

Dear  
Oliver

The magic holiday at  
Hicks Bay. Bess and  
her two sons Peter  
and Russell, 1960.



# Dear Oliver

Uncovering a Pākehā history

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R ESTCOURT  
No 1494

Mrs E. Northcote,  
St. Lawrence Road,  
Napier.  
New Zealand



FROM De Kruisfontein  
P.O. Box 46, Grahamstown, Natal.

# Red Letter Day

OPPOSITE

A letter sent to my  
grandmother from South  
Africa in 1947: 'If you got  
a letter it was exciting.'

As with all change,  
you lose some things,  
you gain others. The  
digital present is full  
of marvels, but it isn't  
hard to think that  
something has been  
lost. Is it as basic as  
speed versus silence?

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS HAS ALREADY BECOME indispensable, but its noise has rendered older media like cinema and books almost redundant. Almost. But not completely. Just as silence is powerful, so is reading a well-argued book of non-fiction or a vividly imagined novel — these have their own unique qualities.

But some things seem to have been left behind. The personal letter is one of them. So few people write letters anymore, a handwritten letter has become something really special. A gesture outside the norm. Instead we punch out illiterate emails and texts, no longer bothering to be grammatical, let alone witty and insightful. Speed is all. We all use the new technologies while tacitly accepting that data collection is screening or filtering what we write, collecting our likes and tastes so we can be better exploited and even, in a political sense, utilised when needed. In abandoning the letter, which was essentially private, we have lost something really important — a kind of freedom.

The derogatory term for letters is ‘snail mail’. This is a wry comment on the slowness involved in writing a letter, but also on the fact that the writer had to take the stamped envelope to a letterbox, from where it was collected, sorted and then, some time later — it could be days, it could be weeks — it arrived in the letterbox of the addressee.

If you got a letter, it was exciting. Sometimes you even waited to open it, as if saving a surprise. If the letter was from a lover or a particular friend you could carry that letter around with you in your bag. Your fingers might touch it when you were feeling tense. You could get the letter out and find another meaning in a sentence. The very handwriting was the signature of a soul.

You can tell I’m a fan of the letter. In fact I still write letters to a friend, a fellow author, who is similarly committed to the humane qualities inherent in what one might call ‘slow communication’. But then letters were always a part of my life. My mother’s family — her mother and two sisters — lived in separate cities in New Zealand. Nobody ever called long-distance to chat in my childhood. Right up until the 1970s toll calls were for emergencies and sparked a rush of adrenalin: a toll call presaged a crisis of some kind. Letters, on the other hand, were cheap, and they were part of the currency of family life. Each week a letter from my grandmother in Napier, with its signature pale-blue Basildon Bond envelope (signalling ‘quality’), dropped into our letterbox in Point Chevalier in Auckland. The address would be in my grandmother’s flowing handwriting — she was

born in 1883 and so it had the hint of copperplate about it. She used a fountain pen, and the ink was either radiant blue or the more sober blue-black. My grandmother died in 1967. She never used a ballpoint.

These letters provided a view of village life as detailed as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, but they were such common currency that they were thrown out after a certain period of time. (The latest letter was usually saved so that you could refer back to it to see if there was anything you needed to answer.)

Just a handful survived. And when I had the onerous task of shifting my mother out of what passed, by then, for the family home, I found various letters dotted all over the house. An historian friend, knowing the pressure on the middle-aged 'child' clearing out a parent's house, advised me to get a box and throw anything into it that I might want to look at later. (You can get very easily carried away with 'cleansing the past'.)

I did this, saving, for whatever reason, the bunch of telegrams sent to my parents when they wed three months into the Second World War; childhood letters from a time when my brother's fingers — and mine — could hardly model the words; a wartime aerogramme from my mother to my father while he was fighting overseas; a letter from my sage grandfather in the final months before he died; and a delightful collection of letters written in highly ornate copperplate, in coloured inks, and sent to my eight-year-old grandmother by a grown man in the 1890s — a time when adult-child relations were viewed with less suspicion.

Years later I looked through them. It was then that this book occurred to me. I could see that the letters were part of an overall narrative, one that I knew implicitly: the story of an ordinary Pākehā family and how they made sense of their lives. I knew there were other, older letters, too, which a great-uncle had unearthed in the 1950s. These went back to the 1840s and traced that fracture line when my mother's family, the Northes, left Cornwall forever and made New Zealand their home. In this sense the letters traced an archetypal journey from the period of what has been called 'the Anglophone settler explosion', one of the great migratory patterns in history, when 20 million people left Britain and Ireland to create homes in other places and spaces.<sup>1</sup> It was a migration that changed the world.

I began to see the letters in a wider context. A letter was once part of how you experienced being human — how we saw, thought, imagined, expressed ourselves. Letters are history written as a part-time serial, with many key parts lost. But from what is left we can extrapolate and fill in,

imagine, and set people and events in the context of time and place. This makes them sound very grand, but really the letters I'm talking about are just the haphazard communications of an ordinary Pākehā New Zealand family over time — the sort of detritus that remains when the past evaporates and leaves behind a certain number of exhibits, none of which make any claim to literary or historical greatness. I decided their very ordinariness was what made these letters interesting. They showed the history of a family not notable for anything in particular — except its quiet genius in being itself.

