

Humanitarian Aid among Aegean Neighbours: Joice NanKivell Loch's *A Fringe of Blue*

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At the time Joice NanKivell Loch finished her autobiography, *A Fringe of Blue*, she was 80 years old. The book had been commissioned some years earlier by the British publisher, John Murray,¹ which had released in 1922 *Ireland in Travail*, the first book that NanKivell Loch and her husband Sydney Loch co-authored. It was one of a number of texts that documented the Irish War of Independence,² but it also signalled the beginning of their lifelong collaboration, which extended beyond the page.³ The then recently married couple's shared writerly ambitions had taken them from Australia and to London, and then Dublin. Prior to moving to England once the Armistice of 1918 was declared, NanKivell Loch had worked in Australia as a journalist and book reviewer, and had published a volume of children's stories, *The Cobweb Ladder* (1916), and another one of childhood sketches, *The Solitary Pedestrian* (1918). Writing was not, however, the career her family had in mind for her. 'The sight of me wielding a pen drove Father mad,' NanKivell Loch recalled in *A Fringe of Blue* (51).

NanKivell Loch's early childhood had been privileged, with her family's wealth derived from the Queensland sugar industry that relied on the 'blackbirding' of South Sea Islander labourers. The passing of bills by the Queensland government and the new federal government during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that outlawed indentured labour, coupled with a virus that contaminated the plantations, saw speculation in sugar, and the family's fortune, plummet.⁴ The newly-impooverished family turned to farming, and NanKivell Loch's desire to study medicine was curtailed by a lack of money. During the war, she found work in the theatre—where her job was 'to slip topical witticisms into the leading actors' parts in variety shows' (NanKivell Loch, *A Fringe* 53)—and as a personal assistant to the Warden of Trinity College at Melbourne University and Professor of Classics, Alexander Leeper. Leeper became one of the driving forces behind Australian relief efforts that responded to the Armenian genocide of 1915 and the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey (Diamadis, 'Australia's First' 7–27), the effects of which NanKivell Loch would witness and involve herself with.

During this time, Sydney Loch, who had travelled to Australia from Scotland in 1905, served as a runner in the field artillery, and in 1916 he published (writing as Sydney de Logue) *The Straits Impregnable*—a realistic account of his time in the First World War. It was a book that NanKivell Loch would later loyally describe in her autobiography as 'one of the best books on the Gallipoli campaign' (63). She also reviewed the book when it was released, and soon after met its author. The sale of Loch's small sheep property in Gippsland meant that the couple had capital to travel once the war ended, and they headed to literary London (de Vries, 'Heroine' 155), albeit on separate ships as it was extremely difficult to secure passage for civilians.

The Lochs' reputations in Australia, if not elsewhere, as writers of some note were strengthened when the two co-authored *The River of a Hundred Ways: Life in the War-devastated Areas of Eastern Poland* (1926), which was contracted to the British publisher, Allen & Unwin. (Its release was delayed by the couple's aid work in Greece.) In the meantime, they sent dispatches back to Fleet Street about the post-war recovery operations in the eastern provinces of Poland,

and then Russia. These reports, in turn, found their way to Australian papers, in large part thanks to the Australian newspaper editor, Guy Innes, who, stationed in London as the director of the Melbourne *Herald's* London cable service, was NanKivell's early and very encouraging journalistic mentor. To reach Poland, the Lochs had agreed to work as writer-publicists for Quaker medical relief units. Neither of them was a Quaker, and in her autobiography NanKivell Loch part-comically recalls their first interview with the Quakers, in the manner of narrative journalism that also characterises the works she co-authored with Sydney. This initial meeting had been arranged through contacts established by her cousin, and NanKivell Loch's telling of the meeting in *A Fringe of Blue* makes clear the differences she sees between herself and Sydney, and the formidable representative of Quaker authority and demeanour, Ruth Fry—chairperson of the Russian Famine Relief Fund and later author of her own book about relief efforts, *A Quaker Adventure* (1926):

We were called to Friends' House. We entered the presence. It was chilling. Quakers of that day were never warmly enthusiastic. We didn't look like do-gooders.

Ruth Fry stared unwinkingly through the roundest and plainest steel-rimmed glasses that ever struck terror to anyone's heart. Her grey uniform buttoned to the chin. It fell near her ankles in that age when skirts barely reached the knees.

'Are you a Friend?' she asked, fixing Sydney with her attention. Sydney had never met a Quaker before, and he was suffering from shock, but he pulled himself together with admirable courage.

