Katherine Mansfield and Rugby
or, Energy and Torpor: a Pattern of Contrast in Mansfield's Life and Stories

Speaker: Roger Robinson

Roger Robinson, Emeritus Professor of English at Victoria University, initiated and convened the 1988 Katherine Mansfield Centenary Conference in Wellington, when the Birthplace was also opened. His books include *Katherine Mansfield: In from the Margin* (1994), and the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (1998). Since academic retirement, he has won three international journalism awards for his writing on running.

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“Katherine Mansfield and Rugby” certainly has the attraction of being undiscovered country. The prevailing version of Mansfield is insistently one of sickliness and inactivity. The available photographic images seem to imply the same – she is always static and watchful, often haggard, usually in confined locations, on sofas, steps, verandas, in a deckchair, by a desk, in a bedroom, squeezed between siblings in a group photo, buttoned tight in a military-style jacket, and finally as a controversial gravestone. The best image of that watchful, constrained, marginalised Mansfield is the one I chose for the cover of *Katherine Mansfield: In from the Margin* (Louisiana State University Press, 1994), hemmed in by a palisade, a sunshade and a louvred door.

When her life is dramatised in any way, she is similarly always portrayed as confined, indoors, a doomed unhealthy creature, and in biodrama stage performances I always find myself despondently waiting for that first ominous cough.

Looking through the biographies, the nearest she ever got to sport was (from Kathleen Jones) three recorded instances of skinny-dipping. From Alpers to Jones, we have been given and have accepted without question a Mansfield who had no physical life other than sexual.

Pursuing her for some connection with sport, and checking the historical context, I found that she missed two golden opportunities to show what she could do by way of writing about top-level sport.

First, as a 17-year-old student, she was in London from September to December 1905, so surely she could have had the forethought or patriotism to record some reaction to the Original All Blacks, who played five times in London in those months. And a simple train journey to Cardiff on December 16, 1905, could have given to posterity a Katherine Mansfield description of the disputed Welsh try. That would have been the ultimate double whammy for New Zealand culture.

Then in 1908, she was almost back to London at the time of the controversial first London Olympics. Those Games were riven with newsworthy dispute between British and Americans (especially Irish-Americans). They were also the Games when New Zealanders competed and won an Olympic medal for the first time (in the track walk). Most famously, controversy was still raging,
even as Mansfield berthed and prepared to enter London's literary life, about history's most disputed marathon, the one that set the official distance, the race that ended in the Great White City stadium on July 24th with the heroic and exhausted Dorando Pietri being assisted to the finish and disqualified. Mansfield was still at sea, to be fair, but when she reached London, showed no interest in joining Arthur Conan Doyle and H.G. Wells in giving us literary responses to that remarkable moment in sports history.

It's a little embarrassing to record that her only close encounter with elite level sport seems to have come on the voyage home to Wellington after her schooling in 1906, under the stern eye of her parents, when the MCC cricket team was also on board, and at 17 she had a shipboard romance with a cricketer she called “Adonis,” and was reprimanded by her father for “fooling around in dark corners with fellas.”

She did attend Wellington College Sports Day early in 1907, wearing, one newspaper reported, “green shantung and a green hat,” but to include that only shows how desperate I am. But, being a marathon runner, and an Aston Villa and Wellington Phoenix supporter, I have a long history of pursuing lost sporting causes.

There is in fact evidence to suggest that the sickly, inactive, sports-blind, sofa-confined Mansfield is not the whole picture.

Yes, as a child, she was called “Fatty” by the boys next door, and was dreamy, and as soon as she began to write she portrayed herself as confined, introspective and bookish.

This is my world, this room of mine
Here I am living and here I shall die
All my interests are here, in fine
The hours slip quickly by.

That self-dramatising teenage verse is the prototype for her obviously autobiographical Juliet in the early novel.

...she lived in a world of her own, created her own people, read anything and everything. The large bedroom where she sat looked very dim and dark.

But there are also childhood references to horse-riding, wading in the Karori stream, walking to school. Perhaps she was not wholly confined to “this room of mine.” I began to find innumerable things in the early writings to set against the self-created image of bookish confinement.

The further the little girl leapt and ran
The further she longed to be

she wrote in another teenage poem. On the Urewera trip, though they travelled mainly by waggon, she certainly did walk a lot.

We were tired, and in the evening arrived at Pohue..We camped on the top of a hill, and in the evening walked in the bush...

