

Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand



VINCENT O'SULLIVAN

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New Zealand*

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STEELE ROBERTS
A O T E A R O A

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This is an extensively revised and enhanced edition of *Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand*, first published by Golden Press, Melbourne, in 1974. The author particularly thanks Beverley Randell and Susan Price for making available their extensive knowledge of early Wellington.

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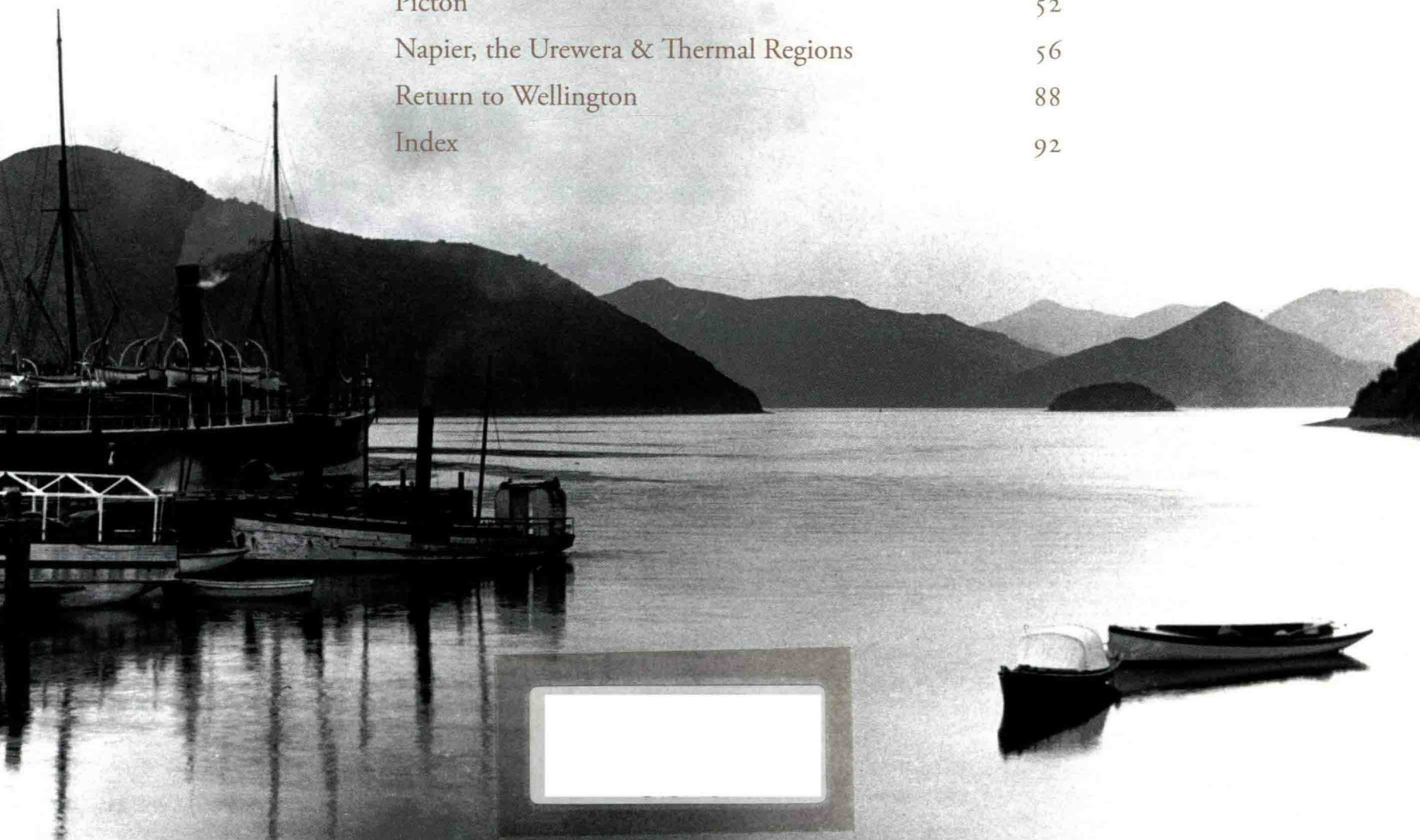
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The ss *Penguin* berthed at Picton, 1907.
Museum of Wellington City & Sea

Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand



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2014年9月



'Kathie in the morning in the manuka paddock saw the dew hanging from the blossoms & leaves, put it to her lips & it seemed to poison her with the longing for the sweet wildness of the plains, for the silent speech of the Silent Places, the golden rain of blossom.'

