

“I Am Very Sincerely Yours”

Elizabeth Popham, ed. *A.M. Klein: The Letters*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. xxxiii + 514pp.

A.M. Klein: The Letters is the culmination of a decades-long academic endeavour. “With this selection of his letters,” Elizabeth Popham writes in her introduction to the volume, “the A.M. Klein Research and Publication Project completes the process of restoring Klein’s public voice” (viii). As a volume that contributes to this effort, *A.M. Klein: The Letters* does not offer wide-ranging insight into literary Canada in the way that Sam Solecki’s *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy* (2004), *Imagining Canadian Literature: The Selected Letters of Jack McClelland* (2002), or Andy Wainwright’s *A Very Large Soul: Selected Letters from Margaret Laurence to Canadian Writers* (1995) have done. Instead, readers can expect a more focused collection that is thoroughly attentive to Klein’s personal and professional life. There is much to praise about Popham’s final product: the precision with which she has edited and selected the letters, her comprehensive editorial and textual notes, the aesthetically pleasing appearance of the volume itself, and, of course, her captivating portrayal of Klein. Her book will be immediately recognized as an essential research tool for Klein scholars and, although to a lesser degree, for academics interested in the development of mid-century Montreal literary culture.

Popham’s introduction nicely summarizes the goals and achievements of the A.M. Klein Research and Publication Project and clarifies the place of this publication in the larger context of Klein scholarship. This text, Popham explains, represents a “core element” of this project because it “reflect[s] [Klein’s] ambitions, his strategies and work habits, his frustrations and his accomplishments. [The letters] also record the tragic loss of his distinctive voice” (xx). Framing these letters for her audience, Popham helpfully observes “gaps” in the collection (ix): letters to family members are absent because of access restrictions (x), and documents concerning Klein’s professional life as a lawyer, journalist, editor, politician, speechwriter, and teacher “are not significantly represented in this volume” (ix)—many such letters are “confidential” and risk “disrupt[ing]” the “narrative of a literary life” that Popham seeks to illuminate (x). Even still, the volume provides plenty of insight into Klein’s professional life via letters to Samuel Bronfman, the Department of External Affairs, and the Bar Association of Montreal.

Above all else, Popham's volume presents an intricate narrative of Klein the writer, and even the introductory letters reveal a literary figure different from the one most readers might expect. Klein's famous refusal to change one line of a sonnet, for example, has fostered a widely accepted myth of his creative inflexibility; the event even comprised a scene in *Haunted House*, the 2009 play about the poet's life. Klein takes issue with the myth in a letter to Leon Edel: "I saw the article which you contributed to the McGill paper concerning the early history of the *Fortnightly Review*. I may say that the story concerning myself is only half complete. Obdurate though I was during my freshman year in refusing to change, at the advice of Messrs. Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith, the last line of my sonnet, I did eventually come around to their viewpoint" (20). In this regard, numerous letters attest to Klein's gentlemanly openness to and appreciation of editorial suggestions. To Harriet Monroe (editor of *Poetry* in Chicago) he writes, "In answer to your inquiry whether I would be willing to have you accept my 'Sequence of Songs' with the corrections and omissions you suggest, I may say that, like Barkis, I am willing" (3). Likewise, he writes to Dr. Isaac Husik (editor of the *Jewish Publication Society*), "I shall of course, be pleased to hear from you, as to any suggestions you may have concerning deletions, exclusions, inclusions, sequence, etc." (9). These letters signal early on Popham's aim to correct misconceptions about and shed light on the personhood of one of the most enigmatic figures in Canadian literature.

Of course, Popham's collection yields far more than just insight into Klein's editorial practices; his defenses of his own work are engrossing. And, as a Jewish writer, Klein often appears on the defensive. Responding to Samuel Charney's claim that Klein's poetry "pre-supposes on the part of the reader a knowledge of the Hebrew tradition," Klein retorts, "In English literature references to a so-called alien culture is not a novelty. Milton's *Paradise Lost* pre-supposes great Biblical knowledge. [...] large tracts of English poetry assume on the part of the reader an intimate knowledge of Greek mythology" (35). In several letters, Klein appears frustrated by such resistance to a modern Jewish literature. He vehemently harangues Leo Kennedy, for instance, who strenuously objected to Klein's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and views on "the rights of Jews in Communist Russia" (341). In other letters, readers find Klein contending with critics who overlay his religious heritage; writing to A.J.M. Smith, Klein says he hopes E.K. Brown "impresses [the Guggenheim people] with more than the fact that I am a Jew" (85). He seemed stung, too, by Knopf's editors, who suggested in 1951 that Klein put the Star of David on the cover of *The*

Second Scroll: “I do not wish at this stage to appear difficult, but everything has gone so wonderfully up to now that I would not like to be made unhappy by this badge” (209)—Klein’s sombre allusion to badges worn by Jews during the Holocaust illustrates his discomfort. With the exception of his exchanges with Kennedy, Klein tends to handle such issues gracefully. He sounds eager to educate his correspondents, rather than censure them.

