



***In Her Hand: Letters of Romantic-Era British Women Writers in New Zealand Collections,***

by Otago Students of Letters.

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This very welcome new collection brings to light unknown letters by women writers which found their way into New Zealand collections, notably those in the Alfred and Isabel Reed collection at Dunedin Public Libraries. Alfred Reed, the founder of prominent New Zealand publishing firm A. H. Reed, was a great literary collector, and in the early part of the last century, he bought miscellaneous batches of letters from London dealers in a quest for the missives of the famous. The letters from his collection reproduced here are supplemented by a few from other sources in New Zealand and abroad.

Ironically, all of the early nineteenth-century women writers featured here had been famous both in their own day, and into the Victorian period. When Reed acquired their letters, their renown had faded – but now all have been the subjects of renewed interest, following the recuperative ventures of second-wave feminists. The women covered, presented in order of their birth, are Anna Letitia Barbauld, Hannah More, Joanna Baillie, Amelia Opie, Jane Porter, Sydney Morgan, Lucy Aikin, Annabella Byron, Felicia Hemans, Anna Jameson and Maria Jane Jewsbury. For Jewsbury, there is also reproduced an article that has never been published.

The volume itself is the product of some innovative pedagogy on the part of Tom McLean and Shef Rogers of the English Department of Otago University in Dunedin. For their graduate course, Writing for Publication, they asked each student to edit the letters of one of the authors – a venture which naturally entailed doing research on the authors' lives and works. So for each woman, the letters are prefaced by a discussion of her career, plus editorial and contextual information about the actual letters, and a bibliography of secondary sources. These tasks are all handled very professionally by the students. The critical and biographical accounts are models of usefulness as well as succinctness: there would be few scholars of the period familiar with all of the writers included here, while students and general readers will find this introduction to a range of prominent but oft-neglected figures very fascinating. My only real caveat concerned the slapdash nomenclature relating to Lady Byron and her sister-in-law: she is usually referred to incorrectly, as Lady Annabella Byron (rather than Annabella, Lady Byron), while her *bête noire*, Augusta Leigh, is identified as "Miss" rather than "Mrs" Leigh.

As might be expected from a necessarily miscellaneous compendium of letters, the value for readers of the individual letters is variable. The most interesting ones include: Barbauld's declining a profile in the *Monthly Mirror* in 1798; Hannah More's early-career letter to "Man of Feeling" Henry Mackenzie in full "sensibility" mode; Joanna Baillie's thanks for a report of the performance of her comedy *The Election*; Jane Porter's explanation of her inability to continue her periodical series on *Woman*; Lady Morgan's capitalising on the Indian Mutiny by revising and reissuing a novel published over forty years earlier; Felicia Hemans's compliments to T. K. Hervey on his 1824 collection, *Australia, and Other Poems*; and financially-strapped Anna Jameson's attempt to drive a firm bargain with an art-dealer and print-seller over engravings from her father's paintings. Especially valuable is the

unpublished article by Maria Jane Jewsbury, which is based on her return to her home in Manchester after a visit to the Wordsworths. Although understanding the conflict between familial and literary priorities in Jewsbury's life is helpful in interpreting this piece, the account also demonstrates acutely her ability to evoke common human experience with a light touch. Her premature death just before her thirty-third birthday was a great loss to journalism.

Even the less weighty letters in this collection convey a sense of the busy literary and personal lives and attachments of these women writers. The collection also reveals some connections among them: Barbauld and Lucy Aikin were aunt and niece, Barbauld and More knew each other, More was an admirer of Hemans's work, Aikin and Lady Byron were friends with Baillie, and Lady Byron, like More, knew the Mackenzie family.

These connections might be more extensive than was evident to the editors here, given that each worked on one writer only. For example, Barbauld was evidently a friend of a Frances Carr and mentor to her daughter Sarah; Sarah Carr reappears later in the collection as a friend of Lady Byron's. The editor of Barbauld mentions that Sarah Carr married Stephen Lushington, Lady Byron's lawyer in her marital separation, but the editor of Lady Byron discusses both Sarah Carr and Stephen Lushington without referring to their marriage, or indeed to the connection with Barbauld. While one might hesitate to construe any kind of strong sisterhood among the writers simply on the basis of what is here, the collection nonetheless suggests that the links among these women which the letters (and research into them) have highlighted might repay further study.

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