

Arthur Prior's 'memorial' letter of Ursula Bethell, 1945

Mike Grimshaw
University of Canterbury
michael.grimshaw@canterbury.ac.nz

Abstract

Providing contextualization for Arthur Prior's brief 'memorial contribution' of Ursula Bethell in a letter to Mary Prior (1945), this discussion considers why Prior was so cursory and nuanced in his recollection and evaluation.

Keywords: A.N. Prior, Ursula Bethell

1 Introduction

In March 1945, Arthur Prior, recently posted to Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides as an Air Force wireless mechanic¹ wrote a short letter² to

¹ While Prior had been a pacifist, he was reconsidering his position from 1941 and accepted his call up to the armed forces in January 1942, applying to the Royal New Zealand Airforce. As Copeland (2022) notes, his wife Clare seems to have continued in her pacifism and this move can be taken as part of a growing "philosophical and spiritual chasm" between them that was also signaled by Clare falling for Arthur's younger adopted cousin Norman Brailsford (Victor Roussin). As the marriage fell apart Arthur relocated to Christchurch and it was there, at an SCM conference that he met Mary Wilkson whom he married in October 1943. Arthur served as a wireless mechanic in the Airforce within New Zealand until he was posted to Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) in January 1945 where he served until October 1945.

² A short 4-page, hand written letter with each page officially headed ON ACTIVE SERVICE and subheaded NATIONAL PATRIOTIC FUND BOARD NEW ZEALAND. The letter was discovered by Peter Øhstrom, Martin Prior and David Jakobsen within the Anne Prior Collection of letters from 1943-1945.

his wife Mary, who was living in Dunedin³. The letter is his “contribution to the ‘memorial’ for Miss Bethell” (Prior 1945: 1). As discussed by Grimshaw (2018) Arthur Prior was one of the ‘young progressives’ (Whiteford 2005: 107) who were in regular correspondence with Ursula Bethell during the 1930s and 1940s.

From March 1936-July 1941 Arthur Prior wrote at least 32 letters to Bethell in which he discusses his theological and philosophical thought, his transition from formal theological study to philosophical study, his relationship with Clare Hunter whom he marries in August 1936, his travel with Clare to Europe and then to the United Kingdom in 1938, his journalistic work in England and Scotland, culminating in a final letter when he and Clare return to New Zealand and are living in Wellington in July 1941, just before they relocate to Dunedin. As well as the letters, Prior sent at least one handwritten ms of his theological thinking to Bethell (see Grimshaw 2019:221-223); the fragment that survives perhaps being part of “31 pages of theology” that Bethell, in a letter to Toss Woollaston (Whiteford 2005: 108) records being sent to her from Prior.

Prior’s correspondence with Bethell began when he was 21 and she was 61. There is no clear indication as to what gave rise to the correspondence but the first letter still in existence (13/3/1936) (Grimshaw 2018: 41-43) is not the start of correspondence but records correspondence already underway. In this letter it is clear Bethell and Prior were already sending books of theology back and forth to each other and that Bethell was interested in Prior’s ability to provide a ‘Barthian “angle”’ on points of theology. Prior’s theological-political mentor Lex Miller (working for the SCM in Christchurch) is recorded in this letter as a mutual contact and so it seems most possible that Prior and Bethell connected through SCM circles, perhaps in 1935. With the final letter in the Bethell-Prior correspondence being dated 1941, it could be presumed that this signaled the end of their epistolary relationship, but as this ‘memorial’ letter makes clear, this is not necessarily the case. Or, perhaps, while their epistolary relationship may have ended in 1941, this was not necessarily the end of their friendship.

