

Shared Visions: Katherine Mansfield and James Nairn in New Zealand Landscape

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Abstract

This article explores the shared visions of the New Zealand-born short-story writer Katherine Mansfield and the Scottish-born painter James Nairn, and their portrayal of the New Zealand landscape, notably Wellington and its harbour. Examining selected stories by Mansfield and paintings by Nairn, the article demonstrates their commitment to capturing the essence of their environment and their local surroundings. In particular, it examines their mutual sensitivity to light and atmosphere at a specific historical moment: the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A further link between them is the likelihood of Nairn having inspired the artist-narrator in Mansfield's short story "Daphne" (1921). The article highlights how their unique but complementary approaches have enriched our understanding of aspects of New Zealand's cultural and artistic heritage.

Introduction: Nairn's background

On 21 September 1889, the Scottish painter, James McLauchlan Nairn (1859–1904) set sail for New Zealand on the *Forfarshire*.¹ At the time of his departure, local news items reported that the artist was making an extended trip to New Zealand, ostensibly to visit relations already living there and that at this stage it was his intention to return to his homeland.² Several months after his arrival in Dunedin in early January 1890, two newspapers confirmed these plans.³ Yet not long after reaching Wellington in July, Nairn decided to stay on indefinitely in New Zealand. Like the unnamed painter of Katherine Mansfield's short story, "Daphne" (1921), he must have taken "an extraordinary fancy to the small town planted at edge of a fine deep harbour like a lake".⁴ Certainly Wellington was a "small town" compared with Glasgow, which was known at that time as the "second city of the Empire"; however, it did hold a special position within the colony, as the seat of central government.⁵ Nairn had taken a liking to Wellington people, among them the local art dealer, McGregor Wright (1861–1939). Moreover, when Nairn first exhibited his work in the capital in early 1891, it received an enthusiastic response, with one artist commentator, Mary Elizabeth Richardson (later Tripe) – who was to be Nairn's future teaching colleague at Wellington Technical School – remarking that "at last one felt that one was seeing something worth while".⁶

The Glasgow Boys, the group of painters with whom Nairn was associated prior to his departure from Scotland, and of which he was recognised as one of their senior members,⁷ consistently rejected the traditions of the academic establishment in their pursuit of a more progressive painting approach and style. During the 1880s they had been drawn to Realism, especially that of the French *plein-air* painter, Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884), who focussed on themes relating to rural life and the people from the land. Over time, their choice of subject matter and their interests broadened. Implicit within their compositions were references to the time of day, the seasons and prevailing weather conditions, and this in turn was often reflected in the titles of their paintings. Several of these aspects are amply illustrated in one of the large landscapes that Nairn produced

prior to his departure, of the small rural settlement of Auchenhew, situated on the southernmost point of the Isle of Arran, off the Ayrshire coast (Fig. 1). The painting depicts a woman taking in her washing at the bewitching hour, the time of the day during the summer months when daylight imperceptibly dissolves into night and all is calm, known to Scots as the “gloaming”. It also affirms Nairn’s developing interest in conveying the true nature of the prevailing atmospheric conditions in his depiction of the scene before him. This approach to landscape painting reflects Nairn’s close study of John Constable, and became the hallmark of his work throughout his New Zealand years.⁸



1. James Nairn, *Auchenhew, Arran*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 610 x 915 mm. Private Collection, London.

Soon after his arrival in Wellington, Nairn took up permanent lodgings with his brother, Archibald and his family, at 93 Tinakori Road, in Thorndon (Fig. 2). He also found a suitable space for a studio nearby at 20 May Street and subsequently at 17 Glenbervie Terrace. Although he moved to Woolcombe Street in the suburb of Mount Cook in early 1898, following his marriage to Ellen Smith,⁹ Nairn continued to be a visible presence in Thorndon until his sudden and premature death, on 22 February 1904, aged forty-four.¹⁰ Furthermore, during the early 1890s, Nairn was appointed to a teaching position at the Art Department of the Wellington Technical School.¹¹ So, although he did travel to Silverstream in the Hutt Valley, a routine of working from a rural base that he had established as a member of the Glasgow Boys, Nairn’s teaching commitments required him to remain in the city for a greater part of the year. This work/life balance is reflected in the number of paintings within his oeuvre representing the Wellington area, including the harbour and its bays.¹²



2. James Nairn, *Street Scene*, 1890s. Watercolour, 355 x 257 mm. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, Gift of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, 1947.

