Gerri Kimber and Vincent O'Sullivan, eds., *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* | Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber and Delia da Sousa Correa, eds., *Katherine Mansfield and the (Post)colonial*

Claire Davison-Pegon

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/5775>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.5775

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2014

Number of pages: 115-117

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Claire Davison-Pegon, "Gerri Kimber and Vincent O'Sullivan, eds., *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* | Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber and Delia da Sousa Correa, eds., *Katherine Mansfield and the (Post)colonial*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 36.2 | 2014, Online since 15 April 2021, connection on 19 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/5775> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5775>

This text was automatically generated on 19 July 2021.

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Gerri Kimber and Vincent O'Sullivan, eds., *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* | Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber and Delia da Sousa Correa, eds., *Katherine Mansfield and the (Post)colonial*

Claire Davison-Pegon

REFERENCES

Gerri Kimber and Vincent O'Sullivan, eds. *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012. Volume 1 (1898-1915), 528 p. ISBN (hb): 978-0-7486-4274-8, £85. Volume 2 (1916-1922), 528 p. ISBN (hb): 978-0-7486-4275-5, £85. Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber and Delia da Sousa Correa, eds. *Katherine Mansfield and the (Post)colonial*. Ed.. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013. 256 p. ISBN (hb) 978-0-7486-6909-7, £60.

- 1 It is customary, and quite practical, to talk of critical tendencies as “turns” – the critical turn, the cultural turn, the historicist turn, and so forth. On a slightly different scale it would seem apt to talk of a new Katherine Mansfield turn, a perspective that also embraces a certain poetic justice – it is now Katherine Mansfield’s turn. After decades of sometimes condescending, often sentimental marginalisation that can be traced back to Bloomsbury snobbery, imperial and gender hierarchies, class and economic contingencies, literary and genre prejudices, not to mention Murry’s hagiographic remodellings, Mansfield is now emerging as one of the key early-20th-century writers whose oeuvre clearly charts the shift from aestheticism to modernism, from panoramic

plot-writing to shards and fragments, from metropolitan anchorage to peripheral counter-dynamics and from print culture to the new media of sound and vision. Obviously, this is not to imply a form of “missing-link” scenario, but it seems safe to assert that no scholar reading into early-20th-century literary history can henceforth leave Mansfield out of the picture.

- 2 The three works reviewed here are an eloquent illustration of such a claim. The two-volume *Collected Fiction* set (shortly to be completed with the collected critical writings and a volume of diaries and notebooks) will astonish any reader accustomed to think of Mansfield's works in terms of a single paperback. As the editors' introduction underlines, while the previous “complete” short fiction comprised 85 stories, the Edinburgh *Collected Fiction* offers a huge 220 pieces, a figure set to rise anew with additional materials uncovered after the volumes went to print. Of course, many of the pieces included here had already been published and anthologised – for example, Margaret Scott's 1997/2002 volumes *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks* included many of the stories present in this collection. The Edinburgh presentation, however, has distinct advantages over the earlier Scott edition as well as adding copiously to the fictional collection. Scott assembled notebook after notebook, meaning that fiction was interspersed with diary entries, poems, shopping lists, and memoranda. The present volume, by assembling all the fictional writings, provides a stunning genetextual perspective on Mansfield's creative life: the chronological ordering shows how her voice, style, and writerly ethics evolved from piece to piece, and essential editorial notes indicate when and where pieces were first published. From such details, the contemporary scholar can build up a far clearer idea of how she shaped her works for a specific readership, how publishing in different reviews affected her output (the move from *New Age* to *Rhythm* for example), and how a story was first conceived – either as a scene, a picture, a sharp dialogue or even forms of evocative eavesdropping. And how much more insightful to read sketches or drafts alongside finished masterpieces, an effect particularly noticeable in the first volume which sheds so much light on Mansfield's evolving craftsmanship up until that pivotal year 1915, during which months the first battles had stagnated into a war of attrition set to last, Mansfield's brother died, and Mansfield began to suffer crippling early symptoms of tuberculosis.
- 3 To give but passing examples of how Mansfield scholarship will inevitably be transfigured by these two volumes, which no serious scholar or library can afford to overlook, starting with the essential place of musicality and sound particularly in her earlier works. Mansfield did train as a musician before branching out into literary composition, so the musical intertext, or “interspace,” is far more than a convenient metaphor or a harmonious backcloth. As so many of these new pieces reveal (it would indeed be apt to call them her “unheard of” oeuvre), her creative imagination was shaped by a dazzling sense of the modern soundscape. Take the little vignette “Almost a Tragedy” for example, which the twenty-year-old aspirant writer published in a New Zealand gazette. The “almost-tragic” figure Mr Hayste longs to declare his love for his sweetheart, but each attempt to pop the question is drowned out by the passing traffic:

“I wanted to say how it –”

“Burr, bz-z-z-, whoo-oo-oo...” said a tramcar, thundering past. [...]

