

# ‘not too calm’

— a preview of the selected letters of John M Thomson and Frederick Page

BY **MARTIN LODGE**

**A**T THE TIME of his death in September 1999, music historian John Mansfield Thomson left a number of projects unfinished. One of these projects was an autobiography. In the course of my duties as executor of his literary estate, I subsequently discovered the beginnings of autobiographical writing on John’s computer hard drive, and it was possible to include these fragments in the 2003 book *John Mansfield Thomson: Notes towards a biography*<sup>1</sup>.

Another unfinished project of Thomson’s was an edited collection of letters exchanged with Frederick Page. Over a period of twenty five years the two friends maintained a lively correspondence. The letters exchanged between 1959 and 1984 were written respectively in London, where Thomson worked in music books publishing and editing, and in Wellington, where Page led the creation of a new Music Department at Victoria University. Both Thomson and Page were gifted writers, and the correspondence is full of vitality, wit and acute observation. Its historical value lies in the simultaneous, complementary perspectives provided of musical life, literature, visual arts, food and wine, people, and cultural atmosphere in European and New Zealand milieus. Figures encountered in the correspondence range from Percy Grainger to Winifred Wagner to Benjamin Britten, but of special interest are the insights to be gained into the developing musical life of New Zealand in the 1960s and 70s. Thomson’s urbane perceptions and Page’s opinionated views weave an engaging counterpoint around more official versions of the country’s cultural history.

The ‘selected letters’ collection covers the whole period of their correspondence, ending with Page’s death in 1983. At present the material is in an unfinished condition, remaining as Thomson had selected and partly edited it when fate overtook him in 1999. As such the collection is not ready for publication, but requires a fair amount of further editorial work. Together the selected letters total about 160 pages of typescript, including numerous footnotes finished or begun by Thomson. These notes provide information on people referred to in the letters, contextual background to some observations and sometimes explanations of particular circumstances or outcomes of topics under discussion in the correspondence.

John Mansfield Thomson was born in Blenheim in 1926, but at the age of 10 was sent to Nelson College as a boarder. While he was there, both his parents died within a few years of each other. This early separation from parents and family, and subsequent isolation as an orphan, seem to have had formative effects on his personality, revealing both an ‘ability to find strength to overcome adversity’ as his younger sister Janet puts it, and a determination to nurture communication with friends and family despite separation. When this attitude was mixed with his gifts as a writer in adult years, the results included a mine of wonderfully interesting and expressive letters. Thomson maintained a voluminous correspondence with many people, and such exchanges were not superficial. He was a man of letters of the old school.

After military service in the Fleet Air Arm in the last years of World War II, Thomson took a BA in English and



John Thomson in 1990. Photo by David Lewis

History at Victoria University of Wellington, and also began his editorial activities. An astute judge of gifted writing from the very outset, one of the first authors he published was Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, who remained a lifelong friend.

From the 1950s to mid 80s Thomson lived mainly in London, working as an editor of music journals and books. He founded the pioneering quarterly *Early Music* for Oxford University Press, and edited Charles Rosen's influential book *The Classical Style* for Faber, amongst other achievements. Returning to New Zealand in 1984, he continued to work on numerous projects until his death.

Frederick Page was Thomson's senior by over 20 years. He was born in Lyttleton in 1905, and grew up there. He took a MusB degree at Canterbury University College then spent a couple of years undertaking further study in London in the 1930s with figures such as Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob. In 1946, at the age of 40, he became the first lecturer in music at Victoria University of Wellington, and professor in 1957 until his retirement in 1971. From then until he died in 1983 Page continued to write, broadcast, perform, pontificate and provoke in musical matters as a cultural *agent provocateur*.

The first letter of the Thomson-Page correspondence dates from 25 June 1959, when Thomson was living in Sydney, working at his book on Alfred Hill<sup>2</sup>. Understandably for a first contact, it begins rather formally:

Dear Professor Page,

I have been intending to write to you for some time and when I found the enclosed picture of Percy Grainger climbing the rigging of a sailing ship it immediately reminded me of your encounter with him.