About Young Kass

From her early years, Kass (born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp [1888–1923]), was always alert to the presence of those round her. She recalled how “I love to watch people – to know them”.¹³ Furthermore, those who came within her purview during her formative years were likely to be stored in her childhood memories, oft-times to appear in a future short story. The question arises, was the young Mansfield aware of the presence of the “bohemian” painter, James Nairn, paint box under his arm, out and about in their immediate neighbourhood, seeking subjects to paint? Did her knowledge of Nairn, if any, come from her own observation of him or subsequent talk within the family and friends of this talented, influential artist? While this is necessarily speculation, it remains a distinct and interesting possibility.¹⁴

Certainly, from Mansfield’s short story, “Daphne” (1921), the reader gathers a considerable amount of information about the painter/narrator and his background, and anyone familiar with Nairn will recognise striking similarities with events in his life. He had been in “Port Willin” (a barely disguised Wellington) for six months and “decided to give a one-man show”.¹⁵ He “expected a mob at my Private View, and I got it too”. Her character seems remarkably similar in outlook to what we know of Nairn — “by no means an out-and-out modern, as they say; people like violins and landscapes of telegraph poles leave me cold. But Port Willin is still trying to swallow Rossetti, and Hope by Watts is looked upon as very advanced”. The artist then concludes “It was natural my pictures should surprise them”.¹⁶ This corresponds to the early, sometimes

hostile responses to Nairn's perceived radicalism, with "murmurings. of protest and cries of 'atrocities'", which he happily exacerbated, as he did not want "the ordinary public... to like my work".¹⁷ The narrator's dealer in "Daphne" was "little Field" (in all likelihood based on McGregor Wright),¹⁸ who "had just started a gallery and he wanted me—begged me, rather—to kick off for him. He was a decent little chap; I hadn't the heart to refuse".¹⁹

Within weeks of working on "Daphne", Mansfield began a second short story, also set in Port Willin, "Taking the Veil" (1922).²⁰ As the narrative unfolds, Mansfield, in the guise of the eighteen-year-old, Edna, reacquaints herself with the well-known haunts of her childhood in Thorndon – the Botanic Gardens and the Convent of the Sacred Heart. She reflects on her good fortune of growing up in Wellington, and how her memories have remained "as vivid as ever".²¹ Significantly, Edna's devoted boyfriend – who she contemplates rejecting and "Taking the Veil" at the Convent – is called Jimmy. This was the name by which Nairn was always known to his friends, though in the story we admittedly do not know his profession. The unnamed painter of "Daphne" is not the only occasion when an artist was a central character in Mansfield's fiction: there is, for example, the very shy Ian French, of "Feuille d'Album", the ladies' man Andrew Gold of "Pic-Nic" and several more, including the rather intriguing unnamed female printmaker of "Psychology".²²

A shared vision: the author's perspective

In the course of my research in the 1990s on Nairn and his New Zealand years, I developed a better appreciation of Mansfield's beautifully-crafted New Zealand short stories.²² It was easy to see the analogies between Nairn's predominantly small-scale paintings and Mansfield's oeuvre, which consisted entirely of short stories; neither artist needed a large canvas to convey their intentions. At that stage, my study mostly focussed on links between them in relation to specific subject matter. The centenary of Mansfield's death in 2023 led me to reconsider this subject in more depth. The present article demonstrates how, for Mansfield and Nairn alike, it was the presence of a "deep brimming harbour shaped like a crater, in the curving rim of hills",²³ and its ever-changing moods, visible from so many vantage points of the city, that would inspire them. It was a subject to which each of them returned in the course of their short working lives.

I will re-examine here several scenes from Mansfield's "At the Bay" (1922),²⁴ the twelve-part narrative of a "day in the life" of the Beauchamp/Burnell family, and compare aspects of this story with paintings that Nairn produced of Wellington Harbour and the hinterland beyond. "At the Bay" describes Mansfield's family while on holiday at Muritai Beach, along the coast from Day's Bay, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For several summers and before purchasing a small cottage at Day's Bay, her father, Harold Beauchamp (1858–1938), rented a cottage at Muritai (Fig. 3). Yet it was not until the second half of 1921 that Mansfield committed her family memories onto paper. At the time, she wrote with her customary enthusiasm to her artist friend, Dorothy Brett:

It's called "At the Bay" & its (I hope) full of sand and seaweed and bathing dresses, hanging over verandahs & sandshoes on window sills, and little pink "sea" convolvulus rather gritty sandwiches and the tide coming in. And it smells (oh I DO hope it smells) a little bit fishy.²⁵



3. The Glen and house, Muritai, Eastbourne, c. 1913–14. Allan, J A: Allan family photographs. Ref: 1/2-040430-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington [/records/23014033](https://records/23014033)

