

THREE VON TEMPSKY LETTERS

Gustavus Ferdinand von Tempsky has become one of New Zealand's few folk heroes; his name conjures up a vision of a man with black curls, open-necked shirt, trousers tucked into knee-length boots, a revolver in his belt and a curved sword held high, dashing courageously into action. Apart from the glamour which he injected into it, von Tempsky made a notable impact on the history of New Zealand during his short career. The tactics, based on his South American experience, which he introduced to the field and the self-reliance and independence with which he conducted his campaigns are recognised as having had a vital influence in developing and directing the quality and effectiveness of the Colonial Defence Force. Increasingly, too, his artistic legacy is being appreciated and acknowledged. His watercolours with their strength of colour and vigorous design have a compelling immediacy and are of no small historical interest as unique records of incidents in the wars of the 1860s.

It was with some delight, therefore, that two previously unrecorded letters were found in an autograph book belonging to Walter Mantell. Dated June and October 1867, they fit together with another already held of August the same year and record the difficulties which he was experiencing at a time when (according to standard biographical sources) his life was a picture of domestic bliss.

In 1866 the Forest Rangers had been abruptly disbanded and von Tempsky had returned to Auckland where he apparently relaxed with his family. Free from the constant anxieties of the wars he could give practical expression to his appreciation of the beauties of nature by tending his garden, indulge his love of music and work up from his sketches a series of watercolours depicting scenes from the wars.

The letters printed below not only present a more realistic view of this period but also a rare expression of his artistic intention.

Auckland June 29 [18]67

My dear Mantell

I send this mail some pictures relating to Maori subjects to Wellington. Sir George Grey has kindly offered to see them raffled for me, and R. Pharazyn will do the work of arranging the raffle for me. Could I ask you to give me a lift in this matter?—I have studied Maori nature under a pictorial aspect and have done my best with the limited artistic practice I possess to give an exposition of my ideas on the subject, sufficiently true to nature to be recognisable and sufficiently idealized to suit artistic purposes. If my exposition therefor does not