

Len Richardson review of Jared Davidson, *Dead Letters: Censorship and Subversion in New Zealand 1914–1920*

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Jared Davidson's *Dead Letters* reproduces a range of private communications intercepted by the New Zealand state during and immediately after World War I and reconstructs, from often fragmentary evidence, the lives and social circumstances that inspired them. The blending of the particular lived experience with the realities of life in a society under stress enables Davidson to explore fissures and tensions buried within the fabric of early twentieth-century New Zealand society. Few questioned the increased policing that followed the outbreak of war. The greater surveillance of individuals and organisations seems, Davidson suggests, quoting Richard Hill, to have consolidated 'official portrayals of the policeman as servant of the public rather than agent of the state' and constables, daily charged with administering the law, as 'guardians of the civilised order'.¹ That the increased surveillance took shape within the framework of imperial defence arrangements and censorship came to be guided by a British military officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Gibbon, attests to New Zealand's colonial circumstance.

Davidson groups his letters to throw light upon this colonial reality and divides them into 2 broad themes: 'King and Country' and 'Spies, Sex, and Subversion'. The explication that accompanies each letter provides a means of exploring a slice of individual experience, the context in which it was lived and, where possible, its future course and connections. The opening letter, written by Marie Wetzel to her brother Hermann in Germany in 1916, reveals the personal dilemmas of an individual caught up in the web of wartime definitions of nationality and facing possible deportation. It was not possible, in present circumstances, Marie lamented, to 'both German and English be' (p. 72). Born in Germany in 1862, she came to New Zealand in 1900 after marriage in Sydney and 3 years in South Africa. She was attracted by New Zealand's reputation as a paradise for workers and the knowledge that her compatriots had been calling New Zealand home since the early 1840s and now comprised the largest immigrant family after the British. After more than

¹ Richard Hill, 'State Servants and Social Beings : The role of the New Zealand Police force in the Great War', in *New Zealand Society at War 1914–1918*, ed. Steven Loveridge (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016), 96.

a decade farming in the Palmerston North area, the family moved to Wellington where, like many working-class families, they eked out an existence by taking in boarders.

The outbreak of war made an already difficult existence more so. No fawning foreigner, Marie never disguised either her revolutionary socialism or her hatred of the British. The class war was one she was willing to fight and in doing so she moved in circles that ensured police attention. It was a world peopled by exotic, revolutionary spirits. Not the least of those introduced by Davidson is Sidney Huguenot Fournier d'Albe. A colourful descendent of French Huguenots, scion of an aristocratic Alsace family and of menacing mien: 'one empty eye socket, beaked nose, teeth like old piano keys and a voice to wake the dead'.² His imprisonment in 1917 for his role in protests against the War Regulations was as inevitable as was Marie's being watched and harassed by the authorities. Required to report regularly to police, she was choosy about when she did so. There is irony in the circumstances of her postwar departure from New Zealand and return to Germany. Officials, who during the war would gladly have been shot of her, now refused her request for assistance to leave. Now it seemed that because her husband was a naturalised Englishman, she could indeed both 'German and English be'.

If those of German nationality were obvious surveillance targets, the mix of nationalities who worked the nation's wharves came a close second. It was there as recently as 1913 that a major industrial disturbance occurred that precipitated a general strike and took New Zealand as close as it has ever come to a revolutionary moment. Thus, it was hardly surprising that the names of all foreigners working on the country's wharves were, from 1917, placed on a 'register as aliens'. In this environment, suspicions flourished within a widespread ignorance of Europeans rooted in New Zealand's remoteness. Drawing upon the experience of Even Christensen, a Norwegian waterside-worker from Dunedin, Davidson demonstrates just how repressive in practice such an environment might become. As a naturalised individual, Christensen came first to be declared a 'disaffected alien', subsequently had his naturalisation revoked and lost all the rights it bestowed. Such was the persistence of suspicions first generated in wartime that a decade later an attempt by his son, a New Zealander by birth, to have the now 69-year-old Even's naturalisation restored was rejected.

The letters written by 'True Sons of Ireland' such as those Tim Brosnan wrote to his sister, Margaret McCarthy, in Australia aroused a different but equally damaging set of suspicions. Tim, from County Kerry, and Mary Ellen ('Molly') Corbett, of Clare, reached New Zealand separately and there met and married in 1916. The couple became part of a small group of working-class Irish navvies

2 Eric Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse: A Memoir* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2011), 11.

moving around rural New Zealand looking for work. Outspoken in his support for Sinn Fein and the Republican cause, Brosnan was imprisoned for refusing to accept call-up for military service and subsequently lost all civil rights for a decade. His experience stands quietly in the shadow of activists such as Patrick Charles Webb, the Australian-Irish member of parliament for the Grey Valley coalfields, who endured the same fate and subsequently became a cabinet minister in New Zealand's first Labour Government. What we see in Brosnan's letters is one man's determined resolve to uphold the tenets of Irish nationalism as he saw them. Such deeply held convictions remained, as Davidson reveals, unknown even within his own family. His death from pneumonia at 47 years of age closed off his life before the reflections of old age revealed the memories of past struggles. In *Dead Letters*, Brosnan's experience is skilfully used to explore the variety of attitudes to events in Ireland that prevailed among New Zealand's Irish and ranged from those of loyal middle-class or 'lace-curtain Catholics' to those of Sinn Fein adherents. Brosnan's letter from prison to his sister in Queensland records a sense of having been caught across the Tasman and on the wrong side of history. The rejection of conscription in 2 separate referenda in Australia contrasts with its implementation in New Zealand without reference to the electorate. New Zealand Irish might thus, as Brosnan knew only too well, be conscripted to fight in an imperial war even as the King's troops enforced British dominion in Ireland.

