

'Food parcels and fond hopes': some correspondence of Walter de la Mare.

Peter Whiteford

In 1937, George Allen & Unwin published a volume of verse by the New Zealand poet Eileen Duggan. Simply titled *Poems*, it included an introduction of several pages by Walter de la Mare, who had written his remarks at the request of the Jesuit priest, [C. C. Martindale](#).¹ Some months after the publication of *Poems*, de la Mare wrote to Eileen Duggan, in response to a letter from her, repeating his favourable comments on her verse, and remarking that his only wish had been 'to be of some small service' to the poems. Thus began an occasional correspondence between two poets who, each in their own settings, had become more and more marginalised by shifting fashions in poetry. It was a correspondence that continued, intermittently, over the next eighteen years, ending only with de la Mare's death, at the age of eighty-three, on June 22nd, 1956.

Some at least of de la Mare's letters have been preserved, and are included in the literary papers Duggan bequeathed to the Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington, New Zealand.² The collection comprises seventeen letters, dated from '8. ii. '38' to 'March 12th 1956', but with a noticeable gap, covering most of the war years, from November 1940 to December 1945.³ Ten of the seventeen are in de la Mare's own (sometimes difficult) hand; the remainder are typed, though always with some handwritten greeting or annotation. The first of the letters was printed in full (albeit misdated as 8. 11. '38) by [F. M. McKay](#) in his monograph study of Eileen Duggan (26-27). The remainder have never been published (and their existence is scarcely known), but they are of interest for the light they shed on the lives and characters of two, not dissimilar, poets, whose achievements are generally placed by the description 'Georgian'.

One note that sounds with surprising insistence throughout de la Mare's letters is his 'fond hope' of visiting New Zealand -although from the first it is expressed with an accompanying wistful doubt that it will ever be fulfilled. This, for example, occurs as early as de la Mare's third letter, as a handwritten postscript:

I have still not quite given up hope of coming to New Zealand —
although the hope is rather faint and frail. But some day perhaps.
[26th September 1938]

Similarly, in the years immediately following the war de la Mare writes in the following fashion:

I have always badly wanted to come to New Zealand, & until recently had real hopes of doing so. Alas that seems very unlikely indeed now. The seventies make a rather narrow cage. [June 11 '46]

His relationship with Duggan, and with other New Zealanders such as Katherine Mansfield and Ian Donnelly, obviously gave him some affinity with the country — imagined, if not real:

New Zealand gets nearer and nearer, & in fancy is becoming — what no hotel or B[oar]ding home could ever be for me — a home away from home; though alas it is unlikely now that I shall ever land! [Nov 12 '48]

Unlikely, and perhaps for the best, for he is recorded elsewhere as believing that 'places rarely came up to the expectations which had been created by his imagination' (Brain 22).

However remote the visit may have seemed, the number of times he mentions it suggests that it conveyed rather more than some polite epistolary formula, and the frequently expressed doubts and regrets punctuate his letters like a gentle plaint:

Now that there is, I fear, practically no hope of my visiting New Zealand, & thus of seeing you, I pine to do so all the more. [4th November 1940]

As that last quotation suggests, the desire is bound up with a keen expectation of meeting Duggan and discussing literature: 'How much I wish we could meet, & talk of books, poetry, versifying, etc. etc' [June 11 '46] Such a comment might encourage us to look for extended discussions on 'poetry, versifying, etc' in the letters, but they are not to be found. What remarks there are about literary matters are anecdotal rather than developed at any length, or seem to be occasioned by something Duggan has written. For example, an early letter responds

I too confess to having been rather disappointed in the Oxford Book — so many translations, for example; and not always a selection

from some of its contributors which seems really representative. The anthology is, of course, a purely personal one — and very individual also: necessarily so, perhaps, as it was the work of a poet as extremely individual as Yeats is in everything he does. [26th September 1938]

In a much later letter he reacts to Duggan's use of the word 'moidered' by reflecting on the effect of some of his own poems having been rendered into Scots:

And exceedingly interesting they are too ... I ... like them better than the originals. That really is something of a riddle, because after all, so many of the Scots words she uses need a gloss for me apart from my realising what they stand for. This seems to be either a graceless betrayal of my own beloved English, or a peculiar scrap of evidence that a Scottish element in one's maternal lineage may (!) possibly explain it. [22 June 1953]⁴

That letter concludes 'How much I wish you could be here, & that we c'd have a real talk'. And it is equally that anticipated conversation that is to the fore in de la Mare's final letter:

You can imagine what sort of a skunk I feel at finding myself well into March and not having sent you a word of acknowledgment, even, of your Christmas letter.