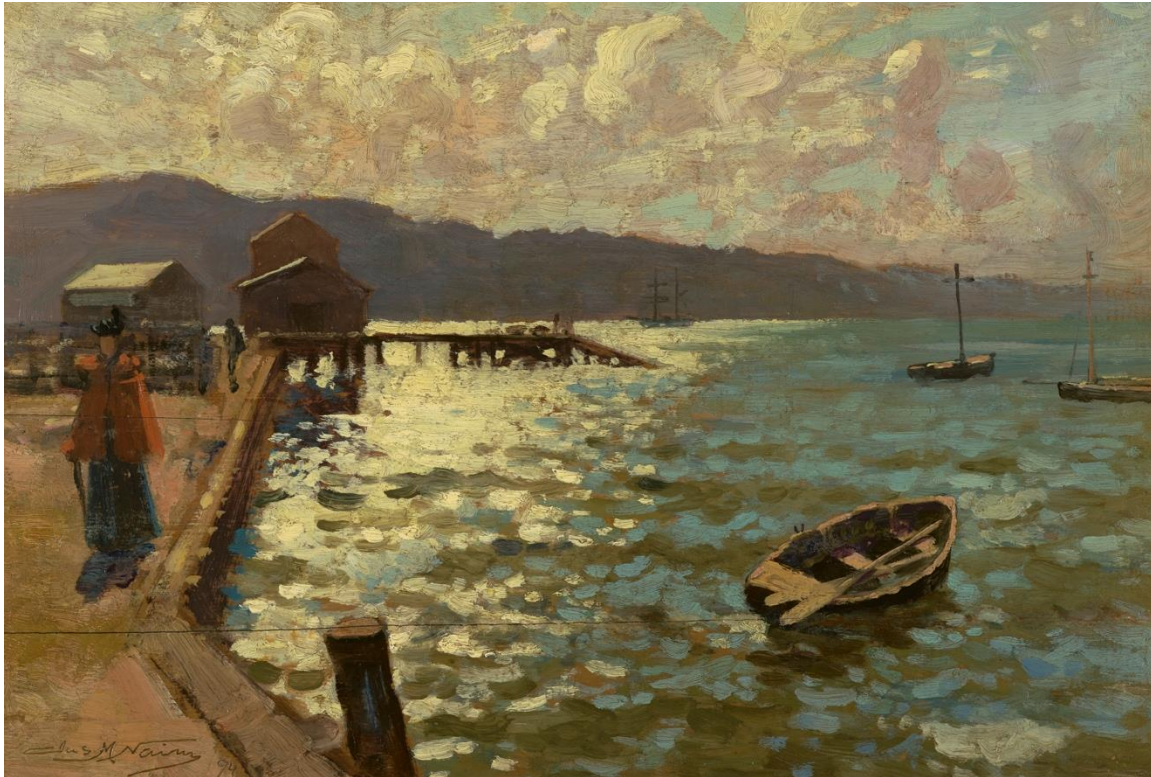
Significantly, the time lapse that applied to stories based on Mansfield's memories of her Wellington childhood was set precisely at the point when Nairn was also at his most active as a practising artist. For all their independence from one another during their working lives, a comparison of Mansfield and Nairn reveals their shared attitudes and values towards their chosen subject matter. I will also explore here how each treated their subjects, particularly in the depiction of natural forms within the local landscape. At the same time, I will consider how they came to terms with the interpretation of atmospheric phenomena in its various moods, at specific times of day and season. Common to them both is the realisation of the uniqueness of that often debated phenomenon, New Zealand light.

A new light on Nairn?

In this section I will consider Nairn as a working artist and his paintings in comparison with those of a previous generation of painters working in New Zealand, as well as his near contemporaries. Two of Nairn's paintings of Wellington Harbour, coincidentally from practically the same viewpoint, a watercolour dated 1902 (Fig. 4) and an oil dated 1894, provide good exemplars. (Fig. 5) What is important is not just Nairn's selection of subjects and materials, but also the way that the time of day can make a dramatic difference in the interpretation of a specific scene.



4. James Nairn, *Wellington Harbour*, 1902. Watercolour on paper, 584 x 737 mm. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, Gift of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, 1936.



5. James Nairn, *Wellington Harbour*, 1894. Oil on panel, 228 x 366 mm. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, Gift of Miss Mary Newton, 1939.