'Merely an acquaintance,' he answered, and on that note we entered Quaker circles. But the remark lost us Russia for the time being. (68)

This remembered, or reconstructed, interview with Fry exposes the couple's naïveté and ignorance of the meaningful tropes that constitute Quaker values, and also hints at what later historians have largely failed to acknowledge, namely 'the scale of Quaker women's involvement in humanitarian responses to the First World War' (Roberts, 'Position' 235). Following on from this conference, and unlike the 'neutral' stance they took when researching their first book on the Irish War of Independence, NanKivell Loch and Loch came quickly to participate first hand in the projects they detailed in *The River of a Hundred Ways*. The couple became front line aid providers in Poland, refashioned in NanKivell Loch's terms as 'do-gooders on a grand scale' (NanKivell Loch, *A Fringe* 71): It was a measure which referred not to the couple's impact on the Polish situation or an aggrandised sense of self, but rather to what confronted them: 'Famine, typhus, dysentery, swarms of homeless in old army dugouts and trenches' (71). Among the stations to which NanKivell Loch was assigned was the typhus unit. As her biographer, Susana de Vries recounts, drawing on NanKivell Loch's own account:

Members of the Mission's typhus units . . . lived in a world of steam, surrounded by naked patients, some skeletally thin, others with swollen stomachs that masked starvation. All the hair had to be shaved off the patients' heads and bodies to get rid of the lice which swarmed so thickly that 'at times the horrible creatures had to be removed with the blade of a knife.' (124)

At night, when she could stay awake, NanKivell Loch wrote of what she had seen and experienced.

NanKivell Loch would leverage her writerly credentials, call on her journalistic reserves and demonstrate her canny awareness of how international relief work was taking shape by authoring newspaper stories on starving children in Poland to bring attention to their plight. (The Lochs had entered a contract whereby any money earned from these articles went to the Quakers' efforts. They otherwise had a meagre allowance.) This was at a time when British interest in particular was directed more at Russian war victims, and for the first time children were explicitly placed as the primary subjects for humanitarian aid. In Britain, Eglantyne Jebb was founding the relief agency Save the Children, which singled out children because of a belief in their innate innocence, which, it was hoped, would elicit universal sympathy. As historian Michael Barnett has rightly suggested, the premise at play was that 'Former enemies could unite around the idea of the innocence of the child and agree that children are the building blocks for a better future. It was not the child known or recognized but rather the child as an abstraction, as a symbol of what the world might become' (85–86).⁵ Providing relief to children was also an investment in a new internationalism, and NanKivell Loch's journalistic reports from Poland drew from and contributed to this new transnational humanitarian focus, which sought to have real, material effects on the wellbeing of those who were suffering from the ongoing fallout of war.

NanKivell Loch would exercise the power of the press again when she and Sydney later moved in 1923 with the Quakers to Greece and the American Farm School run by the American Board of Missions outside of Thessaloniki. They had finally made their way to Russia, where NanKivell Loch wrote the first draft of the Russian spy novel, *The Fourteen Thumbs of St Peter* (1927), which she later completed in the Byzantine tower on Prosforion. (The Lochs had been leased the tower on a peppercorn rent in recognition of their relief work at the American Farm School. The tower itself was built in the early fourteenth century and was originally part of the monastery of Vatopedi.) A rather jumbled article appearing in Melbourne's *Herald* newspaper in November 1924, under the headline 'Pity the Greeks,' reported that NanKivell Loch, described as 'an Australian authoress of distinction,' was petitioning Australians to donate wool to Greece to set up weaving industries, while also relating the horror of malaria in Macedonia and Russia. The short report concluded by noting, accurately as it turns out, that 'Both [Joice and Sydney] may collaborate in further books thus increasing the reputation they gained by their publications on Russia, Poland and Ireland' (Anon., 'Pity' 15).

If the Lochs are remembered today, however, it is less on account of their writing than their deeds. As de Vries summarises the feats of NanKivell Loch:

Through decades of hard work in refugee camps in Poland and Greece, and by organising Operation Pied Piper for Polish and Jewish women and children to escape Nazi persecution, Joice Loch saved thousands of lives. In addition her rescue work in an earthquake and her successful anti-malaria program explain why she received eleven medals from Kings, Queens and Presidents of Greece, Poland, Rumania and Britain. Joice Loch may well be the world's most highly decorated woman for humanitarian work. She is certainly Australia's most decorated woman. (8)

