

## *Short Life Well Spent*

**The Life of Katherine Mansfield**, by Antony Alpers, *New York: The Viking Press, 1980. xxvi + 466 pp. \$16.95.*

ANTONY ALPERS' new life is a valuable and in many ways exhilarating work. It replaces his biography of 1953, incorporating twenty times as much material, and is almost twice the length. Over the last two decades and more, as those who knew Katherine Mansfield have died, much that was confidential has become available in university libraries and private collections of three continents. Mr. Alpers has crossed the seas repeatedly for access to these, and for personal interviews that cast fresh light upon a magnetically attractive but somewhat enigmatic figure. Ten years in the making, a totally new biography has resulted, and is surely now the definitive one.

Before she died in 1923 at the age of 34, Katherine Mansfield wrote upward of a dozen short stories which are recognized classics. (Veteran readers need no introduction to pieces like "The Garden Party," "Bliss," "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," or "At the Bay.") These, most of them, were composed against deepening illness and impending death from tuberculosis. It was her conviction that even her best work was "not good enough." But had she not set a lofty standard to begin with, and been driven by an effort of will to attempt it despite and because of failing health, Katherine Mansfield would be known today chiefly as the first wife of editor-critic John Middleton Murry. For the most part, the good biographer Alpers properly subordinates her stories to her story "which is so darkly tragic—and yet which even in its darkest places sparkles like the inside of a geode, thanks to the gaiety and wit of its central figure."

In all of its brevity, Mansfield's life was one of commotion and variety from the time she left her native New Zealand in 1908 to pursue a literary career in London. There, her 19-year-old head stuffed with Oscar Wilde and Henrik Ibsen, she em-

barked on a course of bohemian escapades to exhibit the break with stodgy Wellington and her affluent family. Alpers' account of the wild-oats years—their fearful toll in unwed pregnancy and ensuing miscarriage, exposure to consumption, and gonorrhea undetected until 1918—is full and frank, his view of our young adventuress sympathetic, at times paternally amused. (On her near-surreal one-day marriage to a voice teacher she barely knew, he comments, "The little monkey.") Mansfield's writings from this period, cognate with her personal dealings—cheeky, cynical, satiric—were finding their way into A.R. Orage's *The New Age* by 1910. Her complex involvement with this amazing periodical, epitome of all the tacky vigor of the Edwardian literary underworld, deserves and receives a very funny chapter.

The alliance with Middleton Murry dates from 1911. Here was the center of gravity Katherine craved and, except for a dash to the war zone of France in 1915 for a rendezvous with novelist Francis Carco—a final escapade—her man till death. Murry did not, as he was the first to admit, offer a scrap of emotional support. Possibly Mansfield didn't need it very deeply. (Besides, they married each other's careers.) The tumultuous friendship with the D.H. Lawrences, the famous Cornwall weeks of 1915 and 1916—or, as one acquaintance put it, "The great Dostoevsky nights, when Mansfield was always at her worst"—Alpers reports with a penetrating sense of the human realities involved.

By 1918, when she had her first tubercular seizure, Katherine was a very different being from the bewildered child who scribbled an undelivered suicide note in 1909, blaming it all on Wilde. After that, the story goes quickly. Biography being what it is, these are Alpers' slowest chapters: the turned-inward years of dying, and writing well. Medically exiled in Italy, southern France, later Switzerland—accompanied throughout by blundering, devoted Ida Baker, close friend of long standing—Mansfield looks back to remembered New Zealand for

much of her finest work. In early 1923, seeking a mystical cure in Gurdjieff's Institute at Fontainebleau, she dies.

Her brief career spans one of the busiest eras in English literature. Alpers puts it this way:

It would be hard to think of anyone who saw so vividly at the time so much of what was happening, with an eye for both the human and the literary fact. There is no other writer who knew Orage's *New Age* in 1910, the Lawrence who wrote *Women in Love* in 1916, and the emerging moth Virginia Woolf, along with Lady Ottoline Morrell's hectic Garsington, Middleton Murry's hectic *Rhythm*, and his distinguished *Athenaeum*; which is not to mention a short-lived intimacy with Bertrand Russell, a clash with Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, or the surprising walk-on parts that are played in her tragedy this time by T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Wyndham Lewis.