She swam at Rotorua, and later was found “weeping on a park bench...I am tired to death with a headache and thoroughly weary feeling.” Too few writers, wrote Robert Louis Stevenson, have ever exercised enough to know what it is to be thoroughly tired.
And somehow, even as early as this Urewera journey, the two things – the leaping, running, walking, swimming, and the reaction of weary lassitude – are intercut and juxtaposed with each other. After a hard walk, she writes:

I stand in the manuka scrub, the fairy blossom...I am alone. I am hidden. Life seems to have passed away, drifted, drifted...

In “The Youth of Rewa,” another early autobiographical fiction, she wrote:

Rewa walked rapidly, her head thrown back...The sea seemed to call upon her to live a boundless, free, glorious life, to revel in her physical strength...She suddenly started almost running...She climbed quickly, clutching at trees and branches, wrenching her hand...At last the top was reached...Rewa did not move. As she lay there, rain-beaten, wind-tossed, in her frail body she felt the thundering of the sea.

A pattern begins to be apparent. Intense activity is energetically pursued, and then often leads to a reaction of torpor and passivity (“in her frail body she felt...”). The torpor is no surprise for the Mansfield we think we know, but the rapid walking, quick climbing, the seeming “to revel in her physical strength” certainly is.

This pattern is not just a fancy of her youthful fictions. Even towards the end of her life, even when she was supposedly inactive and almost invalid, like at Bandol, when Alpers describes her in those weeks as “confined to bed in a strange hotel,” there are surprises. She doesn't play rugby, but as soon as she can get up, in mid-December, she does go energetically walking every day.

On December 24, for instance, she writes in a letter, “I went off by myself into the woods and spent all afternoon exploring little tracks.”

Next day, Christmas Day, she joined an active older Englishman on “a long walk through the woods,” and he “taught me how to climb, as taught by the guides in Norway...We scaled dreadful precipices and got wonderful views.”

So both as a teenager and in her declining invalid later years, she was in fact more often active (I'm being careful not to overstate it) than the conventional image allows. It's with some self-approval that she describes running for the train from Marseilles to Bandol in January 1918,

...running on the railway lines with my rugs, suitcase, umbrella, muff, handbag etc and finally chucking them and myself into the 1ère where I sat for the next ten minutes in a corner.

She fluctuates like that between activity and lassitude, and it's a pattern that seems to have been conducive to her creativity as a writer. The risky adventure of travelling to Gray that became “An Indiscreet Journey” is one example. She wrote to Bertrand Russell in December 1916,

Life never bores me. It is a strange delight...to walk over mountains and into the valleys of the world, and fields and roads and to move on rivers and seas...When I am overcome by one of the fits of despair all this is ashes...and so intensely bitter that I feel it can never be sweet again – But it is – To air oneself among these things, to seek them, to explore them and then go apart and detach oneself from them...and to write – after the ferment has quite subsided.

I don't think anyone has noticed this pattern of fluctuation, what might be called a bipolarity of
moving between activity and torpor, but in that letter to Russell, Mansfield seems to be well aware of it as recurrent and productive - “To air oneself...explore...and then go apart and write.” It sounds almost like Dickens hiking at his habitual furious pace through London's night-time streets as his way of firing his inventiveness when he sat down to write. Or Jonathan Swift, who used to break off from study and writing in his years at Moor Park to run a hard half mile up and down the adjacent hill. We know from the modern scientific study of running about endorphin highs and the mentally stimulating effects of hard exercise, but it's not what you expect to hear in a discussion of Katherine Mansfield.

How can this fit with the cough? Resentfully on her part. As late as January 1922 she complains that “I can't shake off the congestion...all the machinery is out of order.” At the end, she put herself in the hands of Gurdjieff, for the sense of family community, Alpers suggested, but the emphasis on physical work and movement through dance might also have been part of what she was seeking to recapture. Most poignant is when in 1921 at Montana sur Sierre she describes the delight of being able to get so quickly into the forest - “in a moment one is hidden among the trees” - and also how heart-breaking it is when her health has declined to the point when “in the afternoon [Murry] goes walking and I go crawling.”

That heart-broken resentment of being invalid and restricted leads me to the stories.

Sport does appear in Mansfield's stories. In the conventional sense it seems to be something that "pa-men" do, those hearty self-dramatising patriarchs derived largely from her father. Her fullest (and most satiric) presentations are Stanley Burnell's morning rituals in Prelude and “At the Bay.”

Back came Stanley girt with a towel, glowing and slapping his thighs. He pitched the wet towel on top of her hat and cape, and standing firm in the exact centre of a square of sunlight he began to do his exercises. Deep breathing, bending and squatting like a frog and shooting out his legs. He was so delighted with his firm, obedient body that he hit himself on the chest and gave a loud 'Ah.'"