Despite the best efforts of De Vries and others, including an entry on NanKivell Loch by Ros Pesman in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*; the work of Panayiotis Diamadis; and a commemorative plaque erected at the Memorial Botanic Gardens, Ingham (near where NanKivell Loch spent her early childhood in North Queensland) by the Queensland Government and Hinchinbrook Shire Council, being Australian's most decorated woman has

arguably not made NanKivell Loch a household name. Not only is she overlooked for her humanitarian work, but her journalism and autobiographical writing have also received little attention. There are many reasons why this might be the case, but one of them could be the result of the way in which some lives and their associated records can be, as Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake have suggested, ‘lost to vision when a firmly national framework is held in place’ (10). When the *Australian Women’s Weekly* published a piece on NanKivell Loch in 1965, it was keen to reassure its readers in the concluding remarks that, ‘Mrs Loch . . . still thinks of herself as an Australian, and sounds like one’ (‘Rug-Makers’ 9), perhaps because much of the article told of her life elsewhere, working with the Quakers in war-torn Europe and then ‘settling’ on the Mt Athos Peninsula in Greek Macedonia. The concern of the *Weekly* to confirm NanKivell Loch’s ‘Australianness’ seems motivated by a quiet unease that her transnational activities and expatriation pose a challenge to national identity. But it is a discomfort that is less pronounced in scholarly circles and approaches that today recognise and respond to ‘the importance of situating Australian history in its imperial, transnational and global contexts’ (Curthoys 70). Answers to the issue of what is at stake in claiming the transnational stories and actions of NanKivell Loch for ‘Australian literary history’ are beyond the scope of this article. But, with its focus on *A Fringe of Blue* and its Greece-focused chapters in particular, the rest of this essay accepts that the autobiography and its author require understandings that extend beyond restrictive national frameworks that might prove unable to recognise or comprehend NanKivell Loch and her humanitarian work. Moreover, in her autobiography, NanKivell Loch herself recalls geopolitical situations that saw a world, and the tiny wedge of an Aegean peninsula she came to call home, *made* transnational by violent conflict that uprooted people from their countries and saw others voluntarily leaving theirs to provide aid. What emerges are unanswered questions about responsibility to others, and what it might mean to be a neighbour (rather than ‘an Australian’) in this context.

The ethics and politics of the neighbour have attracted significant scholarly interest in recent years. This attention is attributable in part to the interest expressed in these ideas by influential philosophers and theorists including Emmanuel Lévinas; Jacques Derrida (who leans on Lévinas’s notion of unbounded obligation to the neighbour to write of unconditional hospitality and its impossibility); Homi K. Bhabha (who engages with the thought of both Lévinas and Derrida to consider, but not resolve, the contradictory demands globalisation makes on language, hospitality and the self); and Slavoj Žižek (who offers a piercing, but also persuasive, critique of Lévinas’s notion of infinite duty to the neighbour by suggesting that the neighbour might well be ‘monstrous’). Despite their differences and internal disputes, these thinkers are writing in the knowledge of the long and pervasive Christian injunction to love thy neighbour (although clearly this tradition is not the only one that addresses neighbourliness; Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* was particularly ill-disposed towards this universalising commandment). They are also responding to the question of how to live in a world that knows all too well mass atrocities as well as particular places and times that see neighbourly conflicts on much smaller scales.

Yet, in recognising their different premises and claims, what becomes apparent when looking at the writings of these representative scholars is that the issue of neighbours, and contemporary philosophising about them, is fraught. This is not to suggest that things might or should be otherwise, or that these scholars’ works should be sidestepped because of this difficulty. My intention is to signal a need for caution about accepting or applying scholarly ideas to specific texts and contexts uncritically (insofar as these thinkers so often dictate the models many of us seem canonically compelled to work with). This hesitation is especially important with texts such as NanKivell Loch’s that have their own ideas, as it were, about neighbours, that are

grounded less in some principle that precedes, as Lévinas would have it, ‘every free consent, every pact, every contract,’ (88) or imagines ‘a monstrous Thing that cannot be “gentrified”’ lurking in every neighbour, as Žižek warns (143), than in the seemingly simple but in reality far more complex fact of proximity. As a part-account of her humanitarian aid work, NanKivell Loch’s autobiography is fully alive to the horrors that neighbours and nations commit against other neighbours and nations. But, *A Fringe of Blue* can be read to question, quietly and in passing, the moral and evaluative associations that neighbours carry in these later theories, and to take seriously instead the distinctive context of living near others that neighbourliness involves.

