

*Arthur Prior A 'Young Progressive' Letters to Ursula Bethell and to Hugh Teague 1936-1941.*  
Edited by Mike Grimshaw. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2018.  
RRP: \$59.99 ISBN: 978-1-927145-90-6  
Reviewed by Peter Whiteford.

Arthur Prior is scarcely a household name in New Zealand, but in some respects his story repeats a narrative we like to think of as quintessentially Kiwi—that of the small town boy who ‘makes it’ on the world stage. Born and raised in the rural township of Masterton in 1914, Prior became a leading philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feted for his invention of tense logic (or temporal logic as it is now called), invited by no less a figure than Gilbert Ryle to deliver the prestigious John Locke lectures in Oxford in 1956, offered a Chair in Philosophy at Manchester in 1958, then a Fellowship at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1966. Tragically, he died at the relatively young age of 54, but he remains one of the central figures in the development of logic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The detail of Prior’s contribution to logic is helpfully explained in Jack Copeland’s Introduction (pp. 9-10) to this volume, where tense logic is described as a ‘powerful idea ... now widely used for the manipulation of time-dependent data’. While Prior’s ideas and reputation are primarily located in the realm of philosophy, Mike Grimshaw’s essay argues a case that tense logic grew out of Prior’s theological interests, especially his concern with the perennial problem of the freedom of the will. Indeed, Grimshaw suggests that tense logic cannot be understood without an understanding of Prior’s theological thought (p. 15). That might seem a rather bold claim to those only familiar with Prior as logician, but the letters edited here go some way to justifying the assertion and establishing precisely the significance that Grimshaw attaches to Prior’s religious background.

Having said that, it should also be acknowledged, I think, that the focus on theological concerns arises in no small measure from the fact that the recipient of most of the letters (33 of the 39 edited here) is Ursula Bethell. As her own correspondence clearly shows, she regularly engaged in discussions about theological questions and about spirituality to the extent that she has been described as having acted as an informal spiritual director to some of the young men and women who wrote to her. By contrast, there is little discussion of religion in the much more casual letters to Prior’s cousin, Hugh Teague, where the focus tends more to the political.

But in general, I think Grimshaw is right to insist on Prior’s exposure to religious thinking and writing as formative elements in his thinking, and the biographical details that precede the letters very clearly reveal the context within which that exposure took place. Equally, the point is well made (p. 18) that Prior’s decision not to proceed to ministry was not a crisis of faith, as has been imagined, but had more to do with concerns he had about formal ministry itself, and the challenges presented by his developing relationship with Clare Hunter.

The letters presented here span a relatively short period of Prior’s life—around 30 months from early 1936 until late 1938—but they were clearly important months in which Prior was finding himself intellectually and personally, and the letters are packed full of evidence of his intellectual curiosity. In terms of practical religion, one sees the importance to him of the radical Christian student movement and Christian socialism, his growing commitment to pacifism, his interest in the Army of Reconciliation, and his desire to engage in writing and publishing on religious subjects. These matters were all clearly significant in terms of his personal development, but it is the theological discussions that really show his intellectual development and the breadth of his reading. Calvin and Knox, the Scottish Reformers,

mediaeval theologians and mystics all come in for attention, and he writes on several occasions about the defining importance of Trinitarianism, but the figure who clearly dominates his reading and his thinking in these years is Karl Barth. Given the dates these letters cover, it is clear that Prior must have had ready access to Barth's early work and some of his letters to Bethell capture the enthusiasm with which he engages with and embraces Barth's thought. Some of Bethell's younger correspondents tended to show an intellectual deference to her when they wrote, but Prior seems anything but deferential. On the contrary, his letters reveal already an intellectual confidence and commitment that Ursula Bethell must have found particularly rewarding.

Occasionally, the letters give the impression of being little more than a reading list (either of books recently read or of those awaiting his attention), but even these lists demonstrate very clearly the range of his engagement in contemporary and local religious matters and in theological explorations of the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, there is little here, I feel, that suggests Prior might have gone on to become a significant or original theologian (on a par, that is, with his standing as a logician). He is remarkably receptive to Barth's ideas, and shows himself suitably critical of some aspects of Calvinism, but at this stage of his development he is predominantly receptive of the theological ideas of others, not creative of his own. No doubt the loss of material provides some explanation for that: Mike Grimshaw includes as an appendix a transcription of five pages of notes which he entitles 'Prior on the existence of God'. His supposition that these were once part of a 30-page document that Prior refers to seems very plausible, and they may indicate that Prior intended at some stage to undertake more extended theological writing; but even the pages that are extant provide only a summary of a variety of 'proofs'—from Plato and Aristotle, through Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, to Descartes and Kant—collected under the proposition that 'The existence of God is demonstrable'. Prior seems particularly taken with Anselm's ontological proof, although he concludes with an observation that all proofs have a tendency 'to lead the mind to some other type of belief from that of which they are designed to support' and suggests this is particularly the case with the ontological proof 'which led to pantheism rather than theism in Erigena, in Spinoza, & in Hegel' (p. 223).

The material contained in these letters, as Grimshaw notes, enriches our understanding of Arthur Prior's life and thought from a period which had otherwise seemed something of a blank. The decision to edit them for publication was a laudable one, and the result is a fine addition to the Prior canon. If it does not radically change the perception of Prior as philosopher or logician, it certainly provides a valuable background, and the clear connection between tense logic and the problem of freedom of the will is a nice reminder of the close connection between philosophy and theology, perhaps in this case reversing Peter Damien's description of philosophy as '*ancilla theologiae*'.

Inevitably, a reviewer is expected to find some points with which to disagree, or some criticisms to make. In the case of this edition, I would have liked a little more detail on the business of scholarly editing (codicology, provenance, preservation, and so on); there appear to be some relatively minor errors in the transcription of the facsimile page that is included; there are occasional inconsistencies in the notification of undated letters; and I'm inclined to think that the undated letters 5 and 6 might be better in the reverse order. But these are small things, and what is much more to be noted, and applauded, is the richness of the annotation that accompanies the letters. Correspondence of which the record begins, as this does, *in medias res*, and that presumes so much inside knowledge, requires careful and judicious scholarship to make it fully intelligible to a latecomer, and these letters are richly and comprehensively

annotated in a way that brings their intellectual and social contexts fully alive. For that, the editor deserves to be warmly commended.