

*Dead Letters: Censorship and Subversion in New Zealand 1914–1920*

By Jared Davidson. University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 2019.

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Reviewed by Katie Wood

“Archivist by day and labour historian by night” Jared Davidson combines his complementary occupations to bring us *Dead Letters: Censorship and Surveillance in New Zealand 1914–1920*, an engaging book that uses the intimacy of surveillance records to explore broader historical themes of wartime state control and resistance. Davidson places his work in the tradition of “history from below,” and this book achieves some of the best qualities of that tradition; the detailed personal histories bring to life characters that may otherwise have been forgotten, but who are in fact connected to transnational webs of communication and migration of people, political ideas, organisations, and bureaucracies of surveillance and control.

The surveillance regime established by the New Zealand government during the First World War was remarkable in scope and size. By 1920, well over 1.2 million civilian letters had been examined by the New Zealand military, although, as Davidson points out, by 1917 six million letters were being posted each week (35). Surveillance and censorship seem to have disproportionately targeted political and industrial resistance rather than possible German espionage and sabotage. Whilst those who published naval or military information were subject to a £10 fine, the fine for criticism of the actions of the New Zealand government was £100, close to \$200,000 at current values (25). By the end of the war, 287 people had been charged or jailed for seditious or disloyal remarks. According to Davidson, this was a greater number per capita than Britain. It would have been interesting, although perhaps beyond the scope of the book, to have this comparison explored further.

The spectre of the 1913 general strike looms large. The targets of surveillance and censorship were often not those who would have had access to government or military secrets, but those with union or radical backgrounds or foreigners and other supposedly exotic people. Two-thirds of the contents of the Secret Registry were collected because of political (mostly socialist) opposition to the government (48). For instance, they included an Irish nationalist jailed for refusing to be conscripted. His story highlights the scale of resistance to conscription, and the scale of police efforts needed to enforce it. By the end of the war, around 10,000 men (around 5.3 percent of those eligible) had evaded conscription in some way (103). For his part, Timothy Brosnan received two years’ hard labour in the Rotoaira prison camp.

The stories of other political dissidents unravel global threads of radical and union connections. The love-struck Australian-born Frank Burns found a haven for a time in the mining communities on the West Coast; Danish dairy farmer Laura Anderson asked her cousin to deliver a poem about Bolshevism written by her mystic husband to Lenin or Trotsky; J. Sweeny sought anarchist literature and sent Industrial Workers of the World-inspired greetings from his camp in “the back country” (179) where there had been 4 inches of snow and mouse dung in the flour.

The working class was surprisingly mobile in the early twentieth century, and political ideas were carried across the sea, either in heads or on paper, to all corners of the globe. In the First World War, the New Zealand Government was not alone in trying to monitor and restrict the transport of such dangerous goods. Davidson argues that the First World War curbed this

mobility, as national security concerns divided people based on their origin. The *1917 Register of Aliens* was a clear example of this (91).

One of the lessons drawn out by Davidson is to show how foreigners and those who did not fit into social norms easily become the innocent victims of state control in times of national emergency. One of the most wretched stories is that of the “aspiring Maxim Gorky” (25), Arthur Muravleff. Of French and Russian descent, his innocent and in hindsight naïve ramblings through the country with stacks of foolscap paper marked him out as suspicious to people who had been fed a diet of xenophobic and paranoid propaganda. In 1917 Muravleff was interned on Somes Island as a suspect alien even though Russia was an ally in the war. Indeed, his incarceration lasted longer than his German fellow prisoners because of the government’s antipathy to the new Russian Bolshevik regime, who were Muravleff’s only hope of rescue. He finally received papers to return to Russia in 1922 but in a final tragic act, the writing for which Muravleff had been imprisoned was destroyed in a fire at the Raetihi police station in 1918.

Muravleff is one character whose story shows how individuals get caught on the great tides of history and their lives become little more than detritus. Racism and xenophobia, unleashed by the rhetoric of war, make foreigners an easy target. But equally easy to target are those who do not fit in other ways. As Davidson put it, “in New Zealand’s white settler world, constructing common enemies helped an otherwise bondless, atomised society to cohere” (81).

Another character, Dr Hjelmar Dannevell showed how this process extended to the suppression of sexuality and gender non-conformity. Dr Dannevell had been a celebrated doctor in New Zealand before the war but was arrested as an enemy alien in May 1917 and interned on Somes Island for two months until she was released following a severe nervous breakdown. Dannevell was known to dress in male clothing and was rumoured to have sexual relations with numerous women and it was because of this her letters were confiscated and retained by state, even read by the Prime Minister. Davidson shows how the rhetoric of national security was used to push homophobic agendas, citing the campaign by British MP Noel Pemberton Billing, who claimed that Germany had amassed a list of 47,000 English men and women involved in deviant acts and therefore presumably vulnerable to blackmail. In a tantalising statement, Billing proclaimed, “in lesbian ecstasy the most sacred secrets of State are threatened” (174).

A theme emerges from these cosmopolitan and diverse characters of a New Zealand that was once a beacon or a refuge turned into a figurative and actual prison, described as “God forsaken” (64), “wowsler ridden & Tory governed” (96) or a “land of the scabs” (206). The historiographical method chosen by Davidson, of following specific characters through their letters, is well-suited to this history. As Charlotte Macdonald writes in her introduction, letters “provide us with a precise geography of connections” (15). But there is a potential pitfall in such a method; one is limited to the knowable specifics of the correspondents. One example of this deficit is the limited discussion of Māori resistance to conscription, as none of the characters were involved. There must be other areas of resistance to the war and conscription that are only lightly touched on, and this may give a skewed understanding of the general context of the resistance that is discussed. It would also have been interesting to know more about the rest of the contents of the Secret Registry and why these particular pieces of correspondence were chosen.

Davidson's research is clearly thorough, and it is only through this research that the important context of the records come to light. But as Davidson notes several times, much is still unknowable, as the motivations of his characters, and sometimes even their fate cannot be recovered. Still, the diversity and liveliness of wartime resistance and regulation, the human cost of surveillance and censorship, and the legacy of such are all discussed with nuance and affection as Davidson follows his sparkling characters.

The name of the book feels somewhat uncomfortable, perhaps intentionally. These letters were not "dead." For most of the authors, the letters' interception and possession by the state changed their lives irrevocably. Even short of the fact that the letters were often the basis for the imprisonment of the author, if the letters had reached their intended recipient, how would the lives of the authors been different? Would the love letters have changed hearts, the political literature changed minds, the pleas for assistance improved circumstances, had they been allowed to reach their targets? These questions show the injustice of surveillance targeted at "ordinary people during an extraordinary time" (47). Davidson has clearly been in touch with the descendants of some of the characters and these brief moments show how important such records may continue to be, 100 years after their incarceration. It may have been interesting to hear Davidson's reflections as an archivist on his own role as custodian of such intimate and unjustly retained records. Such a discussion would reflect current concerns within the archival profession about the affective nature of records and the ethics of access, ownership and custody. But again, that is perhaps beyond the scope of this history.

As questions of state surveillance and the threats to privacy of personal communication are important questions today, this book feels very timely. It shows the fallacy of the notion that if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to worry about. Furthermore, it makes an argument that extreme or worrying measures introduced during emergency situations can become entrenched and continue when normal times resume. And beyond these concerns, through the stories of Davidson's intriguing characters, the heartbreak, injustice, courage and humour of wartime resistance and nonconformity shines.