The first Greece chapter in *A Fringe of Blue* is largely preoccupied with people in the village NanKivell introduces as having three names: ‘Pyrgos to most people; Prosforion on maps; and Uronopolis to the officials’ (*Prosporion–Uranopolous* np). In distinct contrast to their neighbours, and unlike the common habit of humanitarian workers to leave the places and people they seek to help once that need is perceived as no longer necessary, the Lochs chose to live on one of three jutting peninsulas, or ‘legs,’ in the region of Chalkidhiki in Macedonia. The other villagers found themselves in the shadow of Mt Athos because of the 1923 exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, which took place under the supervision of the League of Nations. NanKivell Loch pithily summed up the political situation in her memoir, recognising the historical contingency of national identities:

Greece would receive 1,500,000 million people in exchange for a few hundred thousand Turks. The nationality of these people was decided by the fact that they belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church. The majority were from families that had been in Turkey two generations . . . The older people only knew Turkish, especially the women, and more particularly those from the far interior of Asia Minor. They were being moved from a much richer to a poorer country, and from being craftsmen and petty tradesmen they were to be turned into farmers. (97)

It was this mass, forced expulsion and movement of people that had brought the Lochs to Greece from Poland in the first instance as part of Quaker relief work; before Sydney Loch’s curiosity about the monks at Mt Athos drew the couple to the Athos Peninsula, where both are said to have been fascinated by the Byzantine tower standing at its edge. On closer inspection, it became apparent that at the tower’s base was ‘A small new village, built on rock and sand for the refugees’ (113). NanKivell Loch reported retrospectively that the accommodation—‘wretched, cement boxes’—provided for the newly arrived refugees was ‘appalling,’ and that the land these people were expected to till enthusiastically was unfit for agriculture, consisting of ‘decaying granite, heavily covered with a thick, thorn scrub’ (113, 114).

In the second, shorter Greece-centred chapter of *A Fringe of Blue*, NanKivell Loch details her post-war return to Prosforion, which takes place amid what she terms the Communist war. As David Brewer has pointed out in his history of the Greek Civil War, ‘After a war spent helping exiled Poles in Romania and Palestine, the Lochs returned in 1945 to their home in Ouranópolis. There they quickly learnt about the actions of the Communist resistance during and since the war. Every account which Joice Loch heard put the blame for the cruelty entirely on ELAS endártes’ (242). (The Ethnikós Laikós Apeleftherotikós Strátos (ELAS) was the military wing of the communist-sponsored resistance organisation.)

This section of *A Fringe of Blue* covers at some length NanKivell Loch’s physical journey, plagued by land mines, from the American Farm School to Prosforion; and details the bullet-

ridden tower she finds on her return, as well as the stories of the surviving villagers, many of whom are infected with typhus. As Brewer also recognises, NanKivell Loch was not a witness to the events whose traces she details, but neither was she a 'naïve outsider . . . There can be little doubt that her picture of terror from the left in her part of Greece is substantially accurate' (242). This part of the autobiography also tells of the signs of post-war recovery, with underwater archaeological teams arriving to recover the remains of the ancient city of Dion, and the building of a surfaced road from Thessaloniki to the front door of the tower, quite literally. This government-funded infrastructure project is taken as emblematic of an encroaching modernity—also signalled by the arrival of modern pilgrims and Coca-Cola—that NanKivell Loch seems at best ambivalent about. While she recognised that earlier efforts by villagers to dig out a road to other places meant that in times of need or natural disaster aid could be brought more quickly (the earthquake that flattened Lerissos in September 1932 is remembered by NanKivell Loch in vivid detail), the new road also invites tourism and new technologies. For NanKivell Loch, these developments signal 'the end' to a particular way of life she has known and valued (243).

As far as autobiographies go, *A Fringe of Blue* is formally conventional. Told in first person as the genre demands, the narrative commences with an account of NanKivell Loch's childhood in Australia, and proceeds more or less chronologically through a selection of the Lochs' experiences in Ireland and Poland, to their time in Greece and their establishment of a home on the Athos peninsula, their war-time work with the Quakers and the refugee Poles in Rumania and Palestine, and their post-war return to Pygros, up until 1967. Tonally, the narrative is notably restrained. Sydney's death is told of quietly: 'It was one autumn after my husband died that I stared down from my balcony to see a tall yacht riding at anchor' (239)—it is Swedish divers looking for the sunken city. Earlier in the narrative, NanKivell Loch recalls in a similar subdued manner setting out 'to photograph the Hindenburg line in all its horrors' and finding in a trench 'ten dead people piled over each other' amongst whom was 'one living baby' (83, 84). She then goes on to relate calmly that the child lived, but that the typhus with which that girl was mildly infected took the lives of many, including the workers who sought to stop its spread throughout Europe.