In the 1902 *Wellington Harbour*, the composition is made up of subtle harmonies of the pale blue of the early morning light as the characteristic sea mist still hangs over the surrounding hills. In this way, Nairn gives form to the shipping, wharves and buildings silhouetted against the insubstantial mass, whose colour is lightly indicated by flat washes and a few short horizontal brushstrokes. In turn, “At the Bay” opens with a prologue, before the main narrative of the Beauchamp/Burnell family begins. Very much as Nairn described in his watercolour, Mansfield puts into words how the sea mist, which has come in overnight, now shrouds the whole bay area. Although the hour is still early, a shepherd is out driving his small flock of sheep along the road past the beach house where the family sleep.²⁶ He has a long crook in his hand, and is quietly whistling to himself, while his dog Wag trots before his master, guiding the sheep.

Nairn had explored a closely related theme in his large oil composition *Changing Pasture - Noon*, (1892) (Fig. 6). This painting came to immediate public attention when it was exhibited at the annual exhibition of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in September that year.²⁷ This was in large part due to its purchase by the new Governor of the Colony, Lord Glasgow. Suffice to say, it is clear that both artist and writer were similarly drawn to the subject of a shepherd driving his sheep and, further, a specific representation of this in Nairn’s painting.



6. James Nairn, *Changing Pasture – Noon*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 910 x 1500 mm. Formerly The Fletcher Trust Collection, Auckland.

In his landscape, Nairn describes a summer scene in the Hutt Valley near Silverstream. At the time, the lowland swamp forest was being felled for conversion into pasture for grazing, as with so much of New Zealand. Yet it is evident that the introduced gorse and broom, with their “gorse yellow” flowers,²⁸ later so admired by Mansfield, had already taken hold within the landscape. In appreciating his new environment, Nairn went to some lengths to identify, through his own observation, the factors characteristic of the scene before him. In particular, he addresses the distinctive forms of the New Zealand bush and the way the light fell on it. Accordingly, Nairn paid close attention to the representation of each individual plant species. At the same time, he also referenced the time of day and the season. Here, he took account of the strength of the midday sun on a fine, calm summer’s day and how, combined with the clarity of the New Zealand atmosphere, these prevailing natural effects contribute to the apparent blueness of the sky, the clearly defined forms within the landscape and the corresponding intensity of the shadows cast.

It was this aspect which the anonymous *New Zealand Mail* reviewer identified and so admired in Nairn’s work:

His colouring should be a revelation to those who can appreciate the blue and purple depths of which New Zealand “welkin” is capable. His masterly treatment of light is particularly noticeable, the cloud-flecked sky quite glowing in the heat of the noon-day sun, whose very intensity of radiance throws into vivid depth the cooler forest shades.²⁹

These factors contributed to the apparent blueness of the sky. This, together with the clear definition of forms and corresponding intensification of the shadows, are discussed below in connection with selected Wellington paintings by Nairn, and also in relation to relevant extracts from Mansfield’s short stories set in this area.

One of Nairn's greatest achievements was his ability to recognise the unique atmospheric effects so significant for any artist working in New Zealand, particularly at this time. This became a major focus of his attention, not just in his landscapes, but also in his seascapes and urban and modern-life scenes. Nairn was clearly struck by what many observers – from Alfred Sharpe, near his own time, to A.R.D. Fairburn and Hamish Keith more recently – have identified as characterising the distinctive, clear New Zealand light.³⁰ This topic has remained a subject of continuing speculation as to its veracity – and indeed in its tone ferocity – by commentators on New Zealand painting. In this context, the relatively recent studies carried out by Jock Phillips, editor of *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, together with colleagues from the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (now Earth Sciences New Zealand), on the clarity of New Zealand light are appropriately illuminating. In his introduction, Phillips declared that this is a “distinctive part of New Zealand experience for visual artists and writers alike”.³¹ He discusses painters and writers from a later generation than Nairn and Mansfield, emphasising the experience of Christopher Perkins and his arrival in New Zealand, followed by the responses of Rita Angus, W.A. Sutton and Don Binney, to name but a few. Francis Pound previously – and vociferously – argued that these painters' concerns were with artistic style, rather than consideration of the representation of the fall of light over the land or on water at a particular time of day. The latter had been the inspiration for the earlier generation of painters including Nairn who, according to Pound, had practised what he termed “meteorological determinism”.³² Perhaps the answer is that Perkins et al were more “scientific” than Pound credits and Nairn, with his freely rendered brushwork, was more “artistic”.