Needless to say, I loved having it. Everything you say in it I should delight to discourse about — Katherine Mansfield for instance. I met her very seldom but had entirely in-keeping letters from her⁵ and I can recall (in that broken way, of course, that everything is recalled) our every meeting. My earliest impression was after a lunch with herself and Middleton Murray [sic]. She told me a story written by a Russian who was at that time only beginning to be well known. And she told it as to make the smallest details alive. A little way she had in her own work!⁶ ... Then again Belloc — how vividly I recall our last talk. Sturge-Moore and Yeats too. W. B. Y took one avoyaging, but so often I never quite succeeded in discovering the name of the harbour for which we were bound. I could go on like this for hours. [March 12th 1956]

Clearly, de la Mare preferred the stimulus of conversation, an impression that is reinforced by the conversations — or, 'soliloquies for two' as the author characterises them (17) — recorded by Russell Brain.

One of the few extended comments on any individual work is a characteristically generous response to the publication of Duggan's *More Poems* (1951).

Your new book of poems flew in safely & alighted here weeks ago, and I know them very well by now ... There is a gallantry & faithful forthright-ness & undauntable spirit that appeals to me throughout 'More Poems' -& again & again their imagery is as rich as (for me at any rate) it is mint new. These are not all that I care for, but what I care for most: — pp. 26, 28, 29, 36, 37, 31, 35,10, 68,15. [July 7 '51]

The sequence of letters which immediately follow the war are punctuated by a new note from de la Mare of gratitude for what he calls 'lucky bags' [Dec 8 45] and the presence of these expressions of thanks reveals a rather curious aspect of their friendship, for it is clear from subsequent letters that the 'lucky bags' referred to (elsewhere a 'capacious package', a 'surprise packet' and a 'packed-tight parcel') were in fact food parcels. Indeed, most of the extant letters between 1945 and 1951 indicate the receipt of some such gift. The items mentioned are slight enough (meat, cheese, suet and dripping), and the delight which they are received is a salutary reminder of the continued 'afflictions & restrictions of the War years' [Dec 8 45]. Nor, apparently were these the only gifts which de la Mare received; he reports that Ian Donnelly and his [Donnelly's] brother Arthur had both also sent food parcels, and moreover that another friend in America has done the same: 'So now I live not only on the fat of this land but on that of two continents, and am a good deal ashamed of it.' [June 11 '46] It is with some sense of quiet irony that he can invite Eileen Duggan, should she ever visit England, to 'come & have tea with me in my flat in Twickenham. It shall be graced with delicatessen from N. Z!' There is even a touch of embarrassment in some of the expressions of thanks:

Yet another beautiful 'surprise packet' has just arrived & if ever there was a case of an Old Person of Perm (or anywhere else) being completely spoiled in his second childhood, I am that man! [March 1 '47]

Finally on April 20th 1951 he writes the following:

It was immensely kind of you to be sending me yet another parcel, but I do assure you that, although recently the "meat ration" has been eight-pennyworth a week (can you imagine Queen Victoria reading this information) it's quite enough for me. (a) we can get chickens, though they would be perhaps happier over their sacrifice if they knew their present price, and (b) the less I eat the better I seem to be. Where one crosses the Rubicon and gets beyond the Minimum that keeps one "here", I am uncertain.

Presumably his assurances had been accepted, for after this there are no further mentions of such parcels.

In one brief aside, de la Mare reveals something of his whimsical sense of humour and wordplay. In his letter of Jan 29 '51, having described himself as 'pampered & cosseted' by the gifts he has received, he laments that 'apparently the 'genuarians are not invited to compete in Poetry Competitions.' The neologism is marked in such a way as to indicate the 'u' should be deleted, but in the margin de la Mare writes 'I prefer genuarians, though it suggests the weak-kneed!'

In 1948, Walter de la Mare turned 75 and the national radio station 2YA broadcast a tribute to him written by Eileen Duggan. It was subsequently published in the *New Zealand Listener*, July 23, and draws upon some of the comments and observations contained within these letters. In addition, Duggan discusses his verse, applauding its 'detached ecstasy' and the combination of 'magic' with a tough-minded recognition that 'this earth is a cockpit of good and evil', and drawing attention to de la Mare's 'ease among tombstones' — a familiarity with death that she finds Celtic in its spirit. Evidently a copy of the broadcast was sent to de la Mare, who wrote back:

How gracious & generous & kind you were to this old bardlet in your broadcast. It would in some ways have been better still to listen to it, but reading gives more time; & I loved it. [Nov 12 '48]

Thus was Eileen Duggan able to repay the generosity with which de la Mare had introduced her verse ten years earlier.