To the list should be added Frank Harris, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, and Aldous Huxley, who later drew her from life (inaccurately) in *Those Barren Leaves*. Many of the figures named above have undergone blockbuster biography. As to relationships between Garsington guests (among them the Bloomsburies) we are minutely informed by an increasing number of memoirs, autobiographies, and published correspondence. Alpers is alert to the times—the importance of clothing as self-declaration, the spreading influence of new feminism, the corrosive and incessant horror of the Great War which claimed Katherine's brother—and sensitive to the decisive cultural moment, such as the post-Impressionist exhibit of 1910 (a kind of "shaking free," Mansfield later recalled) or the joyous discovery of Russian ballet in 1912. His book enters the composite portrait of an era by now massively rediscovered.

Garsington enchants and dismays. Gathered there weekends, the younger generation of Georgian art convivially, rancorously enthralled by each other.

Everyone on the make, unclear who would succeed. (Murry published a roaringly bad novel in 1918, but intended to become the greatest lyric poet since John Keats.) A memorable Garsington moment: Katherine reading *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* to the assembled clan in a deep thrilling voice remembered long after. (She was always a bit of an actress.) Eliot she knew and liked well. But that wife of his!

Three final impressions, all lavender. First, the feminist claim, overdue for a decade, may be at hand. A danger for any commentator is to exalt the adolescent "acting out" of pre-Murry years at the expense of the adult Mansfield who really should matter to feminists. Omitted from Alpers' 1953 book, two lesbian episodes in 1908 Wellington a few months before her departure. Emotional hangover is felt in the early London months (the suicide note). After that, Katherine was sexually orthodox always, if not in the spirit of Phyllis Schlafly. Any feminist who reads into the scrambled erotics of an overheated teenager a revolt against the patriarchal tyrant to inspire women today is a feminist in trouble.

Second, dust-jackets can be misleading. Yes, Katherine did call Ida Baker "my wife." Meaning: Ida took care of domestic details while the author did Her Work. Quite right, Ida was lesbian. At the time she didn't know it, but Katherine would have known. The inimitable Ida whose clumsy, possessive true love Katherine so often rebuffed, was no Alice B. Toklas, but we can see why her darling rebuffed her. Ida Baker died in 1978, and Alpers can now sort out for us an often funny but finally rather melancholy friendship.

Third, my only quarrel with Alpers: since the 1953 book, he has grown quite fond of Murry, and deplores his persecution by D.H. Lawrence's partisans. (Alpers darkly alludes to "the enemies who pursue him yet," though Murry died in 1958.) Drawing freely from the Prologue to *Women in Love* published in 1968, Alpers strongly intimates that Lawrence's attraction to Murry was consciously homosexual. Now, setting aside the Prologue, which is fiction, there is nothing in our factual knowledge of Lawrence that proves any such design upon Murry. Here, an otherwise conscientious biographer inflates an improbability into an implied certainty.

Neither Katherine nor Murry, Alpers makes clear, began to suspect the nature of Lawrence's explosive love-hate. (Nor, when they read *Women in Love*, did they see themselves in Gudrun and Gerald.) Prim, naive Murry could never have recognized such a quality in Lawrence's despotic affection. (Indeed, Murry is the base of a surpassingly comic triangle: A born love-object, congenitally supine, he attracts the volcanic passions of Lorenzo even as his wife pours into this exhilarating man a violence of expectation no living mate could satisfy.) But Katherine, who sensed something odd in Gaudier-Brzeska's manly embraces of Murry in 1913 ("Did you ever have peculiar longings?" she asked the sculptor outright), could sniff out an overture to Murry from either sex a mile away. Her silence on any ulterior motive in Lawrence's *Blutbruderschaft* is probably our best guide. This is Katherine Mansfield, alive again in a splendid biography.

Reviewed by DON W. KLEINE