I hope Wellington is not too calm after Europe. I read with great interest the account in *Landfall* and showed it to Alfred Hill who said he would like very much to meet you. I think he must suffer from an inferiority complex because he said 'I wonder why I didn't meet him when I was in Wellington... I suppose he thought I wasn't good enough'.

The bulk of this quite long letter outlines some vexing issues concerning the Alfred Hill book, about which Thomson was seeking Page's professional opinion:

I find that I can not write the normal kind of biography because the subject's personality does not lend itself to that kind of treatment. I have tried to do a social history of music, giving the narrative some unity by linking it to Alfred's life. This is not altogether satisfactory. The difficulty is that in this kind of work I can not be critical of the music, nor unduly so of the man, and I find that although much of the music is enjoyable, fresh and very good of its kind, that also it is permeated at times by something which is the essence of Victorian sentimentality. The lyrics for *Hinemoa* are a good example... To ignore these aspects of his music (and personality) is to throw the study out of alignment and I am rather puzzled as to what I should do. He is extremely sensitive to criticism and I feel that working alone in this environment has helped to build up this attitude. I do not think he has ever received adequate criticism since the days he left Leipzig.

Page replied a month later, and immediately adopted his characteristically informal tone—lively and conversational, but also direct:

Dear John,

You must write your Alfred Hill book as you think best. I would say go ahead and write it, criticism and all, and if he collapses and dies immediately after reading it, that would be unfortunate. Douglas [Lilburn] and I went to hear his *Hinemoa*, made a point of going to see him afterwards, and he, with great charm, and modesty, said to us: 'Now you two young men, that music is not for you'.

He should be thrilled that a book on him is being done, (and probably he is thrilled) and I don't think you should emasculate your work.

As it would turn out, these two issues—the quietness of New Zealand after Europe and the hypersensitivity of New Zealanders to criticism—recur throughout the correspondence.

After this initial exchange in 1959, there is a gap of nine years in the correspondence as edited by Thomson. Until more detailed editorial work is done, this lacuna cannot readily be explained. A search of the collected papers of both parties in the Turnbull Library eventually may turn up relevant new material.

The next item in the draft collection is a letter from Thomson to Page dated 10 May 1968, by which time

Thomson was well established in London and working as a music books editor for Faber and Faber. This is a typically entertaining epistle, and representative of the vein of the correspondence as it was to continue. Acid comments on contemporary figures in composition, performance and musicology are matched by reports of the activities of expatriate New Zealanders, of whom Thomson had an extraordinarily wide circle. At this time Thomson was editing *As I remember*, the memoirs of Arthur Bliss, working in collaboration with the composer himself.

From this time on, Thomson arranged for numerous newly published books to be sent to Page, many of which Page reviewed or mentioned in his columns in the *New Zealand Listener*, to which he contributed for several years. This particular letter of Thomson's from 1968, for example, refers to *Anton Webern: An Introduction to his works* by Walter Kolneder, *The Monteverdi Companion* by Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune, *Russian and Slavonic Music* by Gerald Abraham, Stanley Sadie's book on Handel, *Renaissance and Baroque Music* by Friedrich Blume, and a new edition of George Perle's book *Serial Composition and Atonality*.

It seems that Page had literary aspirations beyond journalism, because a postscript to a Thomson letter from November 1968 refers to the manuscript of a book on Percy Grainger which Page was proposing to write. Apparently he went so far as to submit a draft chapter to Donald Mitchell at Faber, but, in Thomson's words: 'Freddy's rather idiosyncratic style did not endear itself to Donald, so the project languished.' The manuscript is now with the Page papers in the Turnbull.

When the selected letters are published in full, readers will have the pleasure of a chronological arrangement which will enable one to trace the development of several interesting threads over time, not to mention revealing the unfolding lives of both writers. In the meantime, it is interesting to sample some of the issues which arise in the correspondence.

In a letter dated 12 February 1979, Page gives an update of recent comings and goings in Wellington, books being read, and a summary of his health. He then goes on to observe:

Janet [Paul] brought Hone Tuwhare (1922) to dinner the other night and we had one of those convivial meetings that can happen every now and again ...

