry, disappointed, desperate. Everything that you would expect to find in a good novel is in her letters.

GRS: So, in a way, considering the chameleonic side of Mansfield, we could consider them as a piece of fiction, as the novel she never wrote.

MS: Well, not in the sense that they are not true. Before, I said that she wanted to write a novel and never did. In a way, these letters are almost like a good novel. They contain a great deal of artistry.

GRS: The letters in themselves could make a novel written in the epistolary genre.

MS: But if anybody else wrote it, it would not be nearly as fascinating.

GRS: What is her best value or quality as a writer?

MS: Precision, choosing the precise word. She is brilliant at that. I recently re-read “The Doll’s House” and it is amazingly precise in every word. I would add her sensitivity to unusual situations and her humour.

REFERENCES