³ Mary was living in a small (89sqm), weatherboard 2 bed-room cottage at 12 Balfour Street on the sunny side (such distinctions are important) of North East Valley in Dunedin. While the house is small it has a sizable garden (823sqm). The house is still standing and can be seen via: <https://www.propertyvalue.co.nz/otago/dunedin-city/north-east-valley-9010/12-balfour-street-north-east-valley-dunedin-9010-4170272> and <https://www.oneroof.co.nz/estimate/12-balfour-street-north-east-valley-dunedin-city-1039798>

2 Various views of Bethell

Ursula Bethell (1874-1945) occupied a very particular place in New Zealand literary and cultural history. As one of her many correspondents, the poet and editor Charles Brasch wrote of her in 1946 when seeking contributions to a memorial of Bethell for the journal *Landfall*:

Miss Bethell was a friend – & guide & philosopher – to so many of the young & aspiring in so many fields, & also to others not so young, that any future social historian of the period will be bound to regard her as an important figure whatever his opinion of her as a poet.

(Whiteford 2005, p.x)

Interestingly, although Prior was a lengthy correspondent of Bethell, knew Brasch⁴ and wrote for *Landfall*, he does not contribute to the *Landfall* memorials of Bethell in December 1948⁵, perhaps because the focus was on Bethell as a poet and literary enabler. Yet as this brief letter makes clear, with distance and hindsight, Prior was also more tempered in his appraisal of Bethell than he may have been at the height of his correspondence.

It is important to note that the surviving Prior to Bethell letters are most probably only a deliberate selection kept by Bethell not the complete correspondence from him, nor is it necessarily surprising that Prior kept

⁴ In fact, their links became extended familial ones when Arthur's half-brother Ian Prior (1923-2009) married Charles' cousin Elespie Forsyth (1919-2002) in 1946. See: Ian Prior (2006), *Elespie and Ian. Memoir of a Marriage*, Wellington: Steele Roberts. There is little detailed mention of Arthur in this book, but it is stated that Clare Prior "finally identified as a communist" (p.44), which is the so-far only recorded statement of her being so. This does explain in part how she was able to end up working as a translator in a Russian state publishing house after she and Victor (Norman) left New Zealand for Russia in 1970. While I can find no mention of Elespie and Arthur actually knowing each other (and Ian Prior is notably silent on the subject) in late-1930s Dunedin, they would have moved in the same bohemian circles, and had Toss Woollaston, Rodney Kennedy and Colin McCahon as friends in common. Via raising this with Martin Prior, Ian and Elespie's daughter Bettina Bradbury contacted me and has communicated that Elespie returned to Dunedin from England and Europe in August 1937 and so would have overlapped with the last months of Arthur and Clare in Dunedin, while Martin Prior later recalled that Elespie had told him she had met Clare. [Emails to author, 14 October and 15 October 2022]

⁵ See: Somerset, H. C. D., D'Arcy Cresswell, M. H. Holcroft, et al. 'Ursula Bethell: some personal memories'. *Landfall* 2 (Dec 1948): 275-96

no letters from Bethell to him. As Whiteford(2005) notes in his collection of Bethell 's letters:

There is none of her correspondence to D'Arcy Cresswell, Helen Simpson, Blanche Baughan, Arthur Prior or Denis Glover, and almost nothing to Eric McCormick, to Ross or Edith Woollaston, or to Lawrence Baigent...all of these people had important places in her life, they appear as characters in the letters we do have, but too infrequently as recipients in their own right.

(Whiteford 2005, p.xi)

While Whiteford notes in a footnote:

Some measure of what has been lost can be gauged by the number of letters that have survived from Cresswell (32), Prior(31), McCormick (42), Edith Woollaston (29) and particularly Toss Woollaston (92).

(Whiteford 2005: p.xi) [italics in original]

How might we make sense of this?

