

*Letters of Frank Sargeson*. Selected and edited by Sarah Shieff. Vintage/Random House, Auckland, 2012. xxix + 631pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN: 978 1 86979 333 3.

IN THE AGE OF THE EPHEMERAL E-MAIL reading this marvellous collection of letters spanning 54 years (1927–1981) is a sobering reminder of what we have lost not only owing to technological changes but also owing to wider cultural shifts. For not only has e-mail spelt, at least for almost all, the end of the letter, but the format of the e-mail and its instantaneousness have meant a change in the way we choose to communicate. Most e-mails are brief, fragmented and reflect a world of constant communication. They do not require substantial detail or consideration for they exist often more as an ongoing e-conversation snatched between other tasks. Even those that do approach the depth and breadth of the traditional letter are unlikely to be hoarded for future archives. The delete button, of course, is not a total eradication, but the lack of physical paper archives means such exchanges are far less likely to be collected and retained in the manner that physical archives were. The contents of Walter Nash's infamous garage could easily be stored in e-form on any laptop, yet that is not the point. For physical documents signal permanence and act as a reminder in a way that e-files do not. I may be wrong and in the future e-books entitled 'The e-mails of ...' and 'the e-papers of ...' may find scholars and readers, but I doubt it.

Working from 'an archive of nearly 6000 letters to around 450 people' (p.x), Sarah Shieff has carefully and intelligently assembled a collection of 500 letters to 107 recipients which is nothing less than a counter-history of New Zealand cultural and social life in the last century. A work of lasting significance, it needs to be read alongside the letters of A.R.D. Fairburn and Toss Woollaston, two other works which (with this making a trinity) enable the beginnings of a re-evaluation of how modern New Zealand — or at least modern Pākehā New Zealand — was and came to be.

Sargeson may have lived in Takapuna, but his mind lived in that much wider world of letters; a world that stretched back (as noted by Kevin Ireland, p.xi) to Gibbon and Plutarch over breakfast and then encountered the totality of modern life nationally and internationally in his reading, listening and correspondence over the day. It is a life that reminds us that distance was always looking our way, and that New Zealanders were looking, writing, visiting and reading the 'distance' in their everyday lives. The letter was central here, for its possibilities enabled deep friendships of correspondence such as Sargeson enjoyed with William Plomer, whom he first encountered when Plomer was a reader for Jonathan Cape. Plomer and Sargeson never physically met, yet within their correspondence is a reminder of the place Sargeson holds within the wider history of modern literature. Such is the value of collections of letters, for they serve to act as ways to recover that which more recent cultural and societal shifts often downplay or obscure. The return to literary centrality of David Ballantyne, the recovery of Bill Pearson's work and the rise of Kiwi gothic expressed by Ronald Hugh Morrieson are all foretold by Sargeson. Sargeson also supported Maurice Duggan, Kevin Ireland, Alec Pickard (A.P. Gaskill) and, most famously, Janet Frame. We are reminded of the importance of literary mentors who stressed individual visions and voices in the days before the production lines of creative writing courses.

As noted, a constant theme of these letters is the charting of the overcoming of distance — both national and international — whether it is with Charles Brasch in Dunedin, 'Peter' Dawson in Tauranga and England, Karl Stead in his academic travels, Dan Davin at Oxford or Janet Frame's mental and physical travels through sanity, Europe and America. At turns literary, sociological, gossipy, bawdy, spiteful, gracious, perceptive — and always with his underlying brilliance — Sargeson is revealed as much the literary midwife to an incipient cultural nationalism as Charles Brasch or Eric McCormick. In his correspondence, the distances — physical, social, economic, sexual,

cultural, emotional — within New Zealand society are bridged and diminished in what is always the work of a great humanist.

Furthermore, this collection charts ‘the making of a New Zealander’, who in a letter to Denis Glover (20 September 1937) notes the tension of the modern writer who seeks to express the new society: ‘It’s queer — I live mainly with the people I draw my material from, but these people read True Detectives. As far as the people who (I hope) read my writing, a whole heap of gold clocks wouldn’t drag me into mixing with them if I could possibly avoid it’ (p.16).

This tension was — and remains — a consistent one in New Zealand art and letters, wherein the writer/artist exists in creative tension with a lower-middle-class society. Seeking to express the society around them for a readership who seek to differentiate themselves from what they read and view, the writer/artist in a small modern nation exists in a liminal position. Yet this is precisely what makes the insights of writers, poets, painters and composers so important and productive for the historian. In their attempts to represent the age and nation they exist within, they expose the tensions and experiences of the society in new ways. The cultural history of a nation is intimately linked with the social history, for the culture expressed and created is in response to the society. There is also the tension in adapting the international to local conditions, and conversely reinterpreting the local through what would be now termed global changes. So in these letters, as well as literary and cultural discussion and gossip, we gain insights into lives of gay and lesbian men and women here and abroad, changes in food, and changes in society such as the identification of Auckland as a Polynesian city with its own forms of apartheid.

Yet amidst all of the riches we are most centrally reminded of the gifts of Sargeson as a writer. Magnificent and invaluable as this book is as a resource, an entertainment, a cultural artefact and a history, most importantly it has sent me back to re-reading Sargeson’s stories and novels.

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*On Dangerous Ground: A Gallipoli Story*. By Bruce Scates. University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, 2012. 263pp. NZ price: \$45.99. ISBN: 978 1 74258 393 8.

THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY stood for progress and affluence. Significant industrial and domestic developments were taking place, although initially horse-drawn carriages were more prevalent than motorcars, electric lighting was a luxury and the aeroplane industry was in its infancy. The age of promise was fleeting though, and lives were irrevocably changed with the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, which sparked a four-year catastrophe.

Few individuals understood the complex chain of events that contributed to what was termed the first global war. In England, and in her dominions abroad, ordinary people believed a military victory would bring further prosperity and a more egalitarian epoch. Rousing assurances from those in power suggested that men should fight not so much to alienate the enemy but to expand the possibilities of civilisation. Romantic and idealistic views abounded, as reflected in comments such as the war could be ‘amusing’ and offer opportunities to ‘picnic on the grass’ (p.140).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately these attitudes failed to consider the wider context which smouldered with tensions over alliances, nationalism, imperialism and militarism. Nor could those caught up in the mayhem have envisaged that their first-hand experiences would fascinate twenty-first-century historians and novelists, a few of whom have written across both genres.