FOREWORD

Honorary President of the Katherine Mansfield Society

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Katherine Mansfield is one of the few early-twentieth-century writers whose work has never been out of print. For more than eighty years, her stories have remained among the most read in the language. In the last thirty, biographies and editions of her letters and notebooks have added depth to what we know of her, and she is now recognised as one of the essential and enduring Moderns. She has come a long way since Wyndham Lewis, a few months before she entered the Gurdjieff Institute, dismissed her as 'the famous New Zealand Mag.-story writer, in the grip of the Levantine psychic shark'. The recently established Katherine Mansfield Society and the enthusiasm of its world-wide membership has prompted the founding of this Mansfield journal.

Part of that earlier condescension sprang from her stories being so liked by 'ordinary' readers. There was the feeling that as a mere short story writer, she was not up there with 'the clever ones'. Her own last letters had voiced her deep suspicion of the intellectual life. Play less chess, do more gardening, she advised her husband. In a note meant only for her own eye, she hit on a deadly image for a life whose values rose only from books, and scuttled back to them: 'I do not want to be a *bookworm*. If the book is taken away from it the little blind head is raised, it wags, hovers, terribly uneasy, in a void until it begins to burrow again'.

Mansfield was, as the saying goes, 'a born writer'. She was also a born enthusiast for living life to the full. Writing – 'work' as she liked to call it – was of central and defining importance to her; but it was part of life, not a substitute for it. When a writer a few years ago in the *New York Times Book Review* singled her out as 'the most emblematic woman writer of her time', it was that alert, embracing commitment to the day, to what was possible and at hand *on her own terms*, that was celebrated: a woman set on shaping her destiny, whether or not she was able to bring it off. At the core of Mansfield there is an existential toughness: 'The little boat enters the dark fearful gulf and our only cry is to escape – "put me on land again." But it's useless. Nobody listens.

The shadowy figure rows on. One ought to sit still and uncover one's eyes'. It is something like this 'uncovering' that also defines the *élan* and the stringency of her prose. As both life and fiction made clear, to be modern was a risky business. Her contemporary H. D. astutely put it like this: "I believe in intelligent women having experience" was then a very, very thin line to toe, and a very, very frail wire to do a tight-rope act on'. Mansfield was up to the performance.

It took a generation, perhaps even two, for her reputation to break free from Middleton Murry's sincere but saccharine moulding of her image. The stories were read, as ever, but only slowly did Mansfield take her place among those Modernists credited with recasting English fiction. There were always a few of course who knew what was going on. The Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor, who so deeply disliked what he knew of her personality, and quite misread much of what she wrote, nevertheless declared that at her best, she can be linked with Proust and Joyce. Elizabeth Bowen, in the 1950s, mourned her as her missing contemporary. She made, so Conrad Aiken believed, 'the reflection of the moment' her particular domain.

This new journal will attend to the writer and to the woman, to the social and literary and imaginative worlds she moved in, to the divagations of fashion, to the recovery of texts, and to fresh responses to what she wrote. It will aim to do this with scholarly rigour, with openness, and as the editors intend, with something of Mansfield's deft example from her own critical writing – to be serious is a quite different thing from being solemn or doctrinaire.