"More or less in love"

by Margaret Moran

James Thomas Flexner. *An American Saga: The Story of Helen Thomas and Simon Flexner*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1984. Illustrated. Pp. 450 c$24.45.
The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, vol. 1: *1903–1917*. Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. Pp. xxx, 376. c$38.50.
Sean Hignett. *Brett: From Bloomsbury to New Mexico, a Biography*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984. Pp. 299. 8 leaves of plates. £14.95.

RUSSELL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY DESCRIBES Alys's cousin, Helen Thomas, whom he met during his first visit to America:

> She was gentle and kind, and had lovely red hair. I was very fond of her for a number of years, culminating in 1900. Once or twice I asked her to kiss me, but she refused. Ultimately she married Simon Flexner, the Head of the Rockefeller Institute of Preventative Medicine.[1]

An American Saga interweaves a detailed account of the background and experiences of Helen Thomas with those of Simon Flexner until their marriage in 1903. If the art of biography consists of imposing a pattern on lives that seem worth the trouble, the rather abrupt ending of the narrative with the marriage of the central characters may be considered regrettable. As the author notes, he has used a structure more appropriate for a Victorian novel (p. 433). Since the book was written by the son of the two subjects, his decision to concentrate on their early years may be understandable. Aside from all the practical impediments to continuing the saga further, he must have found himself especially intrigued by events in his parents' lives which were distanced from his own experience. An accomplished biographer, practised in the techniques of transforming masses of documents into a highly readable story, James Thomas Flexner here applies his impressive skills to his own heritage. Thus, the complaint that the book ends too soon arises in part from Flexner's fine capacity as a writer.

[1] *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 1: *1872–1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 132.

Readers can be stirred by the record of Simon's youth in a struggling Jewish immigrant family. As a student, he was so mediocre that no one could have ever predicted his distinguished contributions to medical knowledge. His father went so far as to take him on a tour of a jail to give him dire warning of the direction in which his delinquent ways seemed sure to lead. In spite of this unpromising start, Simon eventually gained prominence for his work in pathology and bacteriology. Although Helen enjoyed, in contrast, a genteel upbringing, she faced challenges of her own that came from an acutely sensitive nature and a tendency to ill-health. *An American Saga* is probably most remarkable for the graceful and perceptive way the development of their love is recounted. For us, there is the added interest of seeing Russell play, for a short time at least, an unaccustomed role: that of rejected suitor.

In 1929, he told Helen that when he came to write his autobiography, he would wish to dedicate certain chapters to her, since she had taught him all that he knew about unrequited love. In a note to future readers of his letters from Helen, Russell was more equivocal, writing: "I fell more or less in love with Helen, but she kept our relations rigidly correct." The letters Russell addressed to Helen, though scrupulously free of importuning, contain their own fervency. As a teacher of English literature at Bryn Mawr, Helen encouraged Russell's latent interest in the subject. To her wish to perceive him as a poet and essayist who had taken a wrong turning into mathematics, he responded with general discussions about the value of literature and statements about the nature of human experience that are suggestive of "The Free Man's Worship". But he also justified his professional commitment using the arguments of "The Study of Mathematics". After her marriage, his letters became less solemn. Their shared appreciation for literature found expression then in brief comments on particular books, like *Kipps* and *The Man of Property*. And when Helen sent him in 1908 a draft of a novel she had painstakingly prepared, he responded with encouragement and detailed recommendations about what look to be minor matters. After a publisher told her in 1914 that a short story was lacking in sufficient "spice", Russell advised: "Throw in a few demi-mondaines and some risqué conversation. The best beginning I know for a story is: 'Hell and Damnation' said the Duchess who had hitherto taken no part in the conversation." As the intensity of the letters relaxed, the range of subjects broadened to include mention of the political affairs of the day, plans for reunions, gossip about acquaintances and expressions of concern about the health of her two sons and about Simon's perpetual inclination to overwork. From this correspondence and all the other documents available, James Thomas Flexner selects quotations with admirable care.

Flexner errs in saying that Russell finished *Principia Mathematica* in 1900, when in fact the work then completed was first draft of *The Principles of Mathematics* (p. 327). Also, his impression that the reminiscences of childhood which Russell dictated in 1901 were "self-pitying" (p. 346) seems mistaken. Helen wrote to Russell in July 1901 about the delightful world he had once inhabited where he could imagine having tea in the drawing-room with a lion. Her references to "the neglected garden and the old oak tree" and to "the dismay of [his] Swiss tutor" give additional clues that the document Russell had sent her resembled the account of his memories of childhood in his *Autobiography*.[2] Unless (as seems implausible) the tone of his early recollections differed dramatically from what appeared years later in the *Autobiography*, the adjective "self-pitying" must be considered inappropriate. Helen's own response increases the likelihood that Flexner has misjudged the mood of Russell's first autobiographical reflections: "In short you have convinced me of the joys of childhood and early youth and I hope you will add more details to your reminiscences—there must still be interesting things to tell—and someday publish them, so as to convince other skeptics."