Some of Popham’s inclusions, however, show that Klein was not always so evenly tempered. The poet could be surprisingly acerbic toward critics and reviewers. After reading Allen Lesser’s negative review of *Hath Not a Jew*, Klein wrote to the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, “The book has received so many favorable reviews from literate persons, that an alphabetic stutterer, adds a note not entirely unwelcome. It’s good for my immortal soul. Bad it is only for the stutterer. Its base intention leaves me unmoved; I know that when the *Record* reviews will be archives, it is I who will still be contemporary. As for Mr. Lesser, extend him my forgiveness; he knows not what he does, nor how to do it” (45). When compared with Klein’s other letters, this letter is amusingly anomalous in its unflinching, almost Laytonesque egotism.

Even if Klein sometimes adopted such attitudes, his faith in his writing was hardly unshakeable. Popham has done an excellent job of selecting letters that vividly illuminate Klein’s evolving views of his own talent and legacy. In his early letters, he speaks of his poetry with an earnestly religious air; frustrated by the delayed release of *Hath Not a Jew*, Klein complains to Joseph Frank that “the publisher stands, like life, between me and immortality” (14). Yet, less than a decade later, he would write to the editors at *Circle*, “we [as poets] delude ourselves for a sweet moment into believing that perhaps some importance is attached to our function” (125). And having heard that Alfred A. Knopf intended to issue another printing of *The Second Scroll* in 1952, Klein tellingly half-jokes, “you repeat your error a second time” (241). Such letters contribute to an obvious trajectory in the letters: the multiplying self-critical statements foretell Klein’s tragic withdrawal from public and literary life during the fifties.

In fact, much of what makes this collection cohere so well is its assortment of nuanced suggestions of Klein’s eventual silence. Many letters from the forties and fifties, for example, chronicle his numerous work-related voyages around the world. But whereas these documents are exceptionally brief (due presumably to Klein’s exhaustion), letters concerning Klein’s work on James Joyce’s *Ulysses* are exceptionally long. This correspondence discloses a disturbingly overzealous, even fanatical, mind: “What I want to do,” he writes to the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation

in 1948, “is to annotate [*Ulysses*], paragraph by paragraph. [...] [M]y commentary treats of every difficult phrase, every obscure allusion, every elusive thought-sequence” (167). Popham provides extensive insight into the evolution of this project, which Klein eventually had to abandon “because of other plans” involving work and near-constant travel (257). These letters prepare the reader for the despondency that haunts Klein’s later 1950s correspondence.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume Popham’s book lacks a more lighthearted perspective on Klein. Dozens of letters attest to his charisma, wit, and charm. Awaiting news from the Jewish Publication Society regarding *Poems* (1944), Klein sharply questions, “Is there anything new, or does your committee insist that the book be published posthumously?” (83). Or, as he explains the sestina form to the editor of *Kenyon Review*, he exclaims, “It is no wonder that Dante placed the inventor of the sestina, Arnaut Daniel—in hell!” (137). There are a surprising number of humorous moments in Popham’s volume: delightfully bad puns (Klein’s play, for instance, on the last name of his reviewer, Allan Lesser) and self-mockery: “I make life interesting for myself by making it dull for others,—I edit the *Judaeen*” (4).

Although Popham’s collection predominantly focuses on Klein himself, there is still some material here to attract scholars of Montreal literary culture generally. Several letters in particular address little magazine culture during the forties in Montreal and provide a welcome supplement to the literary historical scenes set by other critics like Dean Irvine, Ken Norris, or Brian Trehearne. A case in point: Klein’s criticisms of *Northern Review*, specifically the practices of its editor, John Sutherland, complement some of the spirited resignation letters in Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski’s anthology of literary historical documents, *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*. In Popham’s collection, Klein writes to Sutherland after the formation of *Northern Review* and bitterly tells him “to omit [the names of F.R. Scott, Neufville Shaw, Patrick Anderson, A.J.M. Smith, and himself] from the editorial masthead” (140). Such letters shed light on turbulent periods in Montreal little magazine culture, whereas other inclusions illuminate the golden years of what Klein calls the “literary ‘renaissance’ taking place” in Montreal during the forties (120). Having more letters like these could only have added to the value of this collection, but most readers will find what Popham includes sufficient.

In this regard, Popham has produced a work of stunning historical depth: approximately two hundred pages of endnotes constitute a literary history in and of themselves. Her textual notes document every editorial

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decision worthy of mention. Her explanatory notes are succinct, scrupulous, and in frequent dialogue with other Klein scholars such as Usher Caplan and Zailig Pollock. They also provide much-needed context for letters that are not only rich with intertexts and literary allusions, but also offer only one side of complicated debates and friendships. These are commendable features of a thoughtfully constructed work of literary history. But what casual readers will appreciate most is Popham's deft rendering of a troubled and complex literary figure. It would be difficult to think of a more fitting or skillfully executed conclusion to the Klein restoration project. In these letters, we have, finally, words from Klein himself that exhibit his humour, youthful confidence and later self-consciousness, despair, and tragic silence.

J.A. Weingarten