

**ONE
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EWING**



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

IN NEW ZEALAND IN THE 1950s it was very expensive to make a telephone call from one part of the country to another. Toll calls, we called them. And the price of making a telephone call to another country in those years was prohibitive. It cost *£1 per minute* when I first arrived in London to telephone, or to be telephoned from, New Zealand, and I was living on about *£5 per week*. I was a student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and my *£5 per week* had to cover rent and board and tube fares and tomato soup for lunch. So I kept in touch with friends and family by letter (and got into the habit of sticking their photographs on the walls of wherever I was living).

But one of the New Zealand telephone operators I had got to know earlier when I was ‘sent away to the South Island’ — a euphemism in those days for pregnant unmarried girls being dealt with, although in this case I was simply being sent away to the South Island — told me that the overseas operators (who connected calls manually in those long-ago days) had to stay on the line to make sure the connection was not lost. An agreement had to be made with the operator beforehand as to how long the

call would be: it was conventionally three minutes. And as these expensive phone calls were almost always made only when it was a matter of life, or death, or heartbreak, the listening New Zealand operators — who had to interrupt to say, ‘I’m sorry but your time is up’ — were informally permitted to allow, as well as the three minutes, one minute crying time.

Today, with certain twenty-first-century technological and financial arrangements, I can phone for as long as I like from or to either country, and am permitted to cry — or laugh (hopefully without anyone listening in, though who knows) — for free.



MONDAY 1 JANUARY 1951

Stayed up on New Year's Eve to sing Auld Lang Syne at midnight. Drank ginger ale with Mum and Dad and Andrew. Ross was asleep. Tonight we left Wellington for Timaru. A calm night. We are sailing across Cook's Strait on the "Rangatira".

TUESDAY 2 JANUARY 1951

Landed at Lyttleton at 7am. Caught train to Christchurch. It was cold. Caught train to Timaru. We have got a house for us to stay in near where Nana and Granny live. It is very old-fashioned but nice. It has a poem over the lavatory. We saw Sound Shell concert at Caroline Bay. A fireworks display was very beautiful. Rockets were let off.

SATURDAY 6 JANUARY 1951

Saw Nana and Granny. Andrew and Ross and I gave them a concert with our gazoos. Then went on merry-go-round, Big Wheel and chair-o-plane. Went for two swims. Saw Sound

Shell concert. There were 2 Lady singers, 2 Men singers, 1 Guitar player, 1 Accordion player, 1 Tap Dancer and 2 Irish Dancers. And a Clown. There was a Nigger Minstrel Show before we came. Miss Caroline Bay was picked. It was Miss Catherine Jones, Balclutha. She intends to spend the £50 prize on an electric sewing machine.

SUNDAY 14 JANUARY 1951

My twelfth birthday! Dad and the boys gave me a Royal Family book and a cake of choc. Mummy gave me a brooch. Nana gave me a card and soap and powder and a bowl. I also got a writing pad, rubber, envelopes and Minties. And choc and lollies from Cousin Jack. We had a party tea. Then played paper games after tea with Dad.

FRIDAY 19 JANUARY 1951. BEST DAY

Went to Temuka in Rental Car to Uncle John's farm. Was on Betty the pony most of the time, trying to ride, also Uncle John milked the cows. He showed us how to put hens to sleep. He twirled them round with their heads under their wings. Then he put them on the ground and they were asleep. When they woke up they looked very surprised and sqwarked. Had a sing song before we went home.

SUNDAY 21 JANUARY 1951

Went to the Timaru Botanical Gardens in the afternoon while Dad and Mum took Nana and Granny for a ride. Met them at the Gardens and had an ice-cream. Granny is Dad's grandmother. Granny is nearly 100. She is deaf and so we shout to her. She talks funny. It is Scotland. Played Paper

Games after tea. Tomorrow before we go home will change my birthday Royal Family book to “Princess Margaret in Italy”.

That poem over the lavatory in that rented house: I still remember it. We three kids thought it was very funny and rude (over a *lavatory!*) and we laughed and recited it to one another when no one was listening:

IF YOU’VE GOT A JOB TO DO, DO IT WELL.

IF IT’S ONE YOU WISH WAS THROUGH, DO IT WELL.

Once upon a time, so long ago and (some would say) so far away, as we set off to visit my father’s family, including his sisters, his mother and his grandmother in the South Island of New Zealand, I — about to turn twelve and about to start my last year at primary school — started to keep a daily diary. Millions — trillions — of people keep diaries and journals recording their lives; who knows how many may have started before they were twelve and not missed one single day for 2400 days, but I was one of them. On the 2401st day I stopped, unable to write. I was then eighteen years old.