Notebooks

Manuka.

Sarah Featon, *The Art Album of New Zealand Flora*,
Wellington City Library collection



'In a steamer chair, under a manuka tree that grew in the middle of the front grass patch, Linda Burnell dreamed the morning away. She did nothing. She looked up at the dark, close, dry leaves of the manuka, at the chinks of blue between, and now and again a tiny yellowish flower dropped on her. Pretty – yes, if you held one of those flowers on the palm of your hand and looked at it closely, it was an exquisite small thing.

Each pale yellow petal shone as if each was the careful work of a loving hand. The tiny tongue in the centre gave it the shape of a bell. And when you turned it over the outside was a deep bronze colour.'

At the Bay

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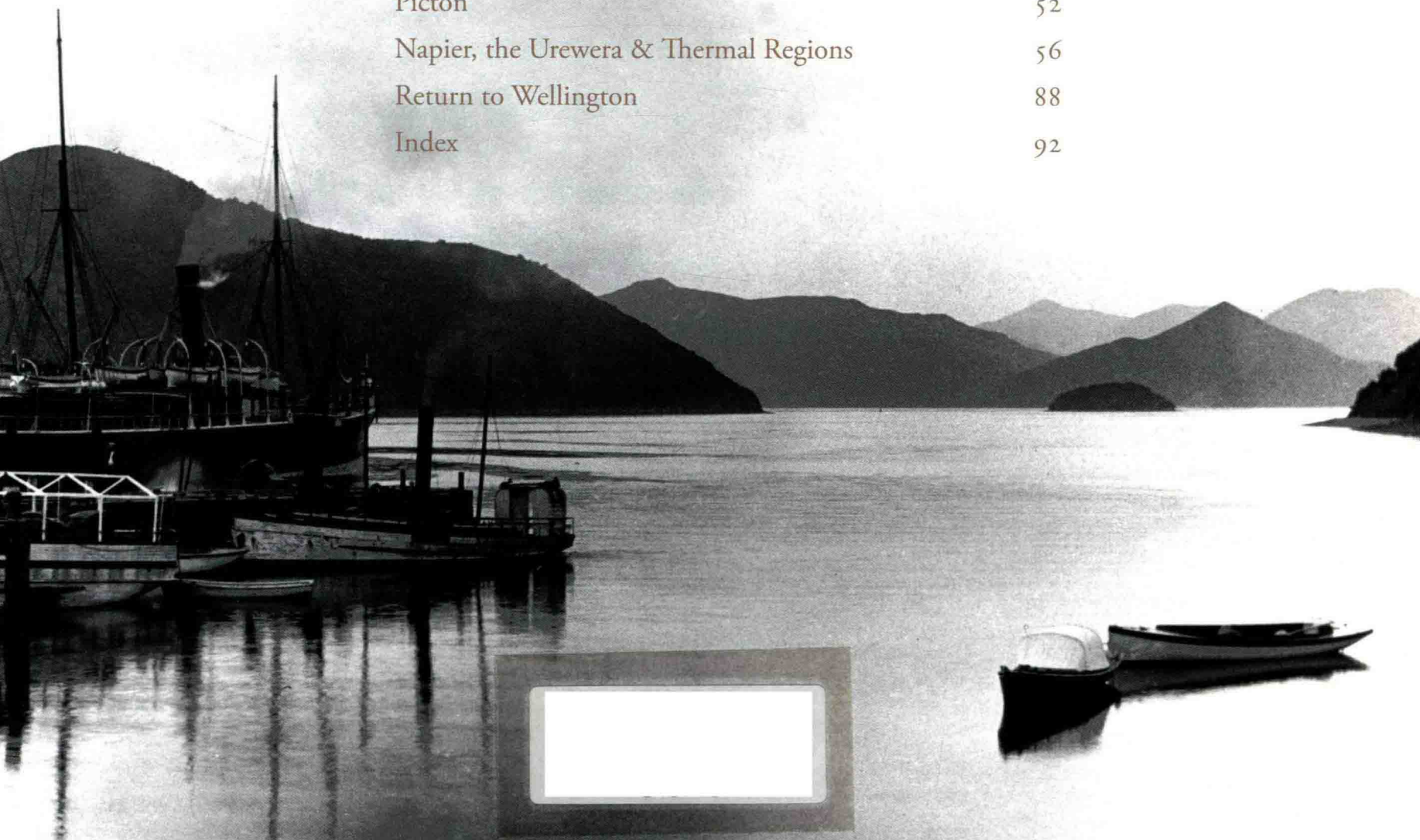
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The ss *Penguin* berthed at Picton, 1907.
Museum of Wellington City & Sea

‘... the longer I live the more I turn to New Zealand. I thank God I was born in New Zealand. A young country is a real heritage, though it takes time to recognise it. But New Zealand is in my very bones.’