“Er, as I was saying, Miss Harrison, I wanted to tell you –”

Burr-r-r-r went another car, and before its noise had mitigated it was joined by a car from the opposite direction, clamouring along the Quay with a deafening half roar, half sob. (Vol.1, pp. 140-2)

And so it goes on. Within two pages, we are struck by Mansfield's immense comic talent, her sense of cadence and timing, and her attentive ear to how the contemporary urban soundscape would not just insinuate into fictional worlds, but transform the forms, scale, and matter of writing. The cinematic immediacy of her art also impresses the reader, even if sound was as yet only desired by the emerging new art forms, or valiantly conjured up in the picture houses by a pianist or small orchestra.

- 4 Another revelation in this double-volume set is the importance of dialogue and witty exchange. Again, her formative training in voice, music, and theatrical performance provides useful insights into this feature of her writing, as do her forays into classical plays, Theocritan dialogues (as Alpers so astutely underlined), and contemporary theatre. At the intersection between the two volumes, we find a series of remarkable dramatic dialogues – most of which published only in the *New Age* – whose sense of timing, insinuation, absurd irony, and sheer comic patter merit comparison not only with Wilde, who Mansfield admired, but Molière and Hugo in the French classical tradition, and later playwrights such as Chekhov, whose theatrical works were not yet being performed, or even Pinter. Here too, the scrupulous chronological approach proves a godsend. As the reader moves straight from the last of these dramatic sketches to the far more familiar “Mr Reginald Peacock's Day,” so they are compelled to see Mansfield's explicitly dramatic verve evolving into the shifting, dramatized voices of prose. “Polyphony” is no longer just a convenient critical borrowing from the domain of music: the reader will note the extent to which, anticipating Huxley's “musicalisation of fiction,” Mansfield can script bravura acts of self-performance alongside the unsaid, and liberate words from the shackles of print.
- 5 That Mansfield scholarship can no longer be the same is the lasting conviction of the reader emerging from the surprises and delights of the *Collected Fiction*. The third volume reviewed here can thus be read as the first eloquent proof of new dimensions to come. As the fifth volume of *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, now upgraded to become a yearbook of outstanding scholarship, the publication confirms the vigour and breadth of Mansfield research. Beyond rereading Mansfield, it also illustrates the impressive critical perspectives galvanised by contemporary engagements with her oeuvre. As the title implies, this is not an overview of Mansfield as a Colonial / Post-Colonial, but a problematisation of what “post” implies in alternative critical perspectives. The “(Post)colonial” here is taken in the broadest sense of the term, to include challenging periphery positioning, hybridising pure identity structures, testing location and emplacement politics, and writing back, whether through Mansfieldian satire, or through creative writers today responding to Mansfield's works in pieces of their own. For reasons of concision, the full wealth of materials can only be glossed over here, but two essays can be mentioned as impressive contributions to contemporary criticism: first Aimee Gasston's “Katherine Mansfield: Cannibal” which explores different forms of assimilation, transubstantiation, and communion/community at work in Mansfield's thematics, poetics and reception. And second, Janet Wilson's exploration of “(Post)colonial modernism” through writing about and through ghostly presences and restless spectres. In both cases, the reader is struck by a sense of history as “incorporation,” of the means and politics of ingestion, and the phantoms that linger because they must not be put to rest for fear of silencing the lucid voices that their spectral presence recalls.

- 6 The Mansfield yearbook concludes with accounts of a recent acquisition by the Alexander Turnbull Library of papers previously held by the Murry family, and of a recent discovery of unknown manuscripts in Kings College London archives. In other words, even as we celebrate the publication of Mansfield's *Collected Works* there are still new, exciting materials to be added. So if the Mansfield turn is well underway, there is every reason to believe a whole new generation of researchers and scholars still has exciting times ahead of them.