

*The Urewera Notebook by Katherine Mansfield*¹

Edited by Anna Plumridge

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Reviewed by Mark Houlahan

On November 23, 1907, Katherine Mansfield set off from Wellington for a three week excursion to the middle of the North Island. She took a train to Hastings, joining a party that by horse and cart travelled up the route we now know as the Napier-Taupō road, on to the vast pumice-laced Kāingaroa plain, not yet covered with the forests planted in the 1930s. From there they traced a roughly diamond-shaped circuit to Murupara and briefly into the Ureweras, across to Rotorua and then down to Taupō, along the route now marked by State Highway 5. The party admired Huka Falls and the Aratiatia rapids on the Waikato river. There were side trips to Tikitere and Hell's Gate. In a small notebook, Mansfield briefly dashed off impressions of the trip, amidst a welter of other material. The trip, as Plumridge astutely expounds in her introduction, is of great significance for Mansfield's artistic development and for understanding the sense in which she can be claimed as a "New Zealand" artist.

The year following this trip, Mansfield left for England and never returned to New Zealand. These three weeks are the longest time recorded of her travelling beyond the tight confines of her privileged Wellington family, with its own circuit from Day's Bay to Thorndon and of course Karori. In the notebook then, all kinds of Mansfields can be glimpsed in embryonic form. Material in the notebook has been printed in editions by Mansfield's husband, John Middleton Murry, and by New Zealand scholars Ian Gordon and Margaret Scott, and passages from the notebook have been resourcefully mined by biographers and critics. This new edition however is far more comprehensive than any previous attempts to publish it. Not only will it now be the edition everyone will want to use, it is also an outstanding example of editorial skill, all the more creditable for having begun life as a Masters Thesis at Victoria University. I will explain why the edition is exemplary, and why its insights might matter to non-literary scholars.

Mansfield's handwriting has always caused editors problems. Her tiny scrawls in ink (let alone pencil) are hard to read, even significantly-magnified digital versions of her manuscripts. Often she wrote at speed. This notebook poses specific problems, as so much of it must have been drafted in informal settings, outdoors at campsites and so forth. There are passages in German and sections in te reo. Plumridge has built on the readings of previous editors, transcribing more accurately than anyone has yet done; and she is honest enough to note when, even so, a word or a phrase cannot still be made out. Her fidelity is especially noteworthy when it comes to attending to Mansfield's punctuation. In all the surviving manuscripts (of her diaries, letters, fictions), Mansfield makes obsessive use of a long dash, a quick horizontal stroke, as she piles up thoughts and images with great rapidity. Editors frequently have normalised this, claiming to know when she "really" means a comma or a semi-colon. This works well enough for reading her fiction, when, as Vincent O'Sullivan pointed out a couple of years ago, what most people want is a readable text.¹ The matter in the notebook, however, was never drafted for publication. The editor's task is then to allow

Mansfield's own developing voice to sound clear. In this case this means keeping, rigorously, all those dashes. Plumridge is scrupulous in this regard, and covers this in her discussion of editorial procedures. She makes it easy to know where she has intervened and where you are directly reading Mansfield.

The notebook, like most of those the Turnbull Library bought from Murry, is a wonderful hot mess. Mansfield clearly bought cheap stationary that was very portable. When necessary she would then recycle notebooks, taking up blank pages years later, or reversing them to begin writing again from the back. Publishing this notebook at all can make it look as though Mansfield, like a kind of proto travel writer, was taking notes along the way that she would write up as a travel account of New Zealand. Plumridge reminds us that, in Edwardian New Zealand, this was a very popular genre, and Mansfield's party was travelling in part through areas between Rotorua and Taupō, then in their first phase of development as prime tourist destinations. Mansfield had no such directly commercial intent. The notebook is an altogether more random and fleeting document. Images of several leaves are included here for reference; the entirety has been digitised by the National Library (search for *q-MS 1244*), where you can see this clearly. Necessarily, this book immerses us in the solidity of print, but it is well that Plumridge reminds us of the tenuous, fragmented material it represents.

Many hours have clearly been spent in the Turnbull's reading room to prepare the text and its collations (all serious departures or disagreements with previous editions are noted). Plumridge has also done an intrepid amount of field work. She has travelled everywhere Mansfield went. A quick saunter from the geysers of Whakarewarewa to Huka Falls is a morning's jaunt for any modern tourist. But she has also travelled into the Ureweras, still not an easy place for many to trek. Then too she has met with the descendants both of Mansfield's fellow travellers (for whom Mansfield coined the delightful acronym FT) and the Pākehā and Māori she met along the way. The comprehensive notes on all these people are an outstanding feature here. Most importantly this allows the placing of the notebook as a cultural document. The party was travelling through areas where local iwi were dealing with the first trauma of colonisation, of the forced sale of tribal land. The Urewera hinterland was strongly under the influence of the prophetic leaders Te Kooti and Rua Kēnana. Mansfield did not go as far as Maungapōhatu, site of Rua's then active "capital" Hiruhārama Hou, but she does note seeing one of Rua's followers, with their distinctive hairstyles. Though she was only nineteen, she was not innocent. Her father Harold Beauchamp became Chairman of the Bank of New Zealand in 1907, so influential an institution for creating the debt economy that allowed so much of this territory to be developed as European style farm land. Throughout her life, Mansfield then depended on the allowance her father granted her. The colony's money underpinned her artistic freedom in Europe. Mansfield was a keen observer of the class she was raised in (a wry detachment marks her fictionalised versions of her extended family), but she was never in thrall to its values. In the notebook she is alert to the different Māori-dominated territories she was passing through. There is a whakataukī on the first leaf of the notebook and a list of basic Māori vocabulary. Though these areas were new to Mansfield she was willing to immerse herself as a sympathetic stranger.

In a talk at the University of Waikato last year, Plumridge noted an unevenness in Mansfield's writing. That seems fair enough comment on the intriguing melange to be found here. We might though make allowance for an adolescent writer. She is energised, then bored. She is fully committed but then wishes she was somewhere else—Mansfield was always wishing she was somewhere else, always planning her next trip. She can be arch and, in terms of her reading, she is a terrible show-off; she knows her Wilde, her Whitman and her

Shakespeare, and wants her diarising alter ego to know so. Not everyone is charmed by relentless over-citation. But then she looks at the world and tears off a striking phrase that sits exactly right. It is easy to be irritated by the cult of Mansfield, as I think she would be too. Yet it is great to be reminded by this stellar work of scholarship how much of Mansfield is worth rereading and how, nearly a hundred years after her early death, there is still so much we need to understand better about Mansfield and her world than we currently do.

¹ *In discussion at a session on Mansfield's manuscripts for the 'Katherine Mansfield: Masked and Unmasked', conference at Victoria University of Wellington, February 2014. Anna Plumridge gave a brilliant presentation at this session on the Urewera Notebook— it was clear to all the senior Mansfield scholars present that she was developing a truly significant advance in Mansfield studies. This edition fulfils that promise.*