Stanley at Karori looks forward to the weekend, when he will “get a few chaps out from town to play tennis...He stretched out his right arm and slowly bent it, feeling the muscle...”

In “At the Bay” he does his vigorous self-congratulatory daily workout outdoors.

...a figure in a broad-striped bathing suit flung down the paddock, cleared the stile, rushed through the tussock grass into the hollow, staggered up the sandy hillock, and raced for dear life over the big, porous stones, over the cold, wet pebbles, on to the hard sand that gleamed like oil. Splish-splish! Splish-splosh! The water bubbled round his legs as Stanley Burnell waded out exulting. First man in as usual! He'd beaten them all again!

But he hasn't. Jonathan Trout, maddeningly, is in the water before him.

Why should he come barging over to this exact spot? Stanley gave a kick, a lunge and struck out swimming overarm.

When Robert, “The Man Without a Temperament,” gets away from his invalid wife Jinnie, he also uses the opportunity to put in an hour's fast walking, and remembers earlier walks.

...walking swiftly ...By Jove! He had to hurry...over the gate, across a field, over a stile, into the lane, swinging along in the drifting rain and dusk.
So it seems that sport or hard physical exercise is something that by-Jove pa-men do, chest-thumpingly self-congratulatory and trivially competitive, to the puzzlement of their sedentary thoughtful wives. It is a reading that pleased feminist critics and readers of the 1980s.

Except that Mansfield is worth reading because she of all writers is never that simple, and never that banally partisan. We should look a little closer.

As a teenager at least, she had been equally comic-satiric about sporty women. There's a very funny Journals scene set at a “lecture on Physical Culture by Miss Mickle,” where the hall is full of “women with great tall gaunt-looking figures, and all angles.”

More important, what I have called bipolarity in Mansfield's accounts of her own conduct and creative process also enters the stories. The contrast recurs in several different forms, and deepens the stories and our response. When the chest-slapping Prelude passage is read carefully, we understand that it is Linda who in effect has taken over the narrative viewpoint and voice, and who is resenting and mocking Stanley's “amazing vigour.” Linda – who is introduced to us at the beginning of the story as feeble, fatigued, self-pitying and inert: “She could not possibly have held a lump of a child on her lap for any distance,” and whose voice is “trembling with fatigue and excitement.”

Linda spends her life in both stories in a state of “fatigue” - the word recurs – and an enervated inactivity that is implicitly mocked as much as Stanley's “Men's Health” magazine hyper-activity. Linda retreats from him at bedtime “as if into a deep well.” (Has anyone commented on how extraordinary it is for a young female writer to record so astutely the sex life of her parents?) And in the morning when Stanley does his exercises, “she lay in the tumbled bed and watched him as if from clouds.” Deep or high, Linda is never on the earth, level with him.

The distance between them in the marriage is not all Stanley's fault. It's Stanley who seeks the sunlight, positioning himself in the centre of its square, while Linda lingers negatively in the shaded bed. At Day's Bay, she is of course still in bed while he's out generating all those verbs of motion - "flung," "cleared," "rushed," "staggered," "raced." It's he who is "exulting" in the opportunities that being at the bay provides. Linda spends her at the bay time in a hammock, suspended, detached from the earth and from any sense of place, escaping responsibility and the need for action.

The key Linda sentence (in “At the Bay”) is “She did nothing.”

Jinnie in “The Man Without a Temperament” is an invalid, compelled to do nothing, though Robert remembers how she used to “fly lightly lightly down the stairs” (like Bertha in “Bliss”) to give money to the carol singers. The contrast is there again, this time between Jinnie's active past and inactive present, as well as between her and Robert in the present.

More than once, Mansfield makes fine fiction from the situation of the invalid and the care-giver, and by no means focuses blame for any lack of empathy on the active one. Jinnie sends Robert running about to fetch her shawl, wakes him in the middle of the night to kill a mosquito, and when he returns from his walk, his only hour free from care duties and full-time availability for her, she reprimands him for being late.

“‘You're late,' she cried gaily, 'You're three minutes late.’ The “gaily” does not fool the reader, though it disarms Robert, as it is calculated to do. We understand that Jinnie may be inactive, but she is unremittingly manipulative, jerking Robert's chain until his only way to survive is to be bland, without feeling or desire or whim of his own; to be “a man without a temperament.”