Glynn Adams<sup>3</sup> has left Auckland for Adelaide; the University Music Departments throughout the country seem to be at sixes and sevens, not with each other, but within themselves. It's as though their centres cannot hold. They all complain about lack of funds: but I ran a Department on £50 per annum ...

## Frederick Page



A MUSICIAN'S JOURNAL

Edited and Arranged by

J. M. THOMSON & JANET PAUL

Dust jacket of *A Musician's Journal*, featuring a painting of Frederick Page by his wife Evelyn

Thomson had more immediate but equally strongly held views about the politics of the publishing world, in which he had been immersed for decades. Having created the acclaimed journal *Early Music* for Oxford, in 1982 he writes:

The biggest enemy of *Early Music* has been Oxford University Press.

In 1982 we read of Page encouraging Thomson to apply for the vacant editorship of the *New Zealand Listener*.

In the Thomson letters there are many colourful reports of concerts, incidents, personalities and feuds in London musical circles, including this one dated 16 December 1968:

Don't believe anything you read about the new Maxwell Davies piece on Vesalius and Stations of the Cross [*Vesalii icones*] for male dancer and instrumental ensemble... our chief entertainment came from other members of the audience and from watching the handsome negro dancer, nude bar a transparent G-string, included because of GLC regulations. Man in front had binoculars. Donald [Mitchell] muttered 'balls' at regular intervals and went off in a fury of boredom. Cynthia Nolan (the Australian painter's wife) said how sorry she was for Max Davies and this is the thing... how he'll get out of the predicament he's in. I don't know... this is an agonising path he's on, not artistically communicative.



Part of an aerogramme from John Thomson to Evelyn Page  
14 December 1981

Page's views on New Zealand music generally did not find much favour with New Zealand composers at the time, particularly the opinions and judgments expressed during his years of retirement when he wrote columns for *The Listener*. His prominent Eurocentrism is understandable given the times and his background, but his rather narrow, historicist view of contemporary music was a limitation.

He would only acknowledge canonical composers, and what he regarded as the canon was the European avant-garde, largely as moulded by Boulez and Stockhausen. It seems that although he could come to terms with various postmodern developments in literature, a similar breadth of appreciation was difficult to extend in music. He also had a fondness for celebrities in music, such as Boulez. The shape of his musical canon is revealed in a note from May 1981, where a litmus test is formed of four key names and applied to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* when it first appeared on the shelves of the Wellington Public Library:

I immediately looked up Schoenberg, Debussy, Delius, Lilburn (in that order)... The Schoenberg and Debussy articles are splendid: the Delius fair and you've done a wonderful job on Douglas. My congratulations; mind you, there is an air about it of 'for New Zealand readers only', but it is admirable.

His broad views of contemporary music are nicely summarised in a letter of January 1981, which begins with a familiar Page litany of Great Names:

About contemporary music: I think we are having access to one of the great periods: Boulez, Takemitsu, Xenakis, Feldman, Carter, Tippett. I could extend the list. The performers are greedy and stupid: they will play new music only if it suits their book: they don't want to know about the quality of the music put in front of them. (True too of that London Consort set-up). There's a lot of silly music around but an Arts Council's business is to sort that out. Will you invite me over? ... I'm all for our composers having a hearing but dull and bad works must be allowed to disappear. I'm serious about the Arts Council's function.

The idea Page expresses of an Arts Council as the great arbiter of musical progress and taste is interesting but perhaps not appealing. History is littered with examples of official and supposedly informed misjudgments of new works. The idea of a government funded body threshing and winnowing new music, as he seems to propose, was, we may recall, exactly executed by the cultural commissars in Stalinist Russia, with a spectacular lack of artistic success.