Katherine Mansfield in a letter to her father, 18 March 1922

Introduction



KM, c.1914.
ATL 1/2-002592-F

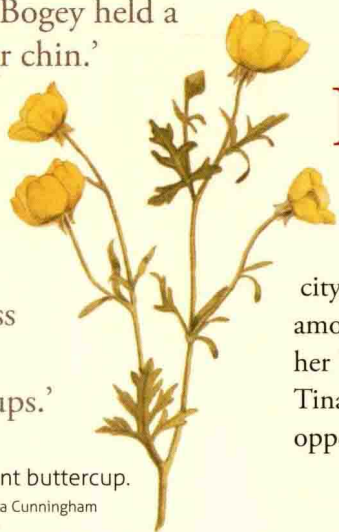
‘To fancy you see again upon your eyelids all the dancing beauty of the day, to feel the flame on your throat as you used to imagine you felt the spot of yellow when Bogey held a buttercup under your chin.’

Notebooks

‘The Kelveys came nearer, and beside them walked their shadows, very long, stretching right across the road with their heads in the buttercups.’

The Doll's House

Giant buttercup.
Sheila Cunningham



KATHLEEN MANSFIELD BEAUCHAMP was born in Wellington in 1888, and Katherine Mansfield died in Fontainebleau, France in 1923. The story of the years between those two dates has been told many times, with varying emphasis on wilfulness and ambition at the beginning, and on illness, loneliness, and courage at its protracted end. Half of her years were spent in New Zealand, and those largely in Wellington. The small colonial city, with its disarray of box-like houses, almost interminable wind, and encircling hills, was among the most vivid and enduring presences in her life. Many of her stories, and certainly her best, are set in its three areas that touched most closely upon her life – the mile between Tinakori Hill and the centre of town; the valley settlement of Karori; and the bays on the opposite side of the harbour.

Mansfield's memories of Wellington almost always meant memories of her family. No matter how pure her art – and purity was her aim – autobiography constantly shapes it. 'It's only by being true to life that I can be true to art. And to be true to life is to be good, genuine, simple, honest.' (*Notebooks*) Her earliest attempts at stories were direct adaptations of her own life. Years before the perfected figures of Stanley Burnell and Kezia, her father appears, for example, as the head of a German family, she herself as a stammering or guilty but always special child, while neighbours and friends and servants are but slightly altered by a change of name or country. KM's own life was her subject matter from the beginning. After the death in the Great War of her only brother, the habit of her art became something more: 'I feel I have a duty to perform to the lovely time when we were both alive. I want to write about it, and he wanted me to.' (*Notebooks*)

That incentive was compounded by Mansfield's own ill-health. In the last five years of her life she hoped to search out the ideal climate, to find the way of life that would accomplish the miracle she hoped for – as she wrote in 1921: 'One must have a miracle. Now I'm without one and looking round for another.' In those years of endless travel, changes of plan, and separations from her husband, she saw fewer and fewer people, and was in almost daily pain. For all her gaiety and celebration of life, she knew by 1920: 'I've scarcely any time.' As health and marriage, friendship and contemporary Europe, each in various ways proved inadequate, there was one thing, apart from her endless delight in the particulars of the natural world, which lost neither its charm nor its virtue. That was her writing. And through her drive towards greater clarity there shone childhood, and her own country. She knew that these assumed such importance precisely as other avenues in her life closed, or threatened to close: 'One lives in the Past – or I do.' Her correspondence with her husband she conducted in terms of childish endearments. Her hopes were located in a future that would seem very like the recovery of an idealised past.

It is isolation and childhood that remain the dominant themes of her finest stories – childhood illuminated by details of that time when what is immediate is sufficient in itself; isolation, the shadow that waits on the periphery of any dream, like that little boat she once watched on the coast of France, and wrote of to her husband, 'far out, moving along, inevitable it looks and dead silent – a little black spot, like the spot on a lung.'

'When NZ is more artificial, she will give birth to an artist who can treat her natural beauties adequately. This sounds paradoxical but is true.'

Notebooks

'You see – to me – life and work are two things indivisible. It's only by being true to life that I can be true to art.'