In the oil *Wellington Harbour* (1894) (Fig. 5), Nairn depicts a later time of day than in the 1902 watercolour. The mist has now lifted and the surrounding hills have taken on their distinctive outline of the uniform brown tones of high summer. A breeze has risen and the sea has become choppy, the sun now high overhead shines directly on to the water and the strength of its reflected rays is rendered by the artist in thick impasto as a pool of white light. In a modern idiom, Nairn makes no attempt to disguise the fact that he is applying paint to a flat surface; rather to the contrary, he almost celebrates it. By any standards, *Wellington Harbour* is a technically experimental painting, and one of the first, certainly in New Zealand, where a painter has attempted to visually record the natural phenomenon of irradiance and its effects on water: indeed, this became a leitmotif for Nairn! In so doing, his approach differs considerably from, for example, that of his older, fellow-Scot and near contemporary John Gibb (1831–1909), who painted many large and highly accomplished harbour compositions. However, compared with Nairn, it becomes apparent that Gibb's priority clearly lay in continuing a more topographical and academically conventional approach towards the landscape. Nairn, on the other hand, was often concerned with conveying a specific atmospheric effect and enjoying, almost for its own sake, how paint could achieve this. Perhaps this is best seen in his dramatic representation of the magnificent blaze of colour of a sunrise, presaging a change in the weather, *Winter Morning, Wellington Harbour* (c. 1900) (Fig. 7). Yet in this painting, as elsewhere in his oeuvre, Nairn deliberately eschews anything romanticised. There are parallels here with Mansfield's stories that never contain plots to engage the reader or even dramatic incidents. This is painting and writing about “nothing in particular”, and making something special out of it: the modern inheritance, perhaps, of Nairn's admired Constable in painting and William Wordsworth in literature.



7. James Nairn, *Winter Morning, Wellington Harbour*, c. 1900. Watercolour, 275 x 386 mm. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. Gift of Miss Mary Newton, 1939.

A further point of difference is seen between Nairn and the Dutch/ New Zealand painter Petrus van der Velden (1837–1913). The two are often compared, partly owing to the coincidence that they both arrived in New Zealand the same year (1890). While Nairn recognised the specific nature of the New Zealand light, van der Velden – for all his sublime forcefulness – preferred to retain the same painting technique with a dark ground and the low-key colour palette that he had employed as a Hague School painter in the Netherlands. Nairn aside, it seems that New Zealand writers of the period were notably “ahead” of most painters in acknowledging these atmospheric effects in their work. Mansfield was certainly no exception, conscious as she was of the apparent effect of “irradiance” on the water; equating its sparkle in her short story, “At the Bay”, with glass.³³

“Light now at 4am”

The New Zealand light held an endless fascination for Mansfield, and this began at an early age. Significant in this context are the precious moments that she recorded in her journals of the sun rising over the harbour, for example: “It is light now at 4am. Jump out of bed & run to the window...” of her home in Tinakori Road.³⁴ In later years, Mansfield was eager to recapture in her writing the magic of these childhood experiences. This became an object of serious interest on the eighteen-year-old Mansfield’s return to New Zealand in December 1906, following three years in Britain and Europe. By then she had had the opportunity to observe the difference in the light factors in relation to each hemisphere. Even if she did not understand the science behind her

observations, she would have realised on her return to her home country how much cleaner and clearer the air was in New Zealand than in many parts of Europe, and how this meant that the light looked brighter and shadows correspondingly more intense.

The period from 1906 to 1908 has usually been characterised as one where Mansfield, then in her late teens, remained sequestered in her bedroom, playing her cello and quietly reading, aloof and resolutely defiant towards her family. This applied especially towards her father, who was reluctant to give his consent for her return to London. Contrary to this view, I prefer to understand it as seminal for Mansfield's development as a writer. It was then that she made important decisions about her artistic and intellectual direction in life and expressed aspirations to become a professional writer. As she noted in her journal: "Music is not my forte – I can plainly see – I must be an authoress".³⁵ Mansfield pursued a course of action towards achieving her aim by embarking on an assiduous study of contemporary Russian fiction. This was made available to her through her father and his connections with the then chief librarian at the General Assembly, Charles Wilson (1857–1932), former editor of the *New Zealand Mail*. For instance, at this time, she made a deep dive into the diary of Marie Bashkirtseff (1858–1884), the young Russian painter who came to France, seeking to make her own way in the world.

More significant for the development of future content in Mansfield's New Zealand stories was the ample time that her lifestyle permitted for her to familiarise herself with her local surroundings. According to newspaper social pages reports and also from her journal entries, Mansfield clearly led a full social life. This included day trips to the Wellington bays with family and friends, and on several occasions she had stayovers at the family's beach house at Day's Bay. While primarily for leisure, these outings provided Mansfield with ample opportunity to absorb detailed impressions of her subject matter in her journal and consign them to memory. From an early stage of her development, she had the ability to synthesise in words the essence of these local climatic effects, and also the vagaries of their changing moods. As already mentioned, Mansfield gloried in the pageantry of the scene before her.³⁶ In later years, she would refer to these notes on the natural effects that she had observed at the time and introduced this material into her short stories. This is why, for the specialist, her journals should be on hand while reading these stories.