'The Camp in the Bush' has been a place of refuge for a wide variety of people throughout New Zealand history. It was there that a variety of military defaulters sought to evade conscription. Proximity to a remote coalfield community was doubly useful. A bush-hideout, an assumed name, a certificate of exemption as a coalminer and a life of sorts was possible for a defaulter. Davidson reveals the exploits of a mercurial camp-dweller from the fringes of a coalmining community near Westport to capture something of the uncertain nature of life on the edge. Migration to-and-fro across the Tasman had long been a commonplace among coalminers as they responded to the realities of intermittent work, mine-closures and personal dilemmas. The introduction of conscription without plebiscite in New Zealand left those among them who were of military age liable for conscription. For those like Frank Burns (aka Frank Longman, aka Jack Hay), of less than straightforward circumstances, there was little choice but to hunker down in the bush and hope the law did not come knocking.

Spies were as readily imagined in wartime as aliens were fertile ground for rumour. Davidson illustrates both points by presenting a letter from Arthur Muravleff. Born in St Petersburg to a Russian father and French mother, he reached New Zealand, by way of Australia, in 1913. In his early 20s he attracted attention as he moved around New Zealand as an itinerant labourer given to spending considerable time producing copious notes and sketches allegedly for a book he planned to publish. When curious people, thinking he was French, tried to engage him in conversation they considered

his responses poor and asked authorities to investigate his identity. Interned in 1918, Arthur wrote to the Russian consul in Australia. By seeking the intervention of the post-revolutionary Russian Government he unwittingly compounded his problems. Those once disposed to look compassionately at his circumstances now preferred not to. Arthur's place in the tale of spies and spy catchers during World War I underlines the arbitrary and capriciousness of its operation as officials struggled to keep up with international politics.

Nowhere does Davidson demonstrate the tangled web of wartime surveillance more dramatically than in his account of Dr Hjelmar Danneville's travails. As she tended to her patients in pre-war Wellington, wearing male-style clothing and practising naturopathic and alternative medicine, she was an accepted figure in high society. There were whispers. She was a fraud, she was embezzling money from her female patients or, even worse in the eyes of some, she was a lesbian. Davidson recounts how it was that friends in high places did not save her from internment in 1917. In postwar New Zealand society she was never to regain her previous level of acceptance. Disillusioned, she sailed for San Francisco with companion Mary Bond in 1929.

The war rendered such questioning of the state and its relationship with capital as existed in New Zealand even more subversive. It is from the letters of individuals whose frequent and sometimes radical public utterances had attracted the interest of the police before the outbreak of war that Davidson demonstrates the long reach of the censor's arm. It is territory peopled by activists of many hues. Davidson embeds their letters in a nicely drawn discussion of the contrasting world views they represent. He traces a lineage that ranges from the doctrine of direct action in the workplace as a precursor of the general strike as propounded by the disciples of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to a small group of anarchists who wished to replace capitalism and the state with a social order based on cooperation. In a wartime society such ideological distinctions were of little interest to the guardians of the nation-state. Those who proclaimed them were summarily lumped together as promoters of chaos and disloyalty, natural companions of those who opposed the war and the military conscription needed to assemble the personnel to fight it. All were grist to the censor's mill.

Davidson ends his selection of letters with a glimpse of how the imperial censor envisaged his postwar surveillance duties. A new and potentially destabilising element had thrust itself into the international political arena in 1917 when the old order was overthrown in Russia. To publicly declare support for or interest in the Bolshevik experiment was, in New Zealand as elsewhere, an invitation to scrutiny. So too were the activities of unionists within the transport-related industries. Now bound together in the Alliance of Labour, they extended the One Big Union syndicalist goals of the pre-war 'Red Feds' and revived concerns within police circles of a repetition of the 1913 general strike. It was, Davidson demonstrates,

against this background and at a time when imperial sentiment was infused with a determination to protect a hard-won peace that the apparatus of state surveillance was professionalised. Talk of special branch operatives from within the police force soon came to pepper the conversations of radical activists and union officials. They were to do so until the nation's third major waterfront confrontation between capital and labour in 1951 stimulated the formation of the New Zealand Security Service in 1956. This impressive conclusion rounds out a finely and humanely drawn study that provides a deeper understanding of the genesis and operation of censorship and surveillance in New Zealand.

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