The bipolarity I am exploring - energy against enervation - seems when it's divided like this between the genders to suggest at least a more sympathetic and interesting reading than the one that saw Mansfield's presentation of these marriages as feminist propaganda about obtuse physical men repressing suffering sensitive women.

A brief loop in my course will bring me to “Bliss.”

There's a longer literary tradition behind this metaphor of energetic movement. In my book Running in Literature (2003) I identified a recurrent association of running or energetic walking with the moral positive, with sunlight and air, engagement with life, generous action set against selfish inaction. Think of Dorothea Brooke Casaubon striding about the fields around Middlemarch trying to find people to help, while Rosamond Vincy Lydgate stays indoors preening herself in the mirror. Running as a moral positive occurs in Homer, Pindar, St Paul, Marvell, Browning, Hardy, Kipling, Sorley, Stopnard, Malamud, and many more, and hard walking in Bunyan, Jane Austen, Wordsworth, Arnold, George Eliot, Kate Chopin, Thoreau, Stevenson, Burroughs, and again many more. As in this classic text:

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for not without dust and heat.

That's Milton, the great poet of Puritanism, which disapproved of sport, surprisingly associating hard foot racing with the “immortal garland” of virtue (in Areopagitica). So it's no more a surprise to find poor consumptive Mansfield associating energy and movement with virtue, in her case in the form of innocence, lovingness and generous intentions.

Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again.

In her innocent loving enthusiasm and sense of bliss, Bertha is in perpetual motion: “She ran upstairs to the nursery.” When the phone rings, “Down she flew.” She throws cushions on to the chairs and “jumped up from her chair and ran over to the piano.” When all this positive energy and leaping out of chairs is stifled, it is by Miss Fulton, of the heavy eyelids and the sleepy voice and sleepy smile, the slow-moving, insidious Miss Fulton who lives in taxis and is always late and who “sinks into the lowest deepest chair.” For a writer as conscious of the small details of her craft as Mansfield, the contrast is unmistakable. It's another variant on the activity/inactivity pattern that I have been finding, this time divided not between husband and wife but the innocent wife and her adulterous challenger.

The Little Governess is another innocent who does quite a bit of running: “She had to run to keep up with him” [the rude porter who seized her luggage], and after the former fairy grandfather now revealed as an old lecher forces a kiss on her, “she ran, ran down the street until she found a broad road with tram lines...”. But her running each time only takes her to another place of entrapment – the railway carriage with the old man, the tram that jingled through a whole world of old men with twitching knees, and the hotel room where the vindictive waiter has ensured she will find no escape, by sending away the employer who came to collect her.

In this story the little governess's bursts of running become metaphoric, expressive of the futile attempt of the vulnerable woman alone to escape entrapment and exploitation. Again, as with Bertha, brisk energetic movement has been associated with innocence and good intentions, and as with Bertha it is finally ineffective against malice and manipulation.
The bipolar pattern takes a different form again in “The Stranger.” The waiting husband Hammond is compulsorily in stasis, confined by waiting helplessly on the wharf until his wife is allowed to disembark. He prowls up and down until he sees Janey, when “like lightning he drew out his cigar case,” “strode up the gangway,” and from then on is all the time trying to get her to move, while she delays and drags and says “we can't go quite so fast.” Partly it's a comedy of delayed coitus, as Hammond spends the whole story trying to get his wife alone and near the bed, but it's also another sad commentary on marital disjunction: “When he embraced her she felt she would fly away.” Like Stanley and Linda, the two inhabit different elements; or perhaps are living at a different pace from each other (as in H.G. Wells's marvellous fantasy of a few years earlier, “The New Accelerator”).

“An Indiscreet Journey” is at first all quick movement - “I ran down the echoing stairs,” “I ran, ran in and out among the soldiers and up the high steps into the yellow-painted carriage” - and then becomes all stasis and confinement, ending in a windowless scullery, “full of pans of greasy water.” Its strange tonal structure exactly embodies that shift I have identified, changing from a period of intensely active motion to one of exhausted inertia. The first half is all hurry and excitement - “Why so fast, ma mignonne?” - hasty preparations, rushing for the train, flirting with the official, the train “swung out of the station,” quickly passing the countryside, the camps and the war cemeteries, brief mocking encounters with other travellers, outwitting the “Gods” at the war-zone border, the thrilling pursuit of her lover when they meet - “How fast he went...We seemed to dodge through a maze of policemen, and I could not keep up,” into the cab “and away we flew,” the instruction to “Jump out as soon as he stops,” “Out I flew and in at the door,” into the bedroom, “Down went the suitcase...I threw my passport up into the air.”