Works Cited

- Brain, Russell. *Tea with Walter de la Mare*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957.
- [McKay, F. M.](#) *Eileen Duggan*. New Zealand Writers and their Work. Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Appendix

- | | <i>Date</i> | <i>written from</i> |
|----|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | 8. ii. '38 | Hill House, Taplow, Buckinghamshire
<i>expresses delight at ED's letter, relief at her acceptance of his introductory remarks; confirms his pleasure in her verse</i> |
| 2 | 26 th July
1938 | Hill House, Taplow, Buckinghamshire
<i>asks permission to pass on ED's address</i> |
| 3 | 26 th
September
1938 | Hill House, Taplow, Buckinghamshire
<i>acknowledges US publication of Poems; expresses reservations about Yeats's Oxford anthology; hopes to visit NZ</i> |
| 4 | 4 th
November
1940 | The Old Park, Penn, Bucks
<i>anticipates gift of book [perh. ED's NZ Poems]; brief reflection on months of war; no hope of visiting NZ</i> |
| 5 | Dec 8 '45 | The Old Park, Penn, Bucks
<i>assures ED he has not forgotten her; awaiting 'lucky bag'; sends copy of 'The Traveller'; describes aftermath of war years; renews hope of visit</i> |
| 6 | June 11 '46 | The Old Park, Penn
<i>acknowledges receipt of 'capacious package'; 'living on fat of two continents'; describes 70's as 'a narrow cage'; no hope of visiting NZ; invites ED to England</i> |
| 7 | Dec 21 '46 | The Old Park, Penn
<i>acknowledges further gifts; visited by friend of ED to paint his portrait; expresses exasperation with 'Mr Strachey'</i> |
| 8 | March 1 '47 | The Old Park, Penn
<i>acknowledges another package; describes acute fuel shortage; mentions death of Forrest Reid</i> |
| 9 | Nov 12 '48 | 4 South End House, Montpelier Row
<i>responds to ED's broadcast; describes NZ as 'infancy' a home away from home; has inscribed copy of Mansfield book — 'a treasure trove'</i> |
| 10 | January 19
49 | The Old Park, Penn, Bucks
<i>receives another parcel, offers 'any work' in return; describes himself as 'snail-slow' at 76; gazes towards NZ 'with regret, no hope'</i> |
| 11 | 30 th
December, | The Old Park, Penn, Bucks |

- 1949
another parcel; expresses delight that ED has another book to be published; describes own year as 'ridiculously diligent'; repeats invitation to visit him in house 'once inhabited by Lord Mansfield (? ancestor of Katharine)'
- 12 Jan 29 '51 4 South End House, Montpelier Row
receives another parcel; comments on age and Poetry Competitions; asks about ED's new book; has been working on a poem 'all the last year'; now feels like a deflated balloon; tedious winter
- 13 April 20, 1951 4 South End House, Montpelier Row
reflects on English weather; has completed 'a prolonged piece of verse'; another parcel; notes improvement in rationing; asks about a prescription for poetry; further regrets at not visiting NZ; compares 'Welfare' England with theatre of Elizabethan London
- 14 July 7 '51 4 South End House, Montpelier Row
thanks ED for More Poems; has sent 'a little package' of his own work to her; comments on ED's poems; reflects on present constraints on reviewing
- 15 22 June 1953 [noplac]e
comments on 'Maori crane' and 'moldered' from ED's letter; mentions Scots versions of his verse; reflects on view from window
- 16 21st February 1955 [no place]
reflects on age and mortality; reading Belloc; has new book of stories due
- 17 March 12th 1956 [no place]
shares memories of Mansfield and Yeats

Endnotes

- ¹ Martindale visited Eileen Duggan while on a tour of Australia and New Zealand, a trip that gave rise to his *The Risen Sun: Impressions in New Zealand and Australia* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1929).
- ² I am grateful to Cardinal Williams and Sr M. de Porres for allowing me access to the papers in the Archdiocesan Archive. I have not yet been able to determine whether Duggan's letters to de la Mare have been preserved.
- ³ De la Mare wrote dates in a variety of formats; I preserve his form when quoting throughout. A note of the dates of de la Mare's letters is included as

an appendix to this article.

- ⁴ Doubtless the allusion is to *Poems frae the suddron o Walter de la Mare made ower intil Scots by Edith Anne Robertson wi Foreword by Walter de la Mare* (Edinburgh: M. Macdonald, n.d.).
- ⁵ The correspondence between de la Mare and Mansfield has also been preserved in collections in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington and the Bodleian Library, Oxford. They are to be the subject of a forthcoming article.
- ⁶ De la Mare tried to recall the name of the Russian writer, which he added in a handwritten annotation. His hand at this time had deteriorated somewhat and the name is not easy to decipher. It may be Arbuzov. Brain (45,67) mentions a 'brain injury [which] had interfered with his handwriting.' Brain mentions the same incident, but without naming the Russian author (85).