As such, it is fair to say that *A Fringe of Blue* is not a narrative patterned by emotional crescendos or pulsing adventure plots, the very narrative devices and arcs that NanKivell Loch seems aware that her story is susceptible to. At one point, she tells of how, when living in the Byzantine tower, 'a photographer and a couple of journalists' unexpectedly appeared at her door; they were curious to know if her husband was the subject of rumours about 'a mysterious Englishman who had died and was buried on Athos' (152). Amused, NanKivell Loch deflated their search for a good story—Sydney is alive and well, she told them, and is undertaking research in a nearby monastic community. This research would later inform the book NanKivell Loch completed following her husband's death, *Athos: The Holy Mountain* (1957), although NanKivell Loch herself could not have entered Mt Athos, as it was closed to women. But despite her quick correcting of the record, a newspaper article soon appeared that served to amplify and politicise the rumour. Relayed to her by a Greek friend, the story of Sydney's death is determined to have been no less than 'a miserable fake' for the purpose of deluding 'the Arabs, by an English government which was treacherously backing the Jews' (152), suggesting the wider geopolitical tensions that were in play at the time. In another gossipy article which NanKivell Loch immediately relates following this episode, it is *she* who is the featured focus. In this piece, she is described as 'a young, beautiful adventuress, waiting impatiently on the holy frontier for the monks' resistance to wear thin,' after which, it was predicted, she would

rush in to ‘scoop up hoards of [their] hidden gold!’ (153). It is these all-too familiar tropes the autobiography steadfastly rejects.

It is also worthwhile mentioning that the narrative resists casting the places NanKivell Loch visits or lives in as any way ‘exotic.’ She does give a lot of attention to the landscapes she sees, both to appreciate their oftentimes unexpected aesthetic attractiveness and to acknowledge the human suffering that has occurred within these surrounds, as is suggested by this description of the dirt road leading to the American Farm School:

When I first saw it it was lined with the apparently dead, the incoming emigrants, fallen by the wayside, overcome with malaria or blackwater fever. I found strange beauty in that road of exhausted nature, sprawled and bare under the sun; and in the season when gorgeous, gigantic thistles rose in forests, and the flowing capers tumbled over the edges and cliffs, it was hard to beat. (102)

The one place in the entire narrative that appears alien is the city of Melbourne in Australia. NanKivell Loch travels there briefly before returning to Prosforion after the war. After having seen and done all that she has, her aunt’s incredulity at her not bringing with her a hat for a tea party is that which is rendered foreign, although NanKivell Loch declines to pass overt judgment on her relative and her set of feminine social values, allowing the situation to speak for itself.

With its focus on responses to mass displacements of people, *A Fringe of Blue* is in many ways ahead of its time. Of course, NanKivell Loch was not singular in her on-the-ground commitment and activity; nor was she unusual in writing (later) about that experience. As Emily Bauman has pointed out, ‘Memoir has for some time played a significant role in the expansion and interpretation of the humanitarian industry’ (83). Recent scholars have argued, however, that a specific type of narrative, which might be nominated the humanitarian aid memoir, has emerged only relatively recently as a recognisable genre—one that has coincided with the creation, rise, professionalisation and expansion of modern humanitarianism responses. This genre is internally diverse, as are approaches to it (Black; Shaffer and Smith; Smirl; Roberts ‘I promised them’), but Bauman hazards an attempt to map its broad ideological contours:

Where the humanitarian order is working towards wider consensus, industry narrative relies on and cultivates what I would call the sovereign irrational: an ideal of an individual, intuitive integrity seen as the fundamental component of what it means to be human. This vision of the human undergirds, contradicts, but ultimately legitimates the elaborate web of humanitarian power that is now part of the new world order. It is nowhere more evident than in memoir—a genre that already celebrates the revelation of pure individuality as an agent of change within the status quo. (85)

The historical periods recollected by NanKivell Loch in her autobiography, and the mass movements of displaced people they involved, saw the beginnings of modern, internationally coordinated aid projects, which have transformed into today’s global response industry of which Bauman writes. This change is of such magnitude that critics have suggested that the role of humanitarian projects in the present, which might include those attendant memoirs themselves that celebrate ‘the sovereign irrational,’ is that of ‘the left hand of empire’ (Agier 66-77), sweeping up the mess wrought by military interventions of various kinds but with little lasting effect on the structures of power that engendered the violence in the first instance.