Kass and Jimmy: Their shared vision, continued

Mansfield was well aware of the effect of light on water. In "At the Bay", she describes how, as the day progressed, the sunlight "now leaping, on the glittering sea was so bright it made one's eyes ache to look at it".³⁷ And again, "on looking more closely into each of the small rockpools", she describes how "the light now seemed to spin like a silver coin dropped".³⁸ Mansfield, then, compares and contrasts the appearance of the radiant light on the surface of the water with the rich colours and textures from within the depths of the rockpool (Fig. 8):

[Here] waved the sea-forest—pink thread-like trees, velvet anemones, and orange berry-spotted weeds. Now a stone on the bottom moved, and there was a glimpse of a black feeler; now a thread-like creature wavered by and was lost. Something was happening to the pink, waving trees; they were changing to a cold moonlight blue. And now there sounded the faintest "plop".

“Who made that sound?”, Mansfield asks.³⁹ Sound now becomes integral to the rendering of this scene. By this action, the reader is invited to engage with her story on another level: Mansfield amplifies incidental things as deftly as only she can, to bring the focus on to them.



8. James Nairn, *Rock Fishing*, 1896. Watercolour, 210 x 270 mm. Private Collection.

In her impressions of the rockpool in “At the Bay”, Mansfield was quite likely referring back to the descriptions in her journal, while on her day out with friends at Island Bay in the late summer of 1907, or perhaps on one of short stays at Day’s Bay.⁴⁰ Certainly, the natural effects that she had experienced years before as a child – and later on her return to New Zealand in her late teens – remained firmly imprinted in her mind at the time of her writing this story, years later, in 1921. The inclusion within her New Zealand short fiction of descriptions of these natural features within the landscape brings an authenticity to them. And it is this aspect that makes her stories so full of vitality. This is a significant point of difference between Mansfield and many of her contemporaries. She would proclaim: “Oh, I want, for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the old world. It must be mysterious, as though floating - all must be told with a sense of mystery, a radiance...”. Willing herself on as her health ebbed, she stated: “Now, I must play my part...”.⁴¹

The important point here is not just that Nairn and Mansfield chose similar subject matter in their work, or that they did so with regard to how it was to be visualised within the particular local setting, at a specific time of day and under certain prevailing weather and light conditions. It was

also imperative for both of them to describe the true appearance of what they saw within the environment around them and their similar ways of interpreting it. To repeat, this was a means of bringing authenticity to their work. Nairn, for his part, put it this way: “Whatever the subject, it is necessary to describe the true nature of what is being represented”.⁴² This is what Mansfield would have identified as the “thingness” of a scene before her. Nairn continued by saying – as discussed above with reference to *Changing Pasture – Noon* – that it was incumbent on the artist to demonstrate pictorially the specific conditions prevailing at the time the picture was painted. Mansfield would have agreed, thereby indicating how closely attuned both of them were as to their approach to the representation of selected scenes from contemporary life.

Let us return to their approach to the representation of the figure within the landscape. The comparison extends from rural life scenes, discussed above in the context of the shepherd and his flock, but also to aspects of scenes from modern life, particularly their portrayal of children. While Nairn captures in real time the scene before him in his paintings – with the exception of G.P. Nerli (1860–1926), he was one of the few painters to engage in modern-life New Zealand themes – Mansfield returns to her memories of her carefree Wellington childhood. This brought once again a sense of continuity with this past. Further, as Ian Gordon points out, the degree to which Mansfield brought into her fiction her own experiences is unparalleled.⁴³ However, in both instances, Nairn and Mansfield are able to impart life to their subjects in their choice of stance and through their actions. In this instance, the focus is on children playing on the beach.



9. James Nairn, *George Norton's Boat Building Premises, Esplanade, Wellington*, c. 1894. Oil on canvas, 393 x 311 mm. Private Collection, Wellington.