After that it became a journal, which I have never stopped writing. Until now.



THERE IS A MĀORI EXPRESSION, *karanga mate*, which means to call death. And there is an old Māori belief: if you wrote a will, like the white men wrote wills: *karanga mate*.

When my husband, a New Zealand Māori, died and — like his parents before him — died without leaving a will (I know

he too — a lecturer in Māori tertiary education — somewhere deep inside still believed in karanga mate), he left incalculable emotional, as well as legal, difficulties behind him.

After the long, sad, turmoiled days, I was finally on a twenty-seven hour flight back to London, crossing the world for what seemed like the thousandth time (but was perhaps about the 107th, and yes I do now worry about my carbon-dioxide footprint). Somewhere past Australia I was suddenly consumed with terror that the plane would crash, and my terror was not that I would die but that I would leave behind similar problems — I had no up-to-date will. High, high up in the sky, clouds often turn bright red at dusk, red like fire. In the olden days fires used to be lit along the New Zealand coastline between villages, as warnings. I stared out at the fire and felt my heart beating fast as the plane sped on and into the interminable dark night.

In London I immediately set about the task of, as they say, putting my affairs in order. And among my goods and chattels I had drawers and drawers of those old fading diaries and journals, and the only sensible thing to do with them was to burn them. I live in a London attic but some friends offered to make a bonfire at the bottom of their large garden.

As I was packing the diaries into cardboard boxes to take away for burning, I glanced at one or two of the very early ones . . .

. . . Terrible forms of torture in my Wellington suburban street in 1951 (apart from hard pinching) were horse bites and Chinese burns. Re-reading some of the old, very first, diaries has sometimes been like having a horse bite or a Chinese burn inside my head. Who in their right mind could bear to read, let alone

enable anyone else to read, any of their adolescent, sentimental, excessive, self-obsessed writing? — don't be ridiculous.

But: one of my professions, in one of my countries, is Writer of Historical Novels. I therefore am slightly obsessive about finding old papers and letters and records concerning the people I am writing about: they are so often very revealing and occasionally genuinely exciting. (I stood up with a red face shouting 'WHAT?' in the British Library when I was researching for a novel that became *The Petticoat Men*, because by pure chance I had found *undiscovered information* that might solve a puzzling 1870s court trial I knew about — and I had to leave the Reading Room to compose myself.)

Considering my ignominious record in the History Department at Victoria University of Wellington, it is odd to record not only that I write historical novels but that I also have a strange fascination with 'touching history': other times, other countries, other lives. Somehow to actually — as well as learn — *connect*.

For instance. At the end of the eighteenth century one of Napoleon's scholar-soldiers in Egypt recognised that one of the huge old stones holding up other old stones used to make one of the coastal forts had Greek writing carved into it — alongside some of the mysterious, untranslatable Egyptian hieroglyphs. This ancient stone, which the soldier had carefully had removed, became known as the Rosetta Stone; it was the key, finally, to *unlocking* those unfathomable hieroglyphs and the culture that made them. Two centuries later I had gone to Egypt to research my novel *Rosetta*. And I stood there, on the site of that old fort: an odd, eerie, 'connecting' moment for me. Because (as unlikely as this may sound) inside the closed British Museum in London

some years earlier, in the middle of the night, I had — for some instinctive, unexplainable reason — put my arms around that *actual* Rosetta Stone from Egypt, *the very stone* that French soldier had found, and I had hugged it, possibly a prosecutable offence. There, in the empty, dimly lit, silent exhibition room in a museum: carved figures, and tombs of pharaohs, and an old Egyptian stone. (These days the Rosetta Stone is safely locked in a glass case, out of the reach of vandals like me.)

Perhaps my weirdest experience of ‘touching history’ was when I was invited to take my one-woman play about Alexandra Kollontai, the only woman in Lenin’s first Cabinet after the Russian Revolution, to the Soviet Union during the last years of Gorbachev’s leadership, the time of *perestroika*. In Moscow I met Alexandra’s grandson, Vladimir Kollontai, and his wife Ritta. They were an elderly couple but we became friendly, talked much of his grandmother, and eventually they asked if they could come to stay with me in London. I gave them my bed, and in the night I suddenly thought in stunned, somehow incredulous amazement: *Alexandra Kollontai’s grandson is sleeping in my bed.*

However.

Heightened blood pressure and palpitations, nightmares and dreams have been my reactions to opening old diaries that have inside them a daily, factual, emotional record that touches the history of my *own* life. It’s all very well, in later years, to have — in your head — some version of your life (in this case, crossed countries, crossed cultures, crossed careers) as you remember it. But how can you hold on to that securely if you open a notebook and it is all written down there, in your own handwriting, every

day — day by day by day by day by day — and *not* always as you remember?