Then without transition or explanation, the strange discomforting second half is suddenly all dark static “noir” - confinement and inactivity, tired and wounded soldiers, streets of greasy mud, gloomy café interiors with “a suffocating smell,” petty squabbles, seeping gas-damaged eyes, watchful fear of the military police, and the final retreat into the “dark smelling scullery.”

It's a story that risks bathos and intentionally leaves the reader dissatisfied and a little bewildered. But in the light of this pattern of activity/inertia, it makes better artistic and biographical sense. Mansfield has adapted that habitual shift from (as she described it in the letter to Russell) the “strange delight” of happy energetic movement to “fits of despair, from “sweet” to “bitter ferment” and made it a metaphor for the war's dispiriting, debilitating, immobilising effect on the people whose lives are caught up in it.

Just one more story. Perhaps the most immobile characters of all Mansfield characters are the daughters of the late colonel – Constantia, of whom the first words are “Constantia lay like a statue,” and Josephine, who ends the story “staring at a big cloud where the sun had been.” They end simply “forgetting.” And we should not forget that the retrospective Colonel is or was equally immobile, another variant on Mansfield's own frustrating invalid state, and on the capacity of the invalid to manipulate and dominate. Still powerfully present to the sisters, he is now, of course, “late,” so permanently inactive. Even his thumping stick will never be heard again.

The contrast this time is between this statue-like immobility and the life they all once led in Ceylon, and the implied lives the sisters (and their father) might have had if their mother had not died. We are given only glimpses of that mobile world, as when the sisters amusingly imagine the mail-carrying runner there, “a black man in white drawers running through the pale fields for dear life, with a large brown-paper parcel in his hands.” (This is historically accurate, by the way, as India and Ceylon were among the last places in the world to still use running mail-carriers. See Kipling's delightful verse tribute to them, “The Overland Mail,” discussed in Running in Literature.)
Brought to England by their bereaved father, the sisters stayed on to care for him, eventually entrapped by the invalid's demands, static, allowed to move only when the barrel-organ played, and their father's stick thumped: “'Run, Con,' said Josephine, 'Run quickly. There's sixpence on the...’”

I won't labour it. All three are condemned to inertia, three lives effectively stopped in time at the moment the snake bit the young wife and mother and left the young husband with two small girls and his wife's photograph on the piano for 35 years. A superficial reading blames his tyranny for their victimisation. But when he blames his daughters for “having me buried,” it is not entirely unjust as a summary of his life. His responsibility for them has restricted him (a young man when his wife died) as much as he restricted them. Again, Mansfield can subtly suggest sympathies that subvert the obvious labels of oppressor and oppressed.

The story is masterpiece small tragedy of suppressed life, of the enforced inactivity that by 1920-21, when she wrote “Daughters of the Late Colonel,” Mansfield understood only too well.

From teenage on, right through to the time when she was finally completely invalid, Mansfield, it seems from that letter to Russell, experienced what I have called bipolar shifts between the “strange delight of hard walking” and “fits of despair” and inactivity. From those shifts she generated (by her own account) creative energy. She also, in the examples I've cited, transmuted the bipolarity into her stories in various forms of contrast. There is active husband/inactive wife; active youth curtailed by crippling illness; happy mobile bliss stifled by the sleepy calculating intruder; vulnerable woman seeking to run from a surrounding malice that always recaptures her; a high-spirited risk-taking international travel adventure brought down by wartime reality into a pokey bar and a dark-smelling scullery, a constrained world filled with smoke and fear.

Mansfield did not – and I can't forgive her for it – ever write about either rugby or marathons. She passed up wonderful opportunities to do both. The cough and the encroaching invalidism still dominate our image of her. Yet she was, to put it simply, considerably more active when opportunity offered than that invalid image permits, especially as a walker. Exercise and its reaction of tiredness seem to have helped her creativity, as it has done for other writers. And that contrast did enter her fiction, in several key stories, in the form of quite frequent use of movement, running and walking, often counterposed metaphorically with inertia and constraint.

It's not a key to the whole of Mansfield, but to become aware of it is to enhance your sympathetic understanding of the relationship between Stanley and Linda, or Robert and Jinnie, or the daughters and the colonel; it is to perceive an innovative form of metaphor in the situations of Bertha or the little governess, and of metaphoric structure in “An Indiscreet Journey.” To learn that physical movement was something that, in health and in sickness, Mansfield valued, aspired to, and transmuted into fiction is to understand the writer and her stories a little better.