In Nairn's small, undated modern-life scene, *George Norton's Boat Building Premises* (Fig. 9), situated on the Esplanade, near Thorndon Quay in central Wellington, two youngsters are shown paddling at the water's edge. The boy is bending down, about to launch his sailboat, while the young girl gathers up her skirt above the water, and watches on. The Esplanade was a location within the city familiar to Nairn and Mansfield alike. Mansfield herself would often walk in the vicinity and, furthermore, set several of her short stories there. A memorable example occurs in her short story, "The Wind Blows" (1920). Here, Mansfield recalls out walking in the company of her younger brother, Leslie (1894–1915), when they witness the night sailing of the Picton ferry, all ready to put out to sea. She urges him, using his pet name, to "Look Bogey, look over there".⁴⁴

Mansfield then tells him how the ferry will have to safely pass the “pointed rocks” of Barrett’s Reef. This is the very scene that Nairn in turn realises in another small, undated oil painting entitled *Barrett’s Reef, Wellington* (Fig. 10). The steamer ploughs through the heavy seas as it passes the partially-submerged reef at the heads of Wellington Harbour at the height of a southerly gale for the open sea. Nairn’s almost minimalist painting stresses the elements of wind and water, and also human fragility in negotiating them.



10. James Nairn, *Barrett’s Reef, Wellington*, undated. Oil, 298 x 457 mm. Formerly Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

In “At the Bay”, Mansfield introduces a similar scene to Nairn’s image of children playing on the beach and once again, I believe, she distils some of the essence of Nairn’s painting in words. Here she draws on her memory of the Beauchamp/Burnell children out on the beach, while on their family holiday across the harbour at Muritai. Following their father’s departure for work, quiet settles over the household, only to be disturbed mid-morning by the young Katherine, then still Kathleen, and her sisters Vera and Charlotte, under the fictionalised names of Kezia, Isabel and Lottie, who race out of the house and down to the beach. Here they meet up with their cousins Pip and Rags. After changing into their bathing suits, under the watchful eye of their beloved grandmother, old Mrs Fairfield, all the children rush into the sea apart from little Lottie, who is too timid to enter the water and remains on the edge.

Conclusion

What becomes clear on comparing the work of Nairn and Mansfield in their chosen fields is their mutual commitment towards the treatment of their subject matter in relation to their depiction of the local landscape before them. Furthermore, they shared a fascination for atmospheric phenomena in all their moods, particularly capturing the essence of the prevailing light at a specific

time of day. Nairn succinctly tried “to paint the thing as I see it”⁴⁵ in all seasons and weathers. Mansfield’s world was more sheltered, but she shared his fierce commitment to depicting – in words – what was in many instances the same scene. This comparative journey has endeavoured to introduce a novel approach to gain further appreciation of how their unique but complementary visions coincided at a specific moment in time – the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It could be called a “modern” moment, embracing both Nairn’s freely-painted studies and Mansfield’s more fully-fledged modernism.

Biographical Notes:

Vickie Hearnshaw is an art historian from Christchurch. Since completing her MA thesis on James Nairn in 1992, she has worked mainly in the field of photography. This has led to extensive research on early photographers working in New Zealand and has recently extended to postcards (Brian Brake, *Backstory*, 2020). She has also continued her research on women artists (Margaret Stoddart, *Records of the Canterbury Museum*, 2022, and Frances Hodgkins, *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 2023).

Mark Stocker trained as an art historian in Britain before moving permanently to New Zealand in 1986. He taught at the Universities of Canterbury and Otago, and was Curator of Historical International Art at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. He has over 270 publications to his credit, many of which are in the areas of sculpture, numismatics, New Zealand art and Victorian art.

Vickie Hearnshaw would like to thank her friend Diana Moir for her interest in the progress of this study.

¹ For in-depth studies on Nairn, see: Victoria Hearnshaw, “James McLauchlan Nairn: the Glasgow years”, University of Canterbury Art History BA Hons research paper, 1990; and Victoria Hearnshaw, “James McLauchlan Nairn: The New Zealand Years”, MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1992, file:///Users/markstocker/Downloads/hearnshaw_thesis.pdf (accessed 20 September 2025).

² *The Bailie*, 11 September 1889; *Quiz*, 27 September 1889.

³ *Mataura Ensign*, 4 July 1890, 8; *Evening Star* (Dunedin), 24 July 1890, 2.

⁴ “Daphne”, *Unfinished Stories, Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, (London, Constable, 1945), 470–76. This edition of Katherine Mansfield’s short stories comes from our family’s collection and therefore has a deep sentimental value. Considered to be “unfinished”, the story was first published posthumously in *The Doves’ Nest and Other Stories* (1923).

⁵ The population of Wellington, including its boroughs, according to the Census of 1891, was just over 66,000.

⁶ M.E.R. Tripe, “James McLachlan Nairn (Some Personal Reminiscences)”, *Art in New Zealand*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1928), 105–07.