I began to form the idea of writing a book based on what these letters could tell us about the past. Part of living in digital time is that we've been robbed of a sense of chronology. There is simply the relevant now and the irrelevant past. Yet physically, psychologically, we are still subject to chronology — we are young, we grow old. And as you grow old, increasingly you look back. The past, which seemed at one time boring or incomprehensible, silently shifts into a shape that begins to make sense. You realise how you misunderstood things, how you didn't know vital pieces of information about your parents' lives, their childhoods, even their emotional states. The same goes for all the generations before. You are not only who you are — the unique genetic experiment that is a one-off — but you are also a composite of all the generations that went before. The past speaks through us.

I put the letters into some form of chronological order and decided I would write a book about my family. This is, I thought, what we do when, strictly speaking, we no longer have a family. We conjure one out of the past. This is not so strange. It's how the past is redefined, after all. We walk back into the past and recognise things we overlooked in our urgency to keep moving ahead.

THE JOURNEY OF MY ANCESTORS from Britain to New Zealand could be said to be the ur-journey of so many Pākehā New Zealanders. We are over-familiar with its shape — poverty in the homeland, struggle across the seas, the hard impact on landing. Scrabbling around for a way to survive. Gradually, some success as adaptation takes over, accompanied by a loss of memory about origins as the present obscures a now-distant past. Even the act of looking back — the search for genealogical origins — is a Pākehā cliché. Why do it?

Richard Holmes, author of *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*, has defined the biographical enterprise as ‘a handshake across time’: ‘It is an act of human solidarity, and in its own way an act of recognition and love.’<sup>2</sup> Pākehā on the whole do not love ourselves. We may laugh at ourselves. We rarely understand ourselves. There is a kind of numbness here, a mute silence. But it also has something to do with shame.

Pākehā stand in a strange and controversial relationship to history in Aotearoa. In my lifetime we have gone from being slightly unreal heroic ‘pioneers’ to villainous exploiters of Māori culture and thieves of Māori land. Today we live with the psychological displacement of being defined by what we are not: we are no longer ‘pioneers’, ‘settlers’ or ‘colonists’; we have been stripped of identity and returned to the present simply as ‘non-Māori’. This negative tautology expresses our predicament. Effectively it delivers us back to a psychological homelessness. We are no longer Pākehā with whom Māori had their first few centuries of contact, the outcome of which created the contemporary world in which we live. We’re the shape of a silhouette without a face. Maybe it’s my wish to paint this face in, to personalise a little of our Pākehā past, that has led me to write this book.

When later in life I turned out to be a writer, I asked myself where this strangely ambiguous gift had come from. Other writers had grandparents who told mythic stories from Ireland or the Māori world.

It took me a long time to recognise I had gotten my storytelling streak from my mother. It was not that she was so much a storyteller as a person who had an emphatic and — I realised as I got older — highly individual view of the world. Part of this view of the world was predicated on her family.

It’s interesting what you don’t know about yourself. Part of ageing is a kind of filling in of blanks, areas that you were not even aware existed, let alone understood, were highly influential on the way you saw life. My blank was this. I had not realised that my mother’s constant reference to her family arose precisely because her family was no longer around her.

This needs explaining. My mother was born in Napier to a family who had made Napier their home in 1858. This family had hardly ventured further in all the subsequent years. In 1939, a few months into the war, she married my father, Gordon, who came from another small town to the north. Together they shifted to Auckland. My mother never came back, except for relatively fleeting visits. I grew up in an atmosphere saturated

with stories about Napier, the dramas of the 1931 earthquake and her family's central role in Napier's development.

It was only when I came to live in Napier in 2007 — drawn back by the magnetic force of all her childhood stories — that I came to a different understanding. My mother's family was not, in fact, central to the development of the small town. They were simply one of any number of commercial families who had helped create its infrastructure, and had enriched themselves to varying degrees.

My understanding took another step when, after it became clear my mother could no longer look after herself, I brought her back to live in Napier. She was then ninety-two. I knew the change from being an independent woman in charge of her own life to living in a small studio in a retirement village, without a car, would be difficult. But what I had not factored in was something else entirely. I had not realised my mother regarded it as one of her achievements that she had managed to get away from the claustrophobic confines of a small town and create a flourishing social life in the biggest city in New Zealand. I had not understood that she actually rather despised the provincial town she had come from.

From childhood onwards, I had only been fed stories expressing her love of her family — and, seemingly indivisibly, of Napier. But the fact is her affection was predicated on distance, on missing close links, on her own position in a small society in which she had been known, her parents were known, her grandparents were known. (This is the fixative of small-town life. It is not always a charitable view.) I never knew this. I never sensed this.

As it was, I had come to the end of my own love affair with Napier. I had shifted here with my partner, Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, and I had integrated myself into the history of the town. It had given me the subject matter for two substantial books. But at the end of eight years there was a disillusioning event. Douglas was director of the museum and art gallery in Napier. After it was rebuilt, it became mired in a bitter dispute, as is not unusual in these cases, and I began to experience what Anthony Trollope so feelingly called 'the true hatred of provincial life'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet now I could not leave. My mother's presence necessitated my staying, or at least returning with the regularity of a good son. I would henceforth live in the town in the mood of someone recovering from a love affair: I looked about me ruefully, but with a glance made sharper by a sense of reality.



ABOVE

Bess as a baby, with her parents Ern and Jess and sisters Jean and Patti in 1916. They were a close, affectionate family, everyone with a nickname.

CENTRE

Wedding cables kept in a trunk.

BELOW

Visiting Bess at her retirement village for the ritual of tea.





ABOVE

The R. Northe & Sons yard  
in Napier. Coal was a dirty  
but lucrative business.



CENTRE

Bess and Jess, her mother,  
thought alike.

BELOW

A rare photo of my family  
together on graduation  
day, Auckland, 1974.

