

## Book Review

Letters of Denis Glover: Selected and edited by Sarah Shieff

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**Otago University Press Te Whare Tā o Te Wānanga o Otākou, 2020  
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The Letters of Denis Glover selected and edited by Sarah Shieff (Otago University Press, 2020) is a handsome tome. The portrait of Denis by Leo Bensemann makes a strong cover with his portrait in colour blocks of green, blue and brown. Denis's blue eyes shine with confidence captured ca 1937, when he was at the Caxton Press which he founded in 1935. The letters tell us that Glover valued this portrait by his former Caxton colleague Leo Bensemann and we hear about a later portrait by Eve Page (p.463) 1968 which was purchased by the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki in 1970.

I had considered that extensive volumes of correspondence might be superfluous in the digital age when OCR might help you navigate to relevant correspondence. This is not the case. Researchers cannot yet harvest and interpret 3000+ distributed letters with appropriate footnotes and metadata. Sarah Shieff's assiduous selection of 500 of the 3000+ distributed letters has produced an impressive and deeply interesting book which gives new insights into Denis Glover. The handsome and hefty tome includes a 'Select bibliography' and a thorough index to names and subjects. Extensive footnotes assist with decoding Denis' turn of phrase which riffs off names, addresses and matters at hand. These footnotes provide the key to many of the coded and throw-away remarks intended for the recipient.

This book is an essential resource for studying the evolution of New Zealand twentieth century literary publishing and cultural life. The correspondents are a literary Who's Who – with Glover writing to Sargeson; Brasch; Curnow, Fairburn, Mason et al on matters literary and matters of the heart. See the extensive 'Notes on key correspondents' (p. 29-42) for the literary roll call and introductions to lesser-known correspondents including Olive Johnson. Letters present him at his best – talking, working and scheming with friends, family and colleagues. Some of the perceptions have dated; a heavy measure of misogynistic, racist and alcohol imbued observation. We get to know Denis and to see him at his most astute in terms of book design at the Caxton Press through to his final imprint Catspaw Press. He was an editorial champion in terms of seeing the letters of his dear friend Rex Fairburn collected, and finally published by Lauris Edmond in 1981.

I enjoyed the insights into Glover's love of good book design and the strength of his opinions. In his letter (1941) to the Timaru architect Percy Watts Rule he comments,

*"...the Kelmscott Chaucer is a great disappointment to me – five years wasted effort..." (p97)*

These letters provide case studies on book design, editorial control, copyright and ethics. There is some insight into the purchase and acquisitions of Glover's letters and manuscripts including correspondence with two Alexander Turnbull Chief Librarians, Graham Bagnall and Jim Traue. Glover describes something he had written which was subsequently gifted to the library by the bookseller Dick Reynolds as, "not Turnbull-worthy" (p 469) at a time where he sold instalments of letters to Turnbull in September, October and December 1969. He writes to Jim Traue in 1979,

*"I have no loyalty to my country, being conscripted into it at birth, but I do have loyalty to our Library" (p.720-721).*

The Alexander Turnbull now holds two sequences of Glover correspondence: MS Papers 0418 and 80-387 carbon copies of Glover's outward letters 1977-80. Glover's role in managing access and publication rights to Fairburn's archive at the Turnbull Library provides additional case studies. His letters to Olive Johnson began with her role in compiling the Rex Fairburn bibliography which was published in 1957. This friendship with Olive Johnson resulted in extensive love letters, addressed both her and Buss, the cat. Olive was Head of Acquisitions at the University of Auckland Library, 1959-1976.

This is a remarkable book about a remarkable man of letters. Note too that this is the 2<sup>nd</sup> in an extraordinary hat trick by Sarah Shieff with [The Selected Letters of Frank Sargeson](#) published in 2012 with over 500 letters. An edition of Allen Curnow's letters is next. New Zealand literary scholarship is much the richer with this remarkable book.

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