If *A Fringe of Blue* might be thought of as being ahead of its time, it is also not of its time. While reliant on writings and articles NanKivell Loch published in *Blackwood's Magazine* and other journalist outlets contemporaneous with her humanitarian work, the year 1967 that ends the autobiography firmly establishes its approximate time of writing. There is no suggestion that the events described are in the immediate past, or that the autobiography poses as an eye-witness account of its subject in the way that, say, Bert Birtles's 1938 book *Exiles in the Aegean* does. Birtles was an Australian journalist and poet, and with his wife Dora he began in 1936 visiting Aegean islands (among them Anafi and Gavdos, and also Leros, Karpathos and Lesvos) where communist dissidents, to whom he was sympathetic, were interned. His narrative buzzes with urgency and indignation. In contrast, NanKivell Loch's autobiography shows a capacity for reflection that, while not overtly self-reflexive, does allow her the opportunity to give some subtle consideration to how to tell a life, and how to relate (to) the lives of those others with whom she has come into contact (often physically, if fleetingly, given that she was called on to provide medical assistance), and has lived with in close proximity for extended periods of time.

NanKivell Loch presents her autobiography in a manner that attempts to avoid the sensationalism she is aware her life experiences might invite; she also appears to write from a position other than that which first propelled her and Sydney to Thessaloniki, and then the Athos Peninsula. In the prefatory sections of her 1964 book *Prosporion—Uranopolis Rugs and Dyes*, a book from which she extracted material for inclusion in *A Fringe of Blue*, she writes:

Our original idea in going there was for my husband to study the monastic world from the ordinary human point of view. We meant it as a temporary arrangement, but we became so delighted with the old tower and so convinced that we alone could help the village that we remained. This is a common attitude of mind for which we must be forgiven for we were young, and still had certain enthusiasms. We were both writers, and what better place could we find than the tower in its splendid isolation. (np)

There is a concern running through the autobiography to dislodge at least one of the assumptions that underpinned the Lochs' initial enthusiasm for taking on unobtrusively but heroically the task of saving others: that those understood to be in need of care and 'rescue' are cast as being largely without agency. Both Greece chapters in the autobiography are given over to a significant degree to the experiences and stories of the villagers. In part, this gesture might seem ethnographically motivated. NanKivell Loch notes at one point that the villagers are of unceasing interest to her, and much of part three of the autobiography, which covers the years 1923–39, the Lochs' first period in the Aegean, relates in some detail the habits and superstitions of these people, singling out particular women such as the Church Widow and the Witch.

She describes her own role as that of both 'luck-bringer' at difficult births and resident medical officer. By her account, she is called on at all hours of the day and night to care for those who are sick and injured, with recourse only to modest supplies of bandages and medicines—the latter looked on with suspicion by visiting monks. NanKivell Loch is no saint, however, at times complaining about the imposition, but more interesting and importantly there are moments where NanKivell Loch's central status as the narrator and subject of the autobiography is set in relief by her role as a neighbour among other villagers, and where she herself is held up as a figure of curiosity and a stranger.

Like the visiting journalists, NanKivell Loch recalls that the people with whom she and Sydney live also question the couple's motivations for staying in the tower in this impoverished, waterless refugee village. According to NanKivell Loch, some of her neighbours came to think of the couple as 'seekers of hidden treasure; fugitives from justice; living in sin'; others believed she and Sydney had been 'put there by a beneficent God for the special purpose of relieving their immediate needs (152–53). This conclusion was drawn because the couple supported the villagers financially through their writing and by establishing small industries such as furniture making and rug-weaving, in an effort to create a self-supporting micro-economy.⁶ Seemingly none of the villagers are accepting of NanKivell Loch's carefully pared-down explanation for their presence on the peninsula: 'We were simple writers who sought isolation,' she writes (152).

By the most conservative of measures, the Lochs were hardly simple writers, and their quest for isolation in a secluded part of the Aegean was not unique to their circumstances or dispositions. Many others had previously and would later share this dream; among them fellow Australians Charmian Clift and George Johnston who sought their literary seclusion on another Aegean island, Hydra, along with, paradoxically enough, a large number of fellow artists and writers (Genoni and Dalziell). Further, if NanKivell Loch's account is right, then despite being relatively remote from the regional capital of Thessaloniki and the capital of Chalkidiki, Polygyros, the Byzantine tower and its residents seemed to welcome, and indeed attract, a steady stream of visitors.

Those who found their way there included many of the Lochs' friends, various regional government leaders, wandering monks, and British naval officers as well as malaria researcher Henry Foy; classics scholar R.M. Dawkins (who sketched out his book *The Monks of Athos* (1936) while staying at the Lochs' tower 'after the austerities of Athos' (29)), Major Stewart Menzies of the Imperial War Graves Commission, who would play key roles in the Special Operations Executive unit in Greece during the Second World War, and Kew Garden botanists Arthur Hill and W.B. Turrill.