My view is that Bethell was used by many of her correspondents as a type of sounding board enabling them to *write out* their ideas; Bethell therefore fulfilling a very necessary role in a country with a very small intellectual and cultural society. In a letter to her former publisher Frank Sidgwick (September 1936) Bethell makes mention of "these very young people who are now busy painting, writing, reading, arguing – just a few of them, but me." (Whiteford p.113). To understand her central role, we could put it in the context of the pop-culture game "six degrees of Kevin Bacon" in which the aim is to connect the Hollywood actor Kevin Bacon (perhaps most famous for *Footloose*) to any other actor in six or less moves; itself based on the claim that almost everyone is only six or less social connections away from another. In New Zealand literary and cultural society at this time, it would tend to be three degrees of Ursula Bethell. That is, anyone of either major or indeed minor note was at most, three connections *from* Ursula Bethell or even more so, to someone else *via* Ursula Bethell. What is also of note is how Bethell's correspondents tend to also seek to put other young 'promising' men (and it was almost exclusively young men) in touch with her because of what they felt her knowledge, books, patronage and connections could offer.

As Whiteford (2005 p.xx) identifies via her letters to John Summers⁶ and what Charles Brasch states in his memoir *Indirections* (1980: 302-303), Bethell had three roles in relation to her correspondents and wider circle: spiritual director, adult education tutor, and friend and confidante. We can see this expressed in how Prior wrote to her in his letters and in how, in his letters, he is often responding to the letters she sent him. In turn, it would seem that her letters were not kept because what she said in them was of far less value and use to her recipients than what she identified in the letters sent to her. It was not however that her letters lacked varied content; as Whiteford observes:

And to all of them she communicated her own continued concern for matters of religion, encouraging first Holcroft and later Summers towards a study of theology, expressing misgivings about the impact of the Oxford Group upon Woollaston, and sharing a great variety of books, practical and theoretical, about mysticism and prayer, about Christian ethics and social justice, and about scholastic philosophy and aesthetics.

(Whiteford 2005, p.xx)

All of these topics and interests are to be found in Prior's writing to her, or in his response to her raising them with him. Bethell also acted as facilitator between her web of correspondents, even when they knew of each other she often encouraged one to ask another regarding some interest or to alert them to each other's ideas or interests and, in her role as a provider and facilitator of what we can term an informal interloan service in a country with limited bookshops and libraries (even tertiary ones⁷), telling one correspondent to borrow a book from another. For example, in a letter in June 1937 to Rodney Kennedy, Bethell states:

⁶ John Summers had gone to school with Clare Hunter in Riverton and was devoted to her for years afterwards. Arthur and Clare met Summers when he was working on a farm near Masterton in December 1936 and Prior mentions Summers to Bethell, puts them in contact and they become regular correspondents.

⁷ It was not until the impact of the Carnegie Foundation funding in the late 1930s and the post-war growth of increased funding for tertiary libraries that New Zealand began to experience easier access to books. For a background and overview see Mike Grimshaw, (2022) "'A thwarted Mind?' Popper, Prior and Pocock and the turn to Research in Science and Humanities at Canterbury University College, 1945-46", *New Zealand Journal of History*, 56, 2, pp. 92-116.

I want you to borrow T.E. Hulme's '*Speculations*' from A. Prior if you have not read it, & tell me what you think. I have bought it & find it a great acquisition.

(Whiteford p.140)

There are some interesting points that arise out of this. Firstly, while Kennedy and the Priors moved in the same circles and were friends (Prior records first meeting Kennedy in September 1936 [Grimshaw 2018, p. 94]) and Kennedy was an artist and art educator, it would seem at this stage that Arthur and Kennedy did not necessarily discuss reading art as philosophy. Yet, as Prior records in a letter to Bethell earlier that year, regarding James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "(I told Rodney Kennedy the other day that all I want about 'Art & Scholasticism' is contained in that, & he told me that he has memorised the relevant passages himself)"⁸ (Grimshaw 2018, p.113); so while Prior moved in artistic circles (most notably those of Kennedy and Woollaston and a very young Colin McCahon) he tended, at this stage⁹, to keep his philosophical interests separate from his artistic one.