⁷ Roger Billcliffe recognises Nairn as a “senior” member in the period prior to his departure for New Zealand. See Roger Billcliffe, *“The Glasgow Boys”: The Glasgow School of Painting 1875–1895*, John Murray, London, 1985, 205

⁸ See James Nairn, “Some Notes on Landscape Painting”, *New Zealand Mail*, 23 April 1896, 13.

- ⁹ Nairn married Ellen Smith of Greytown on 17 March 1898.
- ¹⁰ “The Late J.M. Nairn”, *New Zealand Mail*, 2 March 1904, 38.
- ¹¹ Minutes of the Wellington Technical School, 14 December 1891. General Minute Books, 1886–1962, Wellington Technical College: Records, National Library of New Zealand.
- ¹² For further information on Nairn’s extant works, see Victoria Hearnshaw, *James McLauchlan Nairn: A Catalogue of Works* (Dunedin: Hocken Library, 1997).
- ¹³ Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott, eds, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield. Volume 4: 1920–1921* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 112–13.
- ¹⁴ Melissa Reimer’s doctoral thesis on Mansfield and Impressionism briefly addresses Mansfield’s likely familiarity with Nairn, but instead overwhelmingly emphasises her affinities with French artists such as Edouard Manet, Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne, and to a lesser extent Frances Hodgkins. Reimer observes that Nairn’s late career painting, *Summer Idyll* (1903; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū) shares an almost identical title with “Summer Idylle”, a near-contemporaneous, unfinished and “distinctly New Zealand” short story by Mansfield (1906), although she rightly emphasises the dissimilarity of their respective content. See Melissa Reimer, “Katherine Mansfield: A Colonial Impressionist”, PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2010, especially 217–19, <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/ff3cdafb-89a7-45e5-b5b6-e0cf604ce0ae/content>, (accessed 20 September 2025).
- ¹⁵ “Daphne”, 470.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 473.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Gil Docking, with Michael Dunn and Edward Hanfling, *240: Two Hundred and Forty Years of New Zealand Painting* (Auckland: David Bateman, 2012), 80. Nairn was also implicitly accused in a review of a Wellington Art Club exhibition, in a reference to “the chromatic lunacy of much of the Wellington section”. See “Art Exhibition”, *Evening Post*, 22 July 1893, 4.
- ¹⁸ McGregor Wright opened a dealer gallery in Lambton Quay, Wellington in 1888.
- ¹⁹ “Daphne”, 474.
- ²⁰ “Taking the Veil”, *Collected Stories*, 417–22.
- ²¹ John Middleton Murry, ed., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Constable, 1954), 290.
- ²² “Feuille d’Album”, *Bliss, and Other Short Stories*, in *Collected Stories*, 160–66; “Pic-Nic” and “Psychology” in *ibid.*, 91–105; and another in the poem “Pic-Nic” (1918). See Vincent O’Sullivan, *Poems of Katherine Mansfield* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1988), 66.
- ²³ See Hearnshaw, “James McLauchlan Nairn: The New Zealand Years”.
- ²⁴ Antony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), 30.
- ²⁵ “At the Bay”, 205–245.
- ²⁶ O’Sullivan and Scott, eds, *Collected Letters. Vol. 4*, 261.
- ²⁷ “At the Bay”, 205.
- ²⁸ *New Zealand Mail*, 15 September 1892, 39.
- ²⁹ O’Sullivan and Scott, eds, *Collected Letters. Vol. 4*, 111.
- ³⁰ *New Zealand Mail*, 15 September 1892, 39.
- ³¹ For a useful summary of the subject, see Jock Phillips, “Light and the Arts”, in <https://teara.govt.nz/en/light/page-3>. See also Reimer, “Katherine Mansfield”, 238–41.
- ³² Phillips, “Light and the Arts”.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ “The Gem of the South”, *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*, June 1902, 210. See also Phillips.
- ³⁵ Margaret Scott, ed., *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks* (Lincoln, NZ and Wellington: Lincoln University Press; Daphne Brassell & Associates, 1997), vol. 2, 128.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 123.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111–12.
- ³⁸ “At the Bay”, 206.

³⁸ Ibid., 224.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Murry, ed., *Journal*, 9–10.

⁴¹ Gerri Kember and Janet Wilson, eds, *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 131.

⁴² “Some notes on Landscape Painting”, *New Zealand Mail*, 23 April 1896, 13.

⁴³ Ian Gordon, *Katherine Mansfield* (London: Longmans, 1954), 7.

⁴⁴ “The Wind Blows”, *Collected Stories*, 110.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Docking et al, 240, 82.