The reason Hill and Turrill ventured to the Athos Peninsula in the spring of 1934 is because they believed that this region of the Aegean would offer a rare instance of 'unspoilt' vegetation, thanks in large part to a thousand-year-old monastic ban on grazing animals (della Dora 123). The idea that the peninsula was 'primitive' and 'untouched' was a powerful one, as much shaped by colonial-hued discourses and desires the botanists retained as the peninsula's specific religious status at 'the Garden of the Virgin Mary.' The copies of *The Times* that NanKivell Loch provides as drying papers for the botanists' unblemished specimens suggests, however, that their ideal of an untouched landscape is a little misplaced. Notwithstanding the area's ancient history, more immediately shifting geopolitical forces have thrown together people from vastly differently places, experiences and languages into this hastily erected village in the foothills of the mountains, and in her autobiography NanKivell Loch shows herself all too aware of the currents of shifting allegiances into which she is thrown.

As the narrator of the story, a voluntary expatriate, an aid worker, and the occupant of the tower, NanKivell Loch is set apart from the villagers, who are forcibly removed refugees, relegated to the cement boxes that fan out from the Byzantine edifice and are cast as characters of interest. That she and Sydney have some financial capacity also marks them as different from the impoverished refugees, and this situation raises acknowledged, if unresolved, concerns about the ethics of aid on a broader scale that continues to haunt contemporary humanitarian practices and philosophies. NanKivell Loch tells of how she and Sydney gave money to a man named

Aristotle, 'a former schoolmaster in the hinterlands of Turkey,' but who was then ill and dying, and shortly thereafter murdered (136). Perhaps it was a mercy killing but his death was certainly not the suicide the villagers insist on naming it in public. This violent event forces the couple to reflect on whether their beneficence had not saved his life after all, but rather had taken it. NanKivell Loch writes, 'The family could live for weeks on the credit we had given him at the little shop, but it would soon have been spent on a sick man. It seemed a case of . . . misplaced kindness' (139). The issue is left unresolved.

This episode of the 'murdered' man occurs a little after another moment in the autobiography, which sees NanKivell Loch wrestling with what it means to be a neighbour in these circumstances; she considers what obligations, if any, are wedded to living proximately with other people, especially when the power balance between them might seem impossibly lopsided. She is called often to witness difficult births as 'luck bringer,' and on one such occasion sees her request for the midwife to be summoned firmly rebuked by the other women who are in attendance (130). The women tell her, 'You're a stranger, and don't understand these things, but you will see that it is no miscarriage, for there is no child. It is a hare' (131). NanKivell Loch is disbelieving but sits out the excruciating birthing process only to exclaim 'How right they were! . . . It was dead, and it carried its long ears folded back over its head as small hares do. It had long slender legs, and claws. "You see!" they said, "we knew!" But how under heaven did they?' (131). 'Dwelling on the role-reversal of foreign "expert" and local representative' might be a standard trope in humanitarian memoirs today, allowing 'the aid worker to adopt a post of humility while claiming an exception to Western arrogance and appearing to make a naïve intervention in commonsense development attitudes,' as Bauman suggests (88). In NanKivell Loch's narrative, however, the effect is different. The women remind NanKivell Loch that there are limits to what she knows, and that a recognition of their dissimilarities is among the obligations they have to each other as neighbours. It is a different idea of neighbourliness to that of loving thy neighbour as thyself, which seems to underpin the NanKivell Lochs' ill-fated munificence towards Aristotle.

In so far as *A Fringe of Blue* tells a story of NanKivell Loch's life, it also can be understood as a response to the geopolitical upheavals in twentieth century Europe, and in particular in the Aegean, from 'on-the-ground,' from the viewpoint of a humanitarian worker and writer, who is also a neighbour. Whereas newspaper headlines of the time might have called for potential aid donors to 'Pity the Greeks,' NanKivell Loch's autobiography suggests that the sense of superiority over those in need, and the lack of actual assistance, that this call implies is deeply problematic.⁷ In relating NanKivell Loch's humanitarian efforts, and her complex status as an expatriate neighbour in Prosforion to forcibly expelled refugees, *A Fringe of Blue* subtly poses some of the ethical and political questions that motivate and confound humanitarian actions today, and asks what it might mean, what it might take, to live together, peaceably, with our differences.

NOTES

¹ An article on NanKivell Loch which appeared in the *Australian Women's Weekly* in 1965 and told of her travels to Australia to exhibit rugs (in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney) made by the refugee women she worked with, claims that she 'has almost finished her autobiography' ('Rug Makers of Pygos' 9). If this detail is correct, the extent of an injury NanKivell Loch suffered not long after the article was published, and the impact of the injury on her capacity to write, is clear. She fell from the balcony of her Byzantine tower home on the Athos peninsula; her autobiography would be published in 1968.