Secondly, in the existing letters there is no mention from Prior to Bethell of T.E. Hulme's *Speculations* as a text to read, nor that he owns it.¹⁰ Yet obviously, via some means (most probably, a missing letter or a personal discussion when Bethell was in Dunedin or Prior in Christchurch) Bethell was aware that Prior owned Hulme's *Speculations* and thought it important enough to his thought that he must have mentioned it and/or discussed it with Bethell outside of the existing letters between them. Thirdly, that the influence of ideas and books was

⁸ While there is no further indication as to what these 'relevant passages' may be, it would seem highly likely that they are the statements by Stephen Dedalus in his discussion on art and aesthetics with his fellow student Lynch in Chapter v.

⁹ On his return to New Zealand, and especially post-war, Prior was a significant influence on Colin McCahon and his work: "McCahon spent many hours in discussion with Prior in the late 1940s and later had in his possession Prior's books describing his theories of modal logic. The similarity between the books' diagrams in which the philosopher uses mathematical symbols to replace ordinary language to prove his theories, and the format of the individual panels of the Teaching Aids, is striking." Marja Bloem and Martin Browne (2002) Colin McCahon. A question of faith, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum/Nelson: Craig Potton publishing, p.224. For Teaching Aids, see: <https://www.mccahon.co.nz/node/15437> and for the (open-access) catalogue of Auckland Art Gallery exhibition of the same name: <https://cdn.aucklandunlimited.com/artgallery/assets/media/1995-1996-candle-in-a-dark-room-1.pdf>

¹⁰ It would most probably seem that Bethell is referring to the 2nd edition of this text that was recently published in 1936 (the first edition having come out in 1924).

never just one way or even primarily one way from Bethell to her correspondents. As we can see, Bethell used her correspondents, including Prior, to keep abreast of what was current and of what they thought she should be aware of and read; and she in turn circulated suggestions and ideas from one correspondent to another, via her own nodal point. It also helps us understand what Prior was reading¹¹ at the time he wrote his venture into philosophy and art “The Artist’s Creed” published in the *Otago Daily Times* under the nom de plume John Everdean¹². Just as it appears that in 1937 Bethell had lent Kennedy Jacques Maritain’s *Art and Scholasticism* (1930), which Whiteford notes, was a “a favourite book both for reading and for lending” by Bethell and that “Maritain’s aesthetic theory was influential” on Bethell, Kennedy and Woollaston (Whiteford, p.143) – and so, by association, most probably on Prior, even though he does not mention Maritain in his letters to Bethell, except, when in England in 1938, he recommends Maritain’s *True Humanism* (Grimshaw, 2018,p. 204).

Yet Bethell was aware that there were central differences between herself and Prior in their attitudes to even shared interests, as she commented to their mutual friend John Summers in April 1939, on having had Summers report to her that Arthur had communicated to him that he believed mysticism to be “ego centric & individualistic & a thing to be sacrificed’ (Whiteford 2005, p.186 fn 2):

I don’t agree with Arthur about the Mystics – the best, the true Mystics. He [Prior] and I would differ about many things you know! I can’t get on with his Barth at all. But of the depth and reality of his religion I do not doubt and there are many things on which we do agree. He has limitations. Not one word in his letters of the beauty & fascination of England, of the charm of London! He is a

¹¹ In particular we can assume the influence of Hulme’s essays in *Speculations on “Modern Art and its Philosophy”* and “Bergson’s theory of art”. It is also worth noting *Speculations* includes an appendix “Reflections on Violence” in which Hulme discusses the thought of George Sorel, Hulme having translated Sorel’s “Reflections on Violence” (1913). In a letter to Bethell (21/9/37) Prior states he is “an admirer of Sorel” (Grimshaw 2018, p.133) and then, in a later letter to his cousin Hugh (10/4/38) Arthur states “I am at present occupied in translating two old essays by the French syndicalist G. Sorel, from who I find I learn more than from any other Marxist theoretician, tho’ he dates back ti the beginning of the century.” (Grimshaw, 2018, p.155).

