

***Unofficial Channels:
Letters Between Alister McIntosh and Foss Shanahan,
George Laking and Frank Corner 1946-1966***

Reviewed by Damien Fenton

*Unofficial Channels: Letters Between Alister McIntosh and Foss Shanahan,
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The first two decades after the Second World War were tumultuous ones in so far as New Zealand's international relations were concerned. After an exhausting six years of conflict New Zealand, whilst it could stand with pride amongst the ranks of the victors, nonetheless found itself in a world irrevocably divorced from the one left behind in 1939. In Europe the great powers of Germany, Italy and France had been literally destroyed while Great Britain's claim to such status no longer bore close scrutiny. The Soviet Union was now the only European great power worthy of the name and then only by virtue of its totalitarian system of government and the ruthless way in which that system was wielded by Josef Stalin. In Asia Japan too had seen its imperial pretensions shattered and its homeland reduced to rubble and ruin. Meanwhile China was crippled by both the devastation visited upon it by the Japanese and the ongoing civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and Mao Zedong's Communists. By marked contrast the United States of America was the only pre-war great power to emerge from the struggle with that power actually (and indeed, dramatically) enhanced and strengthened. Amidst these realities optimists placed their hopes in the newly-fashioned United Nations, while those of a gloomier disposition noted with foreboding Stalin's blatant violations of the agreements made at Potsdam regarding free elections and human rights in those countries 'liberated' by the Red Army. Finally the war's end heralded an unprecedented upsurge in nationalist movements throughout the old European mandates and imperial possessions in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. By the 1960s decolonisation, whether by peaceful agreement or violent revolution, would easily triple the number of sovereign states that existed in 1945 and create a whole new raft of geo-political factors, interests and intrigues that could not be ignored.

Thus the founding fathers of New Zealand's modern-day Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade were set with the task of having to advise and help

formulate a truly independent foreign policy for the first time in our nations history during a period of great change in global international relations. It is in this context that renowned New Zealand historian Dr Ian McGibbon has presented us with *Unofficial Channels: Letters Between Alister McIntosh and Foss Shanahan, George Laking and Frank Corner 1946 – 1966*. These four men all occupied pivotal positions within the nascent Department of External Affairs (as it was then known) and consequently the personnel correspondence between them provides the reader with a fascinating ‘behind-the-scenes’ perspective on the major events, issues and personalities of the day. In this regard *Unofficial Channels* compliments and follows on from McGibbon’s earlier edited collection of letters between Alister McIntosh and Carl Berendsen, *Undiplomatic Dialogue* (Auckland, 1993). In this latest collection McIntosh provides the focus around which the correspondence from the other three men revolves. This is in accordance with McIntosh’s role as Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, a position he held from its creation in 1943 until he retired in 1966.

In a story familiar to many newly formed (and not-so-new) government departments, the task confronting McIntosh and his lieutenants was made even more difficult by the parsimonious attitudes of their political masters towards matching the latter’s diplomatic ambitions with the resources needed to do the job properly. Laments to this effect are to be found throughout the collection. Furthermore the Department of External Affairs also suffered from the penchant of politicians to treat it as a repository where loyal party colleagues could be rewarded with the position of ambassador or high commissioner rather than see it go to one of McIntosh’s more deserving (and effective) professionals. Thus we are given the case of F. W. Doidge, a former National Party Cabinet Minister, who was appointed as New Zealand’s High Commissioner in London by the Holland Government in 1951. Frank Corner, having spent a week in Paris with Doidge and his wife before he took up the appointment, pulls no punches in what amounts to a candid warning to his superior, McIntosh, that his new High Commissioner in London is so unsuited to the position that he “might crack up”.

Equally forthright observations and opinions pepper those passages concerning the major diplomatic events and issues of the day. For example at the Prime Minister’s Conference in 1946 we find Frank Corner contemplating the rejection of a unified Commonwealth defence policy in favour of a devolved model. Under this model it was proposed that the respective Commonwealth member states (at that time consisting of Britain and the old ‘white’ Dominions) assume primary responsibility for the foreign and defence policies in their respective regions. Whilst resigning himself to Britain’s abdication of such responsibilities for New Zealand’s part of the world he

nonetheless gives voice to fears shared in New Zealand that the resulting vacuum would give regional leadership to Australia “- a leadership which we do not trust as much as British.” Similar insights abound in exchanges ranging from the formation of ANZUS to New Zealand’s involvement in Vietnam.

Of course it is this very candour that makes a collection of this nature worthy of publication. Historians and students of this period in New Zealand’s international relations will find *Unofficial Channels* to be an invaluable, indeed essential, resource. As such the book is well structured and attractively laid out with the letters running in chronological order and divided into five chapters. These chapters basically equate to the four different governments who held office during the two decades covered although the Holland Government is allocated two chapters. A concise and informative introduction by Dr McGibbon provides a thorough background on all four men as well as placing the letters in the wider context of the international developments of the day. As one would expect a potentially bewildering cast of dignitaries and professional colleagues appear in the course of the correspondence, but the provision of an exhaustive index of personalities, complete with brief biographies, at the front of the text should prevent the reader from feeling overwhelmed. In bringing these letters into the public domain Dr McGibbon has once again made a significant contribution to the study of postwar New Zealand history and one all those interested in the period should take advantage of.

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