² One of the very few commentators on this book, Mo Moulton, has suggested that NanKivell Loch and Loch were ‘war tourists in the purest sense, traveling to Ireland to observe and to record, without any mandate from party, organization, or employer, except for that of self-employed writers seeking copy’ (68). This description of the Lochs echoes their own stated sense of purpose. Loch wrote in the first pages of *Ireland in Travail* that like post-war London where he and his co-author were then living, he and NanKivell Loch were ‘restless’ and looking for a story. An encounter in Hyde Park with a British secret service agent known to Loch and who was soon heading to Ireland himself, is the prompt for the Lochs’ interest in also travelling there, albeit ‘If we do, we’re going to be strictly neutral . . . We want to meet the other side,’ Loch tells the agent (1, 4).

³ Susanna de Vries’s biography of NanKivell Loch, *Blue Ribbons, Bitter Bread: The Life of Joice NanKivell Loch*, admirably charts the couple’s relationship; her subject’s writerly career; and the everyday details of their relief work, deploying the style of narrative journalism favoured by NanKivell Loch to tell her life story.

⁴ NanKivell Loch recalls in her autobiography that she was ‘born shortly before the passing of the White Australia Bill and I can just remember Uncle John [Turner, her mother’s uncle and a member of the Queensland Legislative Council] taking me as a very tiny child to see the signing of the Bill. He said I would always remember it’ (4). NanKivell Loch suggests that her uncle was one of the ‘fathers’ of the Bill, concerned both with the slavery blackbirding entailed and foreseeing ‘the difficulties which would arise if coloured people were allowed to swarm into a new country, peopled so sparsely with white people’ (4). NanKivell Loch fudged her birth-date in the autobiography, wishing to present herself as the younger partner in her marriage and therefore also making uncertain which Bill signing she might have witnessed. De Vries puts the year of her subject’s birth as 1887, rather than 1893 as NanKivell Loch would have it, which means that if the Bill she is referring to is the Pacific Islander Labourers Act of 1901, then she would hardly have been a tiny child. The Queensland government passed its own ban on the ‘recruitment’ of indentured Pacific Islanders in 1891.

⁵ Joy Damousi writes of the Australian response to this humanitarian aid emphasis on the child victim (95–115).

⁶ Among the articles the Lochs authored, which brought in income that was then invested in the industries they established, NanKivell Loch also published in the 1950s two well-received collections of short stories, *Tales of Christophilos* (1954) and *Again Christophilos* (1959). These volumes also generated money for the Lochs and their neighbours. The narratives of both are focalised through a young boy who lives in the village of Pyrgos, perhaps recalling the humanitarian aid focus on the child. And the short stories are variously framed in ways that suggest the audiences, discourses and context NanKivell is negotiating. As the author’s dedication of the second volume attests, NanKivell is addressing an international audience, but is cautious about speaking ‘on behalf’ of the villagers: ‘This book is dedicated to those hundreds of people of all nations who have tarried for a little under my roof-tree, seeking for a knowledge of Greek villages, which I do not feel competent to give; but which can be so vividly imparted by Christophilos’ (np). Further, the introduction to the same volume refers back to the first, suggesting it is ‘the best introduction to this book’ (np). The account NanKivell gives of it is worth quoting in full because it registers the geopolitical complexities of the refugee diaspora that NanKivell registers in both books through her child protagonist and directs at her readers who are assumed to be at a distance from those contexts: ‘It tells you how the people of Christophilos’s world came to Asia Minor, and how they tried to make a living in the Greek village of Pyrgos, a much poorer place than the land they came from, and how they were cut off from the world they know, and were in touch with only the curious old world of monks who have lived on the peninsula of Athos for over a thousand years. It introduces you the village president, and Yaryar, and the herbalist . . . and it tells you how Christophilos felt himself to be a rich man when he saved up and bought a donkey. The villagers worked very hard indeed, but they never grew any richer, and they always thought back to their old homes, for, as Yaryar said, “where the baby first opens his eyes to the sun is his country!”’ (np).

⁷ Lilie Chouliaraki has discussed the role of ‘pity’ in humanitarian discourses, which rely on ‘grand emotions about suffering’ (108) and assume that ‘emotions and their universal discourses operate in a moral economy of abundance’ (120). Chouliaraki’s discussion takes place in the knowledge and context of the recent ‘technologization of action,’ wherein ‘all we need do is click under the “sign petitions” or “make donations” links’ (117). For Chouliaraki, this new action might well signal a new post-humanitarian sensibility and a ‘response to the crisis of pity that reclaims the legitimacy of humanitarian appeals by removing grand emotion from the call to action on suffering’ (120–21).

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