¹² Prior, A.N. (1937), John Everdean, “The Artist’s Creed”, *Otago Daily Times*, February 20, p.5.

student, & always will be, & lives in books. He hasn't the poetic streak that you have, John – I don't say that you write good poetry! But you have a poetic response to the world.

(Whiteford 2005, p186).

This statement also helps us understand how Bethell most probably responded to Prior's comments on the poems Bethell sent him in 1936, that were to be published in the collections *Time and Place: poems by the author of 'From a Garden in the Antipodes* (Caxton 1936) and *Night and Day: poems 1924-1934* (Caxton 1939). Yet we also need to remember that of the surviving correspondence from Prior to her, letters 2-6 (Grimshaw 2018) mention Bethell's poems and how she is using Prior and others (Fred Robertson and Basil Dowling) as readers for feedback and evaluation; which Prior provides in earnest detail in letter 6 (Grimshaw 2018). Yet tellingly, after this initial focus on her poetry, the letters are primarily theological in tone and content and even if poetry is mentioned, there is no further discussion of Bethell's poetry.

This can also perhaps be understood in light of a wider cultural-religious divide in New Zealand that Bethell identified in a letter to journalist and essayist M.H. Holfcroft in 1942:

Out here I'm very conscious of the "gulf fixed" (apparently) between the church-goer & those who care for art, poetry, music. It is deplorable. Sometimes my verse has, in sort, made a bridge between a church & non-church"

(Whiteford, p279).

This also needs to be read in light of a later comment to the poet and editor Charles Brasch in 1944 (which though in reference to the poet Allen Curnow, repeats a common sense of Bethell's towards New Zealand culture and society):

.... all these young New Zealanders are afraid of committing themselves, giving themselves away. They wrap themselves round with phrases & catchwords they hear at the university – they don't take their stand on anything!"

(Whiteford, p.334)

As perhaps first intimated by Prior's short contribution to the Bethell 'memorial', in the years after her death there was also space for a

reassessment of Bethell, both as an influence and as a poet. For instance, the poet, critic and intellectual gad-fly A.R.D. Fairburn¹³ wrote to Chales Brasch in 1947 (8 April) that:

Ursula Bethell deserves to be taken more seriously; yet in her best work – or most of it – I feel she was doing something other than wrote poetry. When you describe her as ‘the profoundest intellectual of her time in NZ’ I think you go too far. Her particular form of pantheism¹⁴ has little originality – & on the whole she lacks the passion & tension that can turn mysticism into poetry (i.e. Blake, Crashaw).

(Edmond 1981: p157).

Similarly, earlier in 1934 the poet D’Arcy Cresswell remarked to Bethell: “you are drawn rather to private and domestic devotion.” (Shaw, 1971, p.92)

What Fairburn identifies is that – even in her poetry – Bethell was not offering originality, but rather she seemed to have a particular gift for identifying, supporting and facilitating originality in others. In reply to Brasch, Fairburn clarified his position on Bethell (13 May 1947):

I haven’t any doubt she was good influence, and a strong one, on those who knew her and I wouldn’t for the world want to chuck any dung at her.

(Edmond 1981: p.158)

What is telling is the noting of her ‘strong influence’ and this is something that Peter Simpson, in his history of what he terms *Bloomsbury South*, The Arts in Christchurch years 1933-53, refers to when he nuances Bethell’s influence by stating that many felt at the times the need to distance themselves from what could be experienced as her “imperious and intense involvement in their intimate affairs- especially their marriages” (Simpson, 2016 p.32) even if primarily undertaken by letter. We can consider how she evoked such involvement by the way Arthur

¹³ Fairburn had a noted correspondence with Prior of the philosophy of ‘Red’ in Landfall in 1952; see Mike Grimshaw,(2020) “The Public Prior: A.N. Prior as (relocated 17th & 18th century) Public Intellectual 1945-1952”, in Hasle, P., Jakobsen, D., & Øhrstrøm, P. (ed.) *The Metaphysics of Time: Themes from Prior*. Aalborg Universitetsforlag. *Logic and Philosophy of Time*, pp.25-61.

