

Katherine Mansfield's Many Windows

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Davison, Claire and Gerri Kimber, eds. *The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, Volume 1. Letters to Correspondents A-J*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2020. 680 pages. ISBN 9781474445443. Hb. £175.

This volume is the first installment of the last stage in the publication of Katherine Mansfield's collected works; an ambitious project designed and, in cooperation with various editors, carried out by Gerri Kimber and the Edinburgh University Press. The initial two volumes of the collected short stories (with Vincent O'Sullivan, in 2012) were followed by Mansfield's poetry and critical writings (with Angela Smith, in 2014), and her diaries (with Claire Davison, in 2016). The reviewed volume is yet to be succeeded by three more books—Volume 2, Letters to Correspondents K-Z, is already in the production stage, and the publication of the entire oeuvre will eventually be complete with the last two volumes, solely dedicated to the rich profusion of letters Mansfield wrote to her husband, John Middleton Murry (Vol. 3, years 1912-18 and Vol. 4, 1919-23).

At first sight, it might seem that another edition of Mansfield's letters was not really necessary with the previous one, by two distinguished Mansfield scholars, Vincent O'Sullivan and the late Margaret Scott, having been completed relatively recently, in 2008. However, *Letters to Correspondents A-J* is much more than just old content repackaged with a new preface and some minor changes here and there. First, in the decade following the publication of the 2008 collection, new original materials of all kinds were discovered scattered in libraries and private collections in different parts of world, which have now found their way into the

respective categories and volumes. Although countless letters were irrevocably lost, many burnt by Mansfield herself or at her request, some still reappeared and are included here. The editors also meticulously re-read and re-transcribed the previously published letters, correcting earlier misreadings or omissions, coming as close to the original texts as possible. Compared to most other projects of this kind, this meant a major undertaking, as Mansfield's infamously unreadable handwriting posed a true challenge; there were words or passages which were read differently by each editor in the past. Furthermore, Davison and Kimber forewent the usual silent revisions of incorrect spelling, which, in Mansfield's case, was usually deliberate, indicating playfulness and emotional closeness to the recipient with references to running jokes, or mimicking other people's idiosyncratic ways of speaking. Nevertheless, this is not the main reason that makes Davison and Kimber's edition truly ground-breaking.

The most noteworthy innovation is the structure itself, the result of the novel approach the editors took to organizing the volume. Instead of the customary chronological order and introductory chapters explaining the broader historical context of the period and Mansfield's place in it, Davison and Kimber chose to arrange the letters according to their recipients, thus including, in the first volume, correspondents with names beginning with letters A to J. Among them are well-known personalities such as the American writer Conrad Aitken, or Mansfield's famous cousin, the novelist Elizabeth von Arnim. Other familiar names are those of Marie Belloc Lowndes, Walter de la Mare, and John Galsworthy; there are also letters to one of Mansfield's most beloved friends, author of the iconic cover of the avant-garde journal *Rhythm*, the major Scottish artist J. D. Fergusson, and to the translator of many key works of Russian literature into English, Constance Garnett. The more personal ones include her correspondence with various members of her family (her original surname being Beauchamp), her estranged first husband George Bowden, and the French writer Francis Carco, with whom she had a short affair during World War I, whom she immortalized in "An Indiscreet Journey" (1915) and,

more sinisterly, in “Je ne parle pas français” [I don’t speak French] (1918). The bulk of her letters in this volume, understandably, are the ones addressed to two long-term friends: her closest companion Ida Baker and the painter Dorothy Brett.

There is no point in asking whether this new and relatively unusual approach is better or worse than the ones reflected in former editions. It is more relevant to raise the question of how the alphabetical order affects the reader and shapes their understanding of Katherine Mansfield, her relationships, and her era. Rather than looking at Mansfield historically, we are invited to see individual relationships, their depths, and development. As Davison and Kimber explain in their introduction, chronology “has the huge disadvantage of turning the foibles and surprises of everyday life into the ineluctable march of destiny. There is only one ending, death, waiting grimly on the last page of the last volume, ready to claim and obliterate” (6). Their approach thwarts the inevitability of death and, instead, encourages the reader to see multiple lives, multiple stories, and to enjoy Mansfield’s exceptional letter-writing method of adapting her style and selection of topics to the character and preferences of the person she was writing to. We are thus invited to witness the true modernist multiple selves in action; there are as many Mansfields as there are people she wrote to. What is more, the editors’ system, rather than striving to create at least a semblance of continuity, openly acknowledges and embraces sketchiness, paralleling not only the modernist trends of fragmentation in general, but also the creative techniques of Mansfield’s best short stories in particular: those of producing small islands floating in the sea of things unsaid, lost or unrealized.

Another welcome innovation that contributes to the overall feeling of a multitude of stories, a source of major enrichment for the reader, is the fact that each batch of letters is preceded by the biographical sketch of its recipient, detailing their relation to Mansfield. Many of the sketches are written by the two editors, whose combined knowledge of the writer and her contemporaries is impressive in itself, yet they invited several other scholars whose research

and contributions make this collection a unique venture indeed, both in its scope and extent. As a further treat, and a confirmation that this is not only a piece of outstanding scholarship, but also the labor of love, the volume is prefaced by a riveting foreword by Ali Smith, a Mansfield enthusiast in her own right.

It may come as a surprise to the reader how much this new way of arranging the letters can change perspectives; many things that went unnoticed before suddenly stand out, while others, previously prominent, fade into the background. One becomes more aware of gaps and empty spaces to be filled where one imagines there should, or indeed, must have been letters. There is, for example, only one extant letter to her beloved younger brother Leslie “Chummie” Beauchamp, whose early tragic death at the age of twenty-one in Belgium had a profound impact on her, both personally and professionally. The tension created by Mansfield’s apparent duplicity when she interpreted one occurrence totally differently in several consecutive letters, or when she criticized people behind their backs while being sweet to them in her letters, practically disappears here. What comes to the forefront, instead, is how Mansfield cultivated relationships with people in her life, especially since, due to her progressing illness, for extended periods of time she only had letters to rely on as a means of keeping in touch with the outside world. Her communication radiates a profound investment in her correspondents’ interests and opinions, giving them her undivided attention and that part of herself that was the closest to them, yet not shying away from being critical when the situation called for it.

Ida Baker once called Mansfield “a lantern with many windows—not octagonal, but centagonal” (233), and this volume proves how extraordinarily accurate this assessment was. It is not merely an account of one life lived in letters, but that of the lives of many people interlinked in many complex patterns to create an incomplete, yet still impressive tableau of the years of modernism and early twentieth-century society. Mansfield’s letters are not only sources of information; they are works of art on their own, and have been considered as such so much

so that they have sometimes been read before, even instead, or at the expense of her short stories, often to the detriment of her artistic reputation.

Every arrangement of correspondence into a volume of this kind, no matter how well-meant or striving towards objectivity, would inevitably influence the reader and channel their thoughts in a certain direction. Still, this edition apparently gets as close to impartial presentation as is humanly possible. This way the letters do not compete with or contradict the stories, as they did in the first Murry editions, but complement them, whetting the reader's appetite for Mansfield's short stories. The present volume is not only a valuable resource for all those interested in Katherine Mansfield and the art of letter writing, but it is also a modernist encyclopedia of sorts—it does not need to be read from cover to cover, you can open and start reading it anywhere. The next volume promises to be a rare treat too: just think of all those major modernist figures whose names begin with letters from K to Z.

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Works Cited

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