Notebooks



Northern rata.

Sarah Featon,
The Art Album of New Zealand Flora,
Wellington City Library collection

She has thrown me the knotted flax
It lies concealed in my bosom
It twists about my heart
Sapping the life blood from me
As the rata saps the kauri
As the little clinging tendril
covers the giant kauri
So is the flax on my heart
So would her arms around my body
Cling & crush & enfold me.
Like the flowering rata
Is her young mouth's scarlet.

Song of the Cabbage Tree. The knot of Flax.

Family



'He looked immense as he stood behind the table speaking "full well that day". Whilst he spoke he fiddled artistically with his cigar in the one hand and his champagne glass in the other. He warms to his work, and, as his eloquence burned into working heat, he looked down on those around him from his eminence, now and then reaching forward earnestly and throwing his right hand across the table.'

New Zealand Free Lance, 7 December 1907
Image: New Zealand Free Lance, 19 December 1908

'She spent a great deal of her adult life trying to win the affection and respect of her prosaic father, who built an ugly bus shelter in Wellington as a memorial to his imaginative child.'

Jeffrey Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield: a biography*

Harold Beauchamp

Harold Beauchamp, KM's father, was possibly the strongest influence on her life. Intelligent, kindly, and very successful in business, his relationship with his daughter was a running battle over several years. She described him as: 'a tall grey-bearded man, with prominent blue eyes, large ungainly hands, and inclining to stoutness. He was a general merchant, director of several companies, chairman of several societies, thoroughly commonplace and commercial.' (*Juliet*)

Their true tie to each other is better caught in a letter to John Middleton Murry in 1913: 'Thank you for Pa's letter. He was cheerful and poetic, a trifle puffed up, but very loving. I feel towards my Pa man like a little girl. I want to jump and stamp on his chest and cry "You've got to love me." When he does, I feel quite confident that God is on my side.'

He appears in many of her stories, always commercial, always 'a trifle puffed up', but also 'timid, sensitive, innocent ... who knelt down every night to say his prayers, and who longed to be good ... If he believed in people ... it was with his whole heart. He could not be disloyal; he could not tell a lie.' (*At the Bay*) And if he could instruct, when his daughter demanded that she return to England, 'You must learn to realise that the silken cords of parental authority are very tight ropes indeed. I want no erratic spasmodic daughter. I demand a sane, healthy-minded girl.' (*Juliet*), he could also provide her with a reasonable allowance once she had won him over.

Mansfield's feelings for her parents softened with distance. She met them several times in England and in France, and late in her life, after her father visited her in Menton, she wrote to her husband: 'Father at the last was wonderfully dear to me ... And here on the table are five daisies and an orchid that Pa picked for me and tied with a bit of grass and handed me. If I had much to forgive him, I would forgive him much for this little bunch of flowers.'

Anne Burnell Beauchamp

KM's sisters claimed that her accounts of family life, and particularly her portraits of her mother and father, were 'gross exaggeration'. In fact she recorded many varied impressions of her parents. As Linda Burnell in *At the Bay*, *Prelude*, and *The Doll's House*, her mother is aloof and delicate and finds her children rather too much:

'It was all very well to say it was the common lot of women to bear children. It wasn't true. She, for one, could prove that wrong. She was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child bearing. And what made it doubly hard to bear was, she did not love her children. It was useless pretending. Even if she had had the strength she never would have nursed or played with the little girls.' (*At the Bay*)

In a play she never completed, KM has her mother describe her gifted daughter during the trying months after her unwilling return from school in England:

‘She’s too clever, really, and far too intense. Intense isn’t the word, my dear! She never can take a decent respectable interest in anything; she’s always head over heels before one can say fruitknife ... When she is good – what I call good – I’m not saying this because I’m her mother – I’m speaking quite impersonally – she’s fascinating, irresistible! But then she so very seldom is what I call good.’ (*Toots*)

Mansfield’s affection for her mother was strong and insistent. After she heard of her death in 1918 she wrote to Virginia Woolf: ‘such an exquisite little being, far too fragile and lovely to be dead for ever more.’ And two years later, she recorded: ‘I am sitting in my own room thinking of Mother: I want to cry. But my thoughts are beautiful and full of gaiety. I think of our house, our garden, us children – the lawn, the gate, and Mother coming in. “Children! Children!” I really only ask for time to write it all – time to write my books. Then I don’t mind dying ...