What is harder to argue convincingly is my intuition that Russell's motivation in giving to Lady Ottoline Morrell the letters Helen had sent him cannot be interpreted simply as a wish to boast "about a prior relationship" (p. 328). I cannot hope to defend Russell's infringement of another's privacy or his failure of delicacy, but I suspect that a desire to boast played a rather small part in his action. He had, after all, also passed on to Lady Ottoline the journal he kept between 1902–05. That intensely private record of the deterioration of his union with his first wife does not, as he must have known, redound to his credit. In later years, he told Lady Constance Malleson that he would give her Ottoline's letters to read were it not for the fact that the handwriting was nearly illegible. If all of this makes Russell seem somewhat callous, it also proves his touching faith in the power of the written word to tell the truth about the way things actually were. For him, the documentary record had a verifiable certainty often missing from experience at the moment. He seemed less concerned about the conclusions readers might draw about personal failings than about the preservation of a veracious chronicle. Whatever his faults, Russell had a commitment with his contemporaries and with posterity to honesty about his past that cannot be attributed entirely to "boasting". He took for granted that the people who had once been close to him shared his disinterested dedication to truth.

[2] For the lion/Lyon episode, see *Autobiography*, p. 23. The neglected garden and the old oak tree are described on pp. 19 and 30–1, and the dismay of the tutor on 36.

But to say so much is to belabour unconscionably a few very minor reservations about a book that is, on the whole, quite pleasurable to read.

No one could ever be found more antipodal to Helen Flexner than Katherine Mansfield. Helen dedicated herself to teaching, high moral principles and domesticity. Although she struggled very hard to produce fiction, she published only one book, her autobiographical *A Quaker Childhood*. Katherine Mansfield won a permanent place in literary history for her finely crafted short stories. But her life was a fretful one involving all the pain that could accrue from lesbian attractions, a day-long marriage, an abortion, a miscarriage, undetected gonorrhea and eventually the tuberculosis that caused her premature death at thirty-four. Russell may have favoured Helen's unfinished literary efforts over Katherine Mansfield's writing, if his complaint in 1918 that *Prelude* was trivial and worthless is anything to guide us.[3]

When Russell met her in July 1915 with J. Middleton Murry and S. S. Koteliansky, he "thought Murry *beastly* and the whole atmosphere of the three dead and putrefying".[4] But by November 1916, he revised his opinion about Katherine Mansfield to the extent that he had fallen by then "more or less in love" with her too. There is no reason to think that anything very momentous resulted from their mutual attraction. But the letters she wrote to him at the time seemed suggestive enough to call for a disclaiming note when he reread them in 1949: "The following batch of letters ... read as if we were having an affair, or about to have one, but it was not so.... My feelings to her were ambivalent: I admired her passionately, but was repelled by her dark hatreds." The thirteen letters which Russell feared might be misleading have here been made readily available and placed in the context of her other correspondence.[5]

The story of their short relationship is not news to readers of Antony Alpers' magnificent biography, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (1980). The first volume of the *Collected Letters* contains many letters that have never before been published at all and others not previously published in full. Yet the book cannot now alter dramatically our perception of the author. Long susceptible to the subdued impression that resulted from the silent editing of her papers by her second husband, J. Middleton

[3] Letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 25 July 1918, Morrell Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

[4] *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, vol. II: *1914–1944* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968), p. 53.

[5] Originals of twelve of these letters are in the Russell Archives. The sample I checked proved to be entirely free of error in this edition.

Murry, the record has lately been set straight. In 1922, Katherine Mansfield wrote in her journal, "Letters are the real *curse* of my existence. I hate to write them: I have to. If I don't, there they are—the great guilty gates barring my way." The contents of the first volume of the *Collected Letters* show no hint of this temporary exasperation about the strain of their composition. But the book suffers from the fact that the best bits have been quoted elsewhere; though the whole has never been presented so carefully.

