
Katherine Mansfield is one more of the range of artists whose personal writings are greedily devoured. Her letters, first edited by her husband, J. M. Murry, after her death, helped to know her better and at the same time to create a myth of her person. These were published first in 1927 by Constable, arranged in two volumes, and later in 1951 by the same publisher with the title *Katherine Mansfield’s Letters to John Middleton Murry 1913-1922*. The rigour of his editions, not only of Katherine Mansfield’s letters but also of her other personal writings (the *Journal* published in 1927, and the *Scrapbook* published in 1937) was much questioned and created two conflicting positions: his detractors criticized him for his lack of professionalism and for his opportunism; and his defenders, in spite of admitting this, thanked him for keeping all her papers and notebooks, and in a way justified his attitude.

After Murry’s editions just a few things were done on her personal writings: some letters were published in *Adam International Review* in 1965 (the letters to Anne Estelle Rice and Sydney and Violet Schiff) and 1973 (those to Virginia Woolf, Richard Murry and Bertrand Russell), and some of her correspondence with S. S. Kotliansky came to light for the first time in the *Rêve de Littérature Comparée* in 1971. C. K. Stead published *Mansfield’s Letters and Journals* in Penguin in 1977. However, this edition was done with as little rigour as Murry’s; in fact, he takes most of the material from Murry’s own editions of the *Journal and Letters*.

Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott have been the first ones to do a rigorous edition of Katherine Mansfield’s letters. Their original plan was to make a four volume collection, though in the second volume this was changed unexpectedly without giving any explanation and in the flap of the jacket we read: “Volume two of the five-volume Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield…”

The first volume comprised Katherine Mansfield’s early years: from 1903 when she first sailed from New Zealand to London to study at Queen’s College, to 1917, the year when she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and advised to go abroad. Volume Two goes from her stay in Bandol, early in 1918, to September 1919. Volume Three covers just eight months: from September 1919 to April 1920 when she lived in Italy and the South of France. And the present volume goes from May 1920 to the end of 1921. She spent these months in England, France and Switzerland.

The four volumes share the same distribution and methodology. They all include an introduction by Vincent O’Sullivan who is also responsible for the annotations and dating. These introductions summarize well the content of the letters, though they are not, in any case, substitutes for them. After that we have a “Textual Note,” the “Acknowledgements” and the “List of Abbreviations and Manuscript Sources.” The first volume also includes a chronology of Katherine Mansfield’s life which we are referred to in the subsequent ones. Letters are grouped in periods and preceded by a brief summary. Each letter is headed by its recipient, the date (Katherine Mansfield seldom included it so this is a part of the editorial work), and the address. And at the end we find the source (manuscripts from different institutions and private owners), and the notes wherever necessary. These notes are very clarifying for they help to identify literary figures and personal friends and give the source of quotes (Katherine Mansfield used to quote the “classics” and the Bible) and other possible unknown pieces of information.

Volume 4 of *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* does not differ in form from the others already published, and the content is, as expected, a continuation of them. However, the letters are so satisfactory and fulfilling in themselves that they can be understood and enjoyed without recurring to the others.

The period covered by the letters is, according to Vincent O’Sullivan, “the most important time in her life as a writer”(vii). And it must really be, for she wrote most of her stories and the better ones, probably pressed by the imperiousness of her illness. Vincent O’Sullivan himself summarizes in the Introduction this and other aspects present in the letters. He speaks of Katherine Mansfield’s comments on her work as a writer, as her “insistent reservations about her work”(vii); of the “sense of déjà vu” the reader may have after having read the three first volumes, though this is justified as being a “hardened patterned” more than a repetition (O’Sullivan further explains the differences and similarities between the tone of these letters and the previous ones); of the different people the letters
are addressed to; of the evolution of her thought; the influences some writers exercised on her; and Murry’s negative version of her which made “a mawkish fabrication” of her last years.

Among other important subjects we find in these letters that can help to know Katherine Mansfield better both as an artist and as a person are: her illness and its influence on her work, the question of the technique of writing and also of painting, the question of genres, being the short story the literary genre par excellence for her, her interest in other writers, ancient and contemporary, her concept of religion, her feeling of exile or her frustration for being unable to bear children.

And the letters are addressed to a varied group of recipients, all of them interesting in their own way. The letters to her husband, J. M. Murry, which form the largest group, are written with naturalness and spontaneity. There we find her problems with money, with his infidelity, with his lack of affection, questions of literary criticism and literature in general and many others which make of their relationship something as special as to have arisen much controversy along this century. Full of affection are those letters addressed to her brother-in-law, Richard Murry, whom she considers her own brother and also those addressed to Dorothy Brett (she was the elder daughter of 2nd Viscount Esher and Katherine Mansfield met her in 1915 becoming good friends through their visits to Garsington, before sharing 3 Gower Street). Affectionate and full of literary questions are those to Violet and Sydney Schiff. More tactful are the letters to Virginia Woolf or Lady Ottoline Morrell (influential hostess and patroness of the arts whom Katherine Mansfield had met in February 1915, when she and Murry were taken by Lawrence to the Morrells’ home at 44 Bedford Square, Bloomsbury). Controversy arises in the letters to S. S. Kotelniansky and her dear friend Ida Baker. Some are mere business letters: those to her agent J. B. Pinker, or “medical”: the letter to Dr. Ivan Manoukhin. Family letters show the tension in the relationship with her father, Sir Harold Beauchamp.

We, indiscet letter-readers, can see in this new volume of Katherine Mansfield’s letters, a person and an artist probably not very different from what we already knew. But this time the same as with the three other volumes, we can look for her more in depth and with more rigour, without fearing the manipulation of the editors. [ANA BÉLEN LÓPEZ PÉREZ, University of Santiago de Compostela]