‘My little Mother, my star, my courage, my own. I seem to dwell in her now.’ (*Notebooks*)

Joseph and Margaret Dyer

On 21 January 1922 KM wrote ‘Grandma’s birthday. Where is that photograph of my dear love leaning against her husband’s shoulder, with her hair parted so meekly and her eyes raised? I love it. I long to have it. For one thing Mother gave it to me at a time when she loved me. But for another – so much more important – it is she – my own Grandma, young and lovely. That arm. That baby sleeve with the velvet ribbon. I must see them again.’ (*Notebooks*)

Grandmother Dyer holding Gwendoline Beauchamp was one of KM’s earliest memories. In 1916 she recalled the day the photograph was taken: ‘Grandmother sat in her chair to one side with Gwen in her lap, and a funny little man with his head in a black bag was standing behind a box of china eggs.

“Now!” he said, and I saw my grandmother’s face change as she bent over little Gwen.

“Thank you,” said the man, coming out of his bag. The picture was hung over the nursery fire. I thought it looked very nice. The doll’s house was in it – verandah and balcony and all. Gran held me up to kiss my little sister.’ (*Notebooks*)



KM’s mother, Annie Burnell Beauchamp (1864–1918). Sylvia Berkman in *Katherine Mansfield: a critical study* describes Annie as ‘a slight, finely made woman, with beautiful dark eyes, strongly defined arched eyebrows, and abundant chestnut hair; sensitive, fastidious, aristocratic, with a quality of distant loveliness about her.’

ATL F28637 1/2

Left: Joseph and Margaret Isabella Dyer, KM’s maternal grandparents, from a daguerreotype, 1855.

ATL F49744 1/2

Lower left: KM’s grandmother Margaret Isabella Dyer (*née* Mansfield; 1839–1906), with baby Gwendoline Burnell Beauchamp (1890–91) and the doll’s house which was used as the basis for the story of the same name. Gwendoline, KM’s sister, was born in October 1890, but died three months later of cholera.

ATL F49368 1/2



Wellington

The birthplace at 25 Tinakori Road (formerly number 11), Thorndon, Wellington, 2012. The house is now a Mansfield museum and event space. Below: a faithfully recreated interior. R Wilson; Brett Robertson, Katherine Mansfield Birthplace Society



BEAUCHAMP.—On 14th October, the wife of Mr Harold Beauchamp, of a daughter

Evening Post, 15 October 1888

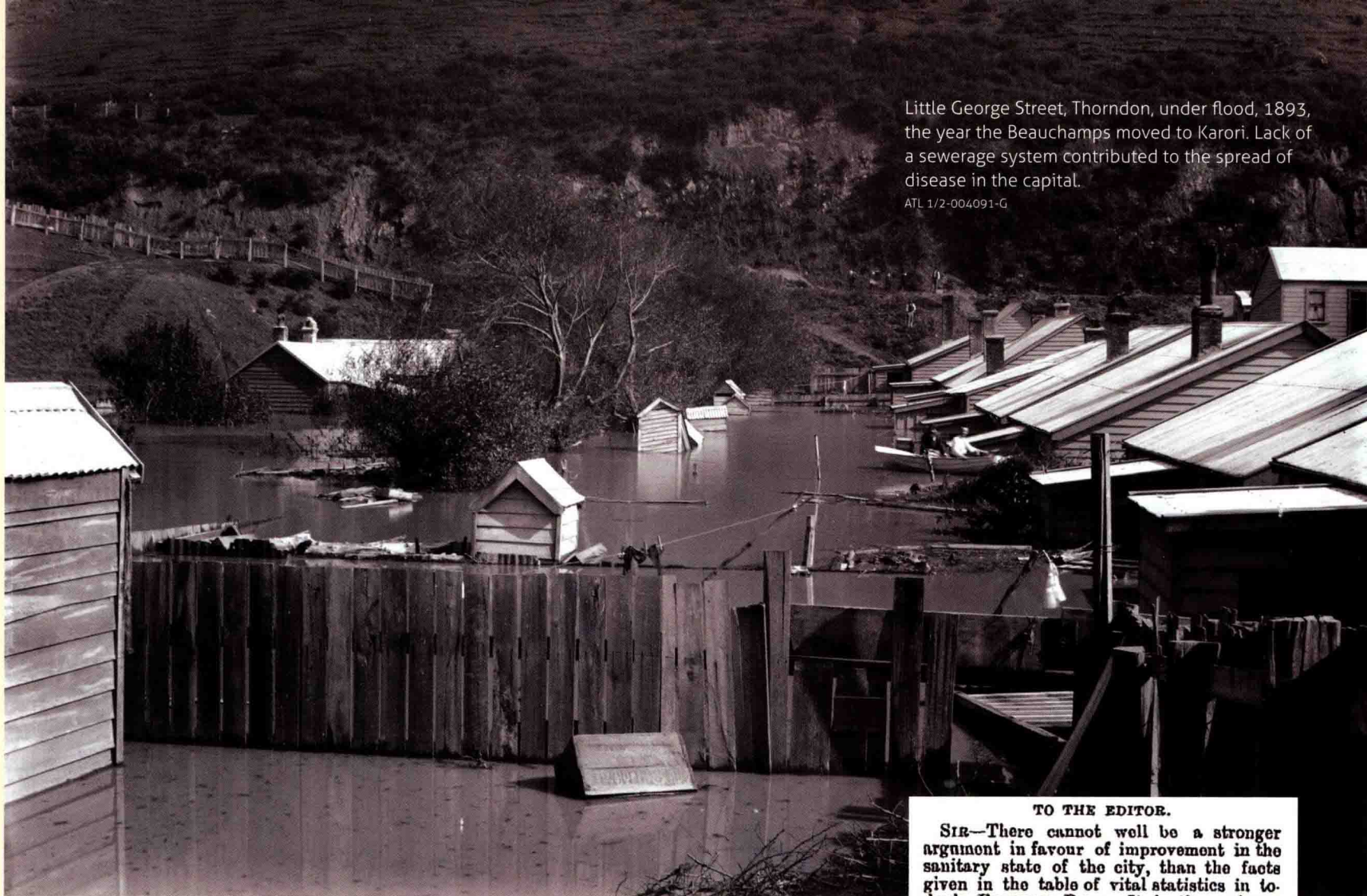
‘Kezia had been born in that room. She had come forth squealing out of a reluctant mother in the teeth of a “Southerly Buster.” The Grandmother, shaking her before the window, had seen the sea rise in green mountains and sweep the esplanade. The little house was like a shell to its loud booming.’