As a near neighbour of D. H. Lawrence and Frieda in Cornwall, she was an acute observer of their life together. Her descriptions of their turbulent relationship make up some of the most memorable passages. Expressing her lack of sympathy with their obsessions, she wrote: "I cannot discuss blood affinity to beasts for instance if I have to keep ducking to avoid the flat irons and the saucepans. And I shall *never* see sex in trees, sex in the running brooks, sex in stones and sex in everything" (p. 261). To Lady Ottoline Morrell, she gave this remarkable impression of Robert Graves: "In the middle sat Greaves chat chatting incessantly of what I told my sergeant and what my men said to me and how I brought them back at the point of my revolver etc etc" (p. 312). In general, the letters to Lady Ottoline contain the wittiest comments. And the ones to any correspondent during 1916 and 1917, when her normally enclosed world temporarily widened, command the most attention. At other times, interest is sustained by her vivid evocation of moods from "*furious bliss*" to despair and by her arresting phrases, especially about nature. Thus, a warm and lazy sun is said to be "the kind of sun that loves to make patterns out of shadows and puts freckles on sleeping babies" (p. 156) and, later, a wild sea can be heard "roaring out the Psalms" (p. 209). In the end, she shows herself to be as capable of satire as lyricism and as comfortable with impenetrable sophistication as childlike fancifulness.

This volume is splendidly edited from the smallest particulars to the brief but perceptive essay which introduces it. The annotations generally seem well judged, although the reasons for the certainty that Russell concluded his long affair with Lady Ottoline immediately before 3 June 1917 bewilder me (p. 310). Mansfield's notoriously difficult handwriting and her habitual omission of dates must have made the preparation of the text itself a difficult task. The editors' vigilance has relieved readers of concern about problems of that sort, thereby leaving us free to face the essential puzzle—what to make of this troubling woman. Attention is focused so remorselessly on Mansfield herself that not a word is said about the epistolary styles and interests of her correspondents and how these may have influenced her various voices. Indeed, no indication is given as to whether any of the letters to which she responded have been

printed (or even if they have survived), except for a reference to C. A. Hankin's selection, *The Letters of John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield* (1983), which is buried in the Acknowledgements (p. xxvi). Mansfield's letters to Murry dominate Volume 1, but we are not instructed if an attempt to read his letters in tandem with hers would be a rewarding or futile undertaking. Although the editors do not say so, Russell's letters to Mansfield are not extant.

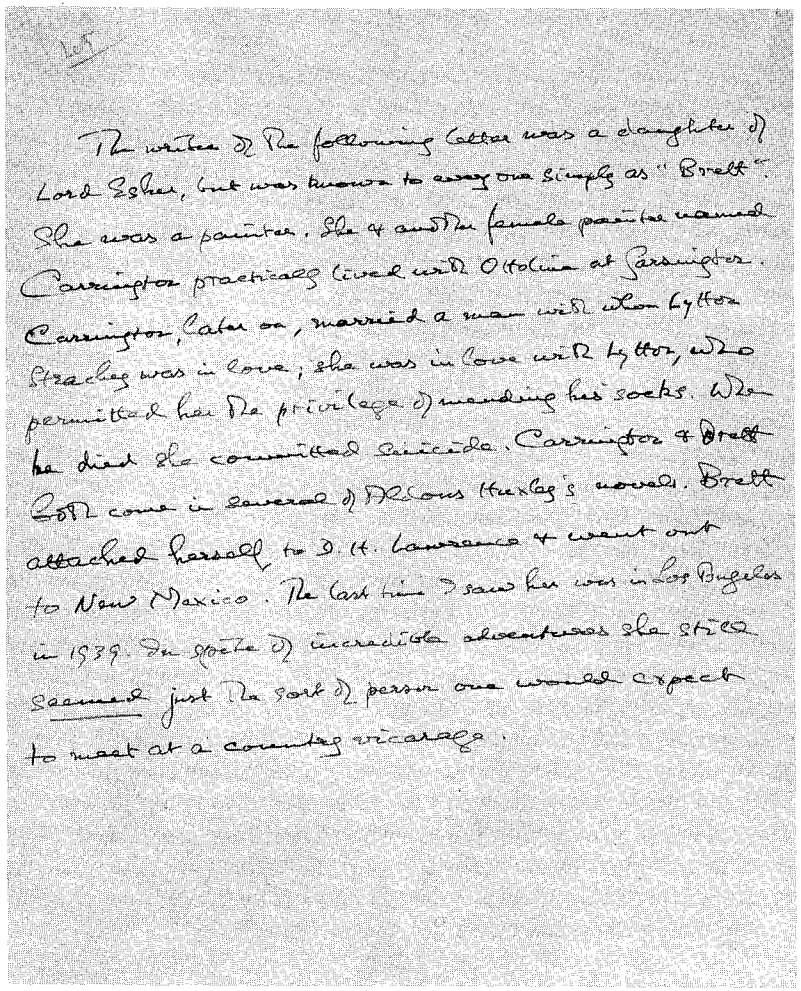
About her friend Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Brett wrote to Lady Ottoline in November 1916: "*I* think she is in *Love*, some man has risen like the dawn on her horizon like they will all her life—the Call of the Wild is in her and she can no more resist the call when it comes than any other wild animal."[6] Dorothy Brett did not know at the time that Mansfield's reaction had been inspired by Bertrand Russell. But after she observed their brief involvement, she pronounced, "Bertie is a skunk" (Alpers, p. 223).