Apart from a few positive remarks on new works by Lilburn, and a handful of others, Page's tone concerning contemporary New Zealand work is usually vaguely negative and arch. The guard slips a little when he writes of

accepting the CANZ Citation for Services to New Zealand Music in 1980:

Oh boy: I'm to have a CANZ citation for services to music. I may even be asked to play! At their annual conference I raised the question of Dick Hoffmann. Was he a New Zealand composer through residence here for 12 years or not? Consternation. Who was this outsider of whom no-one had ever heard ...?<sup>4</sup>

This rather grating, patronising tone mercifully doesn't appear too often in the correspondence overall. And Page later waxes lyrical about the television crews and hoopla associated with his being presented with the CANZ award.

There are several mentions of Douglas Lilburn, including admiration for some of the works, such as the Brass Quartet first heard in 1981. The prickly personal relationship between them is hinted at in a few sentences like this one, from January 1982:

Douglas came to lunch on New Year's day; I called on him, got a bearish reception, delivered my invitation, fled, and he came.

A sentiment often repeated in the letters of Page is a delight in the natural environment of New Zealand but revulsion at the cultural climate, which he found stagnant. In November 1978 he wrote:

New Zealand is a backwater. The only solution is mine, to come over [to Europe] when one can. Three letters in the *Listener* while I'm away; my offence being to stir the waters of their pond.

Four years later this view was spelled out more explicitly:

Kenneth Clark's new book, *Moments of Vision*, drags a bit, but it has a stunning chapter on provincialism which has significance for us out on the periphery. He remarks that Samuel Palmer went to Shoreham—then as remote as Kashmir is now—painted well for ten years, then lost his vision. Clark's thesis is that if you bury yourself then this will happen...

Page apparently dreaded such a fate, and spent a great deal of effort and creativity ensuring he did not become buried alive in New Zealand which was on the periphery, as he saw it, of civilisation.

Thomson tended to agree. In November 1981 he wrote from London:

Entropy is the great peril of NZ life isn't it? I suppose in a way this is what I have to write about in my history.

Thomson was referring here to the *Oxford History of NZ Music* on which he laboured for many years<sup>5</sup>, and which finally emerged in a shape which neither he nor many oth-

ers thought entirely satisfactory, due not least to a process of unsympathetic editing which the manuscript underwent. In the book, he actually does not address the wider question of cultural entropy nor explore very far the effects on artists of working at what some saw as the cultural or geographical periphery.

One of the main problems, of course, is simply the very small number of people in New Zealand who are both able and willing to engage in a lively intellectual debate, especially about music. Another is that New Zealanders tend to be thin skinned and to take all argument personally. Thomson himself had such a tendency, and there's a snappy little interchange in the letters concerning Page's review of Thomson's *A distant music: the life and times of Alfred Hill*, in May 1982.

Thomson:

Whatever got into you with your *Listener* review of *A Distant Music*? It seems so unlike you—slapdash, inaccurate and ungenerous.

Page in response:

I stand rebuked.

That's as far as the debate got. Similarly, whenever criticism of Page's *Listener* columns was published, usually as letters to the editor, Page dismissed these as merely expressions of discomfort from those whose stagnant pond he had stirred. Would he really have been willing to follow words with deeds and engage in a sustained public debate on a musical issue?

The letters reveal that Thomson and Page shared a broad political sympathy which could be called liberal democratic. Both deplored the philistine and divisive effects Prime Minister Robert Muldoon's leadership was having on the country. His re-election in 1981 prompted Eve Page, the painter wife of Frederick, to write:

We are all fearfully disappointed with the election results. That horrible man [Muldoon] is polluting the atmosphere. I could almost become an assassin where he is concerned.

For his part Thomson believed the Springbok tour of 1981 would have long-lasting negative effects and demonstrated against the tour in London.

Thomson's character, in which aesthetic and social sensibility, appreciation of order, beauty and colour combined with a concern for social justice, emerges clearly in a letter expressing admiration of the French painter Pissarro. Writing to Eve Page in November 1980 about Pissarro, it may be inferred that to some extent he is also writing about himself:

The exhibition is a winner, just the right size and so atmospheric; gentle colours, very peaceful and orderly, so it is a surprise to find that Pissarro was *very* political, a radicalist, a reader of Marx most probably, and involved with a series of engravings of extreme social protest. In a way, I suppose the conviction of the landscapes comes from a deep sense of values, which the social conditions of the time outrage.

