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An Artist in the Family

ANTHONY ALPERS'S biography of Katherine Mansfield, reviewed on page 8, will be read and discussed in many parts of the world. In New Zealand the discussion will be more personal than elsewhere, and perhaps more searching: for in studying that short and troubled life we are compelled to look at ourselves and at what we do for our artists. Katherine Mansfield was not allowed to be destitute when she went abroad to make her way in letters. She was never without a small allowance from her father: and she had at least one friend whose devotion was unfailing. Her difficulties, it may be said, were of her own making. She slipped into entanglements, and behaved badly when she was in them, especially in her treatment of the unfortunate first husband. More than once, emotional stability might have saved her. But if she had been different she would not have been Katherine Mansfield.

At the end of Mr. Alpers's book we are left with the old questions. How far can artists be helped? Is it not true that their best work comes out of suffering? And are they so constituted that, if suffering is not thrust upon them, they will extract it from their own perverseness? Katherine could never have been easy to live with, even before her health collapsed. Mr. Alpers shows with much insight the connections between her creative rhythms and personal relationships. The tensions rose to flash-point, and afterwards peace came briefly through writing. Yet beyond the recurring crises was a larger movement of her mind from mere cleverness to understanding and pity. The later stories suggest that Katherine was growing up, and that she died too soon. She was a true artist: her need of self-expression would not have disappeared if she had been spared poverty and illness. A larger allowance might not always have saved her, but her struggles were harder

than they would have been if she had been better understood at home.

Katherine's father was a wealthy businessman whose lack of sympathy with his daughter's outlook was wide enough to be antipathy. In this, however, he was a strictly representative New Zealander of his own generation; and it is as such that he should be judged—if, indeed, he should be judged at all. Katherine is the supreme example of the colonial writer whose needs and aims could not be understood in her own country. The life she wanted, and the work she longed to do, were out of her reach in New Zealand. Her best writing was to come from her childhood in Wellington, but it had to be distilled from experience in another environment; and we can be sure that if she had stayed at home "The Garden Party" and "At the Bay" would never have been written.

The situation of a young writer is now not quite the same. There are more people in New Zealand; the emptiness which Katherine could transcend only by looking back to it from Europe is less daunting. A small literature, in which new writers can find support and influence, has taken root and is growing stubbornly. The journey to London may still be a necessary part of the training, but we now expect our writers to do their best work at home. And they, in turn, are looking for encouragement. The artist is a nonconformist, a man who sees and thinks differently, and whose vision may be a threat to public complacency. Often, too, he is a prickly and unreasonable person, not easy to get on with. Yet without him the nation has no future. The story of Katherine Mansfield and her father symbolises in a poignant and dramatic way the situation of all writers in New Zealand. Inadequate help and belated recognition are by no means confined to this country; but here, where the family is smaller, we have a sharper obligation to find the artist his place and opportunity.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 21, 1954.