Some of these early diary entries record events that I can still easily recall: a school friend's pretty mother, when we were twelve, playing the piano and singing 'Paper Doll', and her drunk husband coming home, and no carpet on the floor. But also: some entries are *different* from what I thought I knew still so clearly. Not just feelings but sometimes checkable facts — and when I have been able to check what I wrote then, different from my memory now, it is the diary, not my memory, that is correct. And sometimes an entry is about something really important: yet I had completely forgotten it. I have also found among the pages one photograph about which I want to say: 'No. This isn't true.' But there it is. Well, of course we forget many things in our lives — our heads would burst otherwise — and there are details in the day-by-day diaries that I don't remember at all. It is also well known that people can remember the same event differently.

And yet . . . and yet. Some entries are *so exactly as I remember*, right down to the moment, and the room, and the song, and the light, and the air . . . the old song 'Night and Day' drifting in the dusk through the windows of an autumn hotel room in Christchurch, and the New Zealand poetry books on the bed . . . so that my heart beats oddly at the thought of how clear memory can be, so long afterwards.

Then, right at this very confusing time, I read the Nobel Prize acceptance speech by one of my favourite writers, Kazuo Ishiguro, in which he described a turning point in his writing life when he could suddenly see a way of writing that could properly suggest *the many layers of self-deception and denial*

that shrouded any person's view of their own self and past.

Self-deception and denial? All of us?

'Know thyself,' said Socrates in Ancient Greece.

All these layers of discovery have thrown me and muddled me — and distressed me — and have led to the emotional Chinese burns and the horse bites. And, finally, unwrapping memory, I can only conclude, as I now find philosophers and psychiatrists and poets have concluded long before me: sometimes memories change and rewrite themselves in our heads. And perhaps we also have to face the idea that until we realise that to some extent memory is *selective*, we can't really know ourselves (if we want to know ourselves). We perhaps sometimes instinctively choose to have a version of memory that suits us — our view of ourselves, the view we *want* to be true.

And even the very oldest diaries were there, waiting . . .

Because even though I went as far away from my homeland as it is possible to go without starting to come back again, I kept even the very early (sometimes funny, sometimes devastating, but often really boring and deeply, deeply embarrassing) diaries: I packed them in a big wooden tea-chest with my poetry books and my photo albums and my LPs — and even my 45rpm records ('Rock Around the Clock', 'Crazy', 'Sad Movies (Make Me Cry)') — and they crossed the 12,000 miles with me, on a big ship, to my new life. As if I was making sure to bring myself with me.

My favourite phrase about the people who made, the other way, that long and dangerous sea-journey from Great Britain in the nineteenth century was written by a New Zealand historian:

‘The drones, of course, did not go.’ And my brothers and I knew our great-grandmother who had actually made that perilous journey. A very un-dronish person: a straight-backed, austere woman, rather alarming to us, dressed in long black dresses and buttoned boots. (Granny is nearly 100 . . . She talks funny. It is Scotland . . .) Yet how un-curious we were then, in Timaru in 1951, eating our ice creams and giving concerts on our gazoos, about the woman with us to whom we were related, who had been born nearly a hundred years ago on the other side of the world.

There is a poem by Ruth Dallas about photographs of pioneer women which starts:

You can see from their faces
Life was not funny . . .

You could see that, from our great-grandmother’s face.

And (though I didn’t think of it in this way in the least) when I left New Zealand on a ship for Great Britain, I was tracing back, with my tea-chest and my poetry books and my pop records and these diaries, the route my own great-grandparents had taken. And to a foreign place also: to such different people who said (sternly at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London) what I had said about my great-grandmother: that *I* spoke funny; to a different, paler light, and to trees that were a different green, and where our word ‘football’ didn’t mean rugby. And where people treated one another differently, depending.

A foreign place, despite all the games of Monopoly I’d played and all the books I’d read.

When I was growing up reading *The Lark in the Morn*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *Jane Eyre*, New Zealand was still perhaps something like a rather prim British country, except with — for this was many (though not all) of the early settlers' ambition, having made that long and dangerous journey — equality instead of a class system (or so we told ourselves), and with sheep, and little rural Māori villages. And how very proud we were of our country — and we had much to be proud of: we were the first country to give votes to women and we were a 'welfare' state with universal healthcare and free education. Still a huge British influence, though: *our* King George VI, and the BBC World Service on our wireless, and always newsreels about Great Britain at the pictures, before the main film. And a few private schools, and 'china cabinets', and gloves and hats to go to town on the tramcar — but in our country *everyone* should be free to have china cabinets. And we looked after war-damaged, dear Great Britain with our lamb and our butter. Great Britain, we were told, was 'Home'. And although, by 1951, writers and poets and artists and critics had — I later realised — been fighting for years to break the constricting net, there was still a belief among many intellectuals and others that *England* was the place to escape to as soon as possible: it was *there* that the most valued Art, and Poetry, and Writing, and Theatre was created and appreciated.