The Aloe



THE HOUSE, whose ‘dining room looked over the breakwater of the harbour’ was built by Harold Beauchamp for his family, and it was here his third daughter Kathleen was born at 8am, 14 October 1888. She believed she was born during a storm: ‘You know climate has an immense effect upon birth.’ (*A Birthday*) The weather forecast from the *Evening Post* on the day of her birth supports her contention, with its warning of gales and colder weather and heavy seas on the eastern coast.

KM spent her first five years in this house. It was on ‘the patch of lawn’ in front that Kezia in *Prelude* waited to move to the new house, and against the upstairs window that she pressed, while ‘As she stood there, the day flickered out and dark came. With the dark crept the wind snuffling and howling. The windows of the empty house shook, a creaking came from the walls and floors, a piece of loose iron on the roof banged forlornly.’



Little George Street, Thorndon, under flood, 1893, the year the Beauchamps moved to Karori. Lack of a sewerage system contributed to the spread of disease in the capital.

ATL 1/2-004091-G

BY THE TIME of KM's birth, Wellington was struggling to manage its sewage and waste products, which often went into open trenches that ran to the harbour. In flat areas such as Te Aro the trenches stagnated, producing a stench in summer and overflow during heavy rain. A report from 1889 referred to 'Numbers of children ... congregated about the mouths of the main sewers of the city, just where the contents empty into the bay ... in many cases right in the midst of the odours that arise from the drains.' These conditions helped the spread of diseases such as typhoid, which claimed 77 victims in Wellington in 1889.

KM's baby sister Gwendoline succumbed to cholera in 1891 and it is likely that the outbreak of the disease in Wellington was a factor in the Beauchamps' move to semi-rural Karori in 1893. In his *Recollections and Reminiscences* Harold Beauchamp explains this was 'for the benefit, not only of the children's health but also of my own.'

TO THE EDITOR.

SIR—There cannot well be a stronger argument in favour of improvement in the sanitary state of the city, than the facts given in the table of vital statistics in to-day's *EVENING POST*. It is there shown that Wellington holds the unenviable position of having contributed three out of the four deaths which were caused by typhoid fever throughout the colony last month. If there were three deaths, how many cases were there altogether, which probably brought great misery and want to many industrious families? These are preventable diseases; and it is no credit to the City Council and those they represent that Wellington, with its natural drainage, is not such a desirable place to live in as other cities in the colony.

I am, &c.,
GREYBEARD.

Evening Post, 24 December 1891