¹⁴ Bethell’s mystical pantheism was an underlying cause of tension between her and the Barthian Prior.

Prior communicates his sudden involvement with Clare Hunter and then their marriage; this is, in many ways, a young man seeking approval for his choices. John Summers, who was introduced to Bethell by the Priors in the late 1930s, recalled such was her intensity that “My life from then on is quite inconceivable without this spiritual, intellectual and cultural godmother. I was to be one of her discoveries, proteges.” (Summers, 1991, p32).

Yet Simpson’s point is that her discoveries, her proteges could feel constricted by the limitations of Bethell, or indeed by her expectations. The painter Toss Woollaston was from 1931 one of her early protégés and he was self-aware enough to write in 1935 to his friend and previous lover Rodney Kennedy regarding Bethell that:

I suppose last year she had hoped or expected to meet in you someone more or less immaculately educated, as she would have her friends *could she prepare them for herself in actuality*”.
(Trevelyan, p.57) [italics added].

This sense of desired control could also be experienced negatively, as Woollaston recounted, again to Kennedy, after a visit Toss and his new Bride Edith paid to Bethell in Christchurch in October 1936:

Miss Bethell was very nice and very nasty. She loved Edith so I think it made her jealous of me – I was let in for a series of damnable snubs from the bitch. It was an emotional strain being with her.”
(Trevelyan, p.72)

This emotional strain seemed to be a characteristic of her demanded involvement in the life of her proteges, as Woollaston recalled in his autobiography *Sage Tea*, with the reference to “the lofty plateau of excitement Miss Bethell lived on.” (Woollaston, 1980, p.22)

I have provided this detailed context because I believe it enables a more nuanced reading of Arthur’s memorial of Bethell in his letter to Mary. So, what was in the letter? Given its brevity, I believe the best way to engage with it is to publish it in its entirety. (The numbers inserted in square brackets refer to the pages of the original letter and each page has the official heading ON ACTIVE SERVICE and subheading NATIONAL PATRIOTIC FUND BOARD NEW ZEALAND]

3 The Letter¹⁵

[1]

To Mrs A.N. Prior, 12 Balfour Street, N.E. Valley, Dunedin

Wed. 21/3/45

NZ 4214986

AC1 Prior (A.N.)

No.5 Squadron

NZAPO 361

Darling M,

I enclose herewith my contribution to the "memorial" for Miss Bethell, & hope it's alright. – And that you're alright.

Heaps of love

– Shig¹⁶

[2]

Though herself a member of the Church of England, she had considerable respect for Presbyterianism as representing the only religion in this country which approached her own standards of learning¹⁷, & a conviction of their special vocation in New Zealand¹⁸ on that account. But

¹⁵ I have relocated any of his deletions to a footnote for readability, but included them so we gain a clear sense of his thinking. Such deletions were common in Prior's letters but that even such a short memorial required a revision of thinking is, I believe, telling of the difficulty Prior experienced with this 'memorial'.

¹⁶ This would seem to be one of the numerous pet-names the Priors used for each other in personal correspondence.

¹⁷ As the history of the Theological Hall, Knox College begins: "The Reformed Churches have always insisted on a godly and learned ministry. That was a consequence of their emphasis on the Word of God...The education of such a minister was necessarily thorough. Ideally he was fluent in Greek, Latin and Hebrew and cognizant of the major parts of Aristotle's philosophy, before admission to the stud of theology proper. Such a course took at least six years. Education was quite separate from professional qualification. Universities dealt with the former, presbyteries with the latter." (Breward 1975, p.1)

¹⁸ The 1899 history of the New Zealand Presbyterian Church proudly proclaims "...the deep interest which the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand has ever taken in the cause of education... the clear and distinguished stand for which she has always been distinguished", (Dickson 1899, p.325); similarly, the Centenary History of the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand states: "The University of Otago arose as the direct result of the inborn ideals of the early