However when dear, Great, Britain somewhat abruptly discarded Commonwealth trade and joined the European Common Market, of course those old ties changed forever. New Zealand had to find other markets (and learned to make wonderful wine). And began to really understand and be proud of its *own* artistic heritage. Now it seems to me (as I come and

go like a yo-yo) almost nothing like a British country at all, no matter that little pockets of it try still to recapture that past, and people still love Royal visits.

The world turns.

As I write, the United Kingdom is still trying to deal with the chaos Brexit has thrown up, and Britain is suddenly looking *back* somewhat keenly for trading deals with those very Commonwealth countries which it left. Like, said a nephew of mine, contacting an old girlfriend again: *'Hello! How **are** you? You know, after all this time, I realise — I've **missed** you — I know, I know, I behaved badly but — oh, **of course** I always thought of you. Let's meet up again?'*

Perhaps we will. New Zealand will know that in this present, alerted, time of climate change there is much talk of food miles as well as air miles. But now New Zealand has other markets too. And its *own* artists, and writers and poets and philosophers and historians and creative spirits.

It is: itself. Aotearoa. New Zealand. And now sometimes even 新西兰.

Yet — other changes too. In a country that so, so prided itself on being 'class-less' and *fair*, I see that money has some other, different power now, and it is *not* fair sometimes, and it is somehow shocking (to me) to hear Auckland buses being casually described (by a family of two with two cars) as 'loser-cruisers'.

No television. No computers. No internet. No mobile phones. No email, no texting, no googling, no Facebook, no WhatsApping, no FaceTiming, no Snapchatting, no streaming, no podcasts, no blogging, no Twittering. I am so very aware of how immature

and naïve I sound in my diaries — and absolutely was — especially compared to young people today. We did twitter of course, but to each other in person, like birds. We listened to the wireless. We went to the pictures. We also wrote lots of letters with pencils and pens, and posted them in the red box (just like Great Britain's red boxes) at the end of the street; the postman passing your house in the early morning would blow his whistle if he put something in your letterbox. Occasionally a man in uniform arrived with a telegram: a folded yellow form in a brown envelope with capital letters typed on strips of white sticky paper: HARRY ASHBY ARRIVING RAILWAY STATION 9.30AM SUNDAY.

Also: I often didn't see things that were there in front of me, even though I wrote about them. The lack of carpet in that school friend's house was to me just perfect for dancing young girls' dances, not a sign of poverty, because *of course* we didn't have poverty in our country; we were all equal, all of us; my friends and I lived together — state houses, owned houses — and went to local primary schools together, and most of our mothers, the Happy Homemakers, made Happy Homes. And (even though there was a Māori in our class) Māori people lived in their far-away villages with their 'Native' schools, and were very happy there — we'd seen them, laughing — and sometimes we did Māori stick games at school and learnt a little Māori song. And all fathers had jobs, of course.

None of this, my diaries slowly reveal, was entirely true.

The diaries also reveal my — and many people's — huge ignorance of many things in the 1950s, but I haven't cut the ignorance out, or changed the basic facts, as I could have done to make this story more acceptable. I have left them in

to show how far (and yet, sometimes, how un-far) our country has travelled in all these years. We simply did not know, as so many — most — people all over the world did not know then, of concepts like ‘feminism’, ‘emotional intelligence’, ‘cultural appropriation’, ‘patriarchy’, ‘environmental degradation’ or ‘political correctness’.

I may come — and go — often (perhaps it *is* 107 times) but I am so aware as I read the 1950s diary entries that since the 1970s and 1980s and the new Māori renaissance that has changed so many things — and many people — it has not been considered appropriate for Pākehā to try to write personally about Māori matters. This is part of a strong, worldwide movement by indigenous peoples who have had, for so long, their histories and their stories told *for* them, *about* them, not *by* them, as if they could not tell their own story. Māori have excellent writers of their own who now tell their own story in their own way, and write their own histories from their own knowledge and their own point of view. In telling *my* own story, I have to recognise that it comes entwined with that earlier, boundaried history. And if, by chance, you break through a boundary you learn so much, but sharp splinters of that broken boundary fall — on both sides.

This story was our particular growing-up, and our young lives, in our country, then.