Daughter of Viscount Esher, she was the Honorable Dorothy Brett, but, after entering the Slade in 1910, she preferred to be called simply by her surname. Her ear trumpet, named "Toby", did not function effectively enough to allow her to participate fully in social exchanges. Cast by her deafness in the role of observer, she became a sardonic commentator on the famous people she encountered at Garsington and Bloomsbury. Imagining what weekends at Garsington would have been like if Philip Morrell had had his way, she told Lady Ottoline that he "would have us all combing the pigs and adding up the milk bills and finally sitting on the eggs" (Alpers, p. 225). About Russell, she said, "The God in him is overwhelming—but the humanity of him is rather footing and below standard" (p. 284). She thought Lady Ottoline to be a "very strange woman with a heart of gold and a yen for men" (*Brett*, p. 60).

Brett's own yen for men was so slow to develop that Dora Carrington allowed her imagination to run rampant with the suggestion that Lady Ottoline was attempting to accelerate the process by sending her out "4 times in one morning with Bertie for long walks across remote fields" (*Brett*, p. 84). In truth, Brett found cause for terror from so much as talking to Russell. She recalled:

> I never seemed to be adequate enough for him. I would say something quite simple, *quite simple*, and he would turn on me and say "Why did you say that?

[6] Quoted by Antony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Viking, 1980), p. 221.



The writer of the following letter was a daughter of Lord Esher, but was known to every one simply as "Brett". She was a painter. She & another female painter named Carrington practically lived with Ottoline at Garsington. Carrington, later on, married a man with whom Lytton Strachey was in love; she was in love with Lytton, who permitted her the privilege of mending his socks. When he died she committed suicide. Carrington & Brett both come in several of Aldous Huxley's novels. Brett attached herself to D. H. Lawrence & went out to New Mexico. The last time I saw her was in Los Angeles in 1939. In spite of incredible adventures she still seemed just the sort of person one would expect to meet at a country vicarage.

Russell's archival note on his letters from Brett

> What do you mean?" Well, I had not meant anything by it, I was so frightened. He would get quite upset and angry if I got up and went to bed at the precise moment he would want to read out loud to the group of us ... he would make me come and sit close to him with my ear trumpet, Toby, practically in his book so that I could hear every word. (*Brett*, pp. 50–1)

She had reached the age of thirty-seven before anyone arose like the dawn on her horizon. At that time she became irresistibly attracted to Mansfield's husband, J. Middleton Murry. Indeed, she went so far as to cherish for a while the illusion that they might marry after Mansfield's death. When D. H. Lawrence and Frieda went to New Mexico to found Rananim, she proved to be their only follower. Lawrence she revered and always regarded as a "potential lover", notwithstanding the futility of their two attempts to turn this possibility into reality. After his death, she asserted, "I feel I am more truly his widow than Frieda" (*Brett*, p. 218).

Sean Hignett wishes to minimize Brett's capacity to pass shrewd judgments on the "frightening intellectuals" and "amazing people" (*Brett*, p. 50) who came under her scrutiny, in the hope that she might be regarded as inherently interesting. He acknowledges, of course, that her reputation for penetrating insights explains her portrayal as Jenny Mullion in Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*. There, Jenny sits in "the ivory tower of her deafness"[7] creating caricatures of her companions. But Hignett's attempt to make Brett more than an eccentric supporting character cannot be entirely satisfactory. Even with the best of intentions, Hignett cannot avoid allowing her to vanish for pages as Lawrence inevitably upstages her. In death too, Lawrence dominates as Hignett spends pages explaining the difficulty of finding an appropriate resting place for his ashes. After this, Hignett has no time to make any assessment at all of Brett's art. Without meaning to do so, his book proves the justice of her modest remark to Lady Ottoline: "Did you really want to know me? There is still time but you won't have to dig deep, I'm afraid = there is not much of me" (*Brett*, p. 69). Unfortunately, the reader is further distracted from the attempt to know her by the constant effort of summoning tolerance for passages like this one:

> Lawrence was forced to salt away the notion until 1924 when only Brett, of all the chosen, put her money where her mouth was and followed Lawrence and Frieda to the 9,000-foot high ranch in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains north of Taos, the final venue for Rananim where Utopia had a brief and bickering existence, anticipating by half a century the communes that were to sprout, peyote-like, in the northern New Mexican desert in the early 1970s. (*Brett*, pp. 73–4)

[7] *Crome Yellow* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928), p. 31.

In spite of all the jokes, Huxley's portrait remains unchallenged as Brett's highest tribute.

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