A thread woven throughout the correspondence is adventures in the world of wine. The exultation of drinking a good wine is recorded: 'the bouquet of a Penfold Bin 95 was so lovely I could barely bring myself to drink it', says Page. The belated development of New Zealand wines is charted through the letters. In 1979 Page reports to the Thomson, a formidable wine connoisseur:

The Blenheim Montana white is the first New Zealand white I have been able to drink. On these summer days it is delectable.

Just two years later he writes:

I made some awful mistakes lately with German hock: Johannisberger [Gelblack], horrid amber colour, tasted like caramels... Apparently we are exporting a lot of wine to Germany these days. I can well believe it.

And the last line of the final letter written by Page to Thomson is on the same topic:

*Music Analysis* [the Blackwell periodical] is now in University Library.

The new Janet Frame *To the Is-land*, is excellent: I'm keeping a copy for you. Julian Bream played like one of God's chosen last week. I was quite shaken by his playing.

*Jacob's Creek* \$5.95 a bottle: surely a possible price?

Love, Freddie



Frederick Page's last letter to John Thomson, 6 May 1983

After Page's death, Thomson worked with Janet Paul to collate various reminiscences and interviews and formed them into an autobiographical volume for his late friend. The book *Frederick Page: A musician's journal* appeared in 1986. When offering Page some editorial advice about the manuscript as far as it had been written by Page while he was still alive, Thomson had recommended reworking the reflective chapters to make the planned autobiography as a whole flow. To break the flow would be fatal. This is what goes wrong in Patrick White's autobiography, he suggested, when the travel sections are added into it:

The temperature goes down. Autobiography means that it must all be subsumed by the actual moment of writing, the Now – that the past is re-focused and reinterpreted. From this, the genre gets its compulsion.

[Thomson letter to Page, April 1982]

Previewing this collection of selected letters, one is reminded of that advice. To some extent the letters appear to have been written for eventual publication. Overall, the register of the correspondence—on both sides—is at once conversational and immediate but also literate. In the letters one senses a concern from both Thomson and Page that their views on the arts, society and manners of the times be captured for the future. The correspondence provided a forum for lively informal discussion and exchange, but the act of writing—and it was all manually typed or handwritten on paper—slowed the process down and created a mental space for thoughts to be organized, much more so than can happen in the ebb and flow of verbal discussion. So the correspondence forms a part of the Western tradition of letters.

But for all the interest in what is said in the letters, what is not said is revealing too. In particular, there is nothing negative written about personal or emotional matters. Nothing is revealed at all of the interior or psychological lives of the writers. Physical health, on the other hand, is frequently discussed in detail. In his autobiographical fragments Thomson refers to a serious depressive episode which had him committed to a British hospital quite early in his adult life. Depression plagued him from then on, but this is never touched on in the letters. Neither is the sexuality of either Thomson or Page mentioned at all, despite the complexities of that area. In fact one gains the impression that all the letters were written with quite a clear-eyed view towards posterity and an expectation that they would enter the public domain at some point. And this is the how we should approach them as readers, expecting not

autobiographical revelation, but refined and playful public statement.<sup>6</sup> ■

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## NOTES

- 1 Clark, Margaret, with Jim Collinge and Martin Lodge (eds). *John Mansfield Thomson: Notes towards a biography* (Steele Roberts, Wellington, 2003)
- 2 Thomson, John M.. *A Distant Music: The Life and Times of Alfred Hill* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1980)
- 3 Glynne Adams, former principal viola player with the NZSO and member of the Malcolm Latchem string quartet
- 4 Richard Hoffmann (b.1925) was a composer and musicologist who came to New Zealand with his parents from Austria in 1935. He continued his musical studies at Auckland University College 1942-45. His family was connected with Arnold Schoenberg with whom he studied, later becoming his assistant and editor of his collected works.
- 5 Thomson, John M.. *The Oxford history of New Zealand music* (Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1991)
- 6 The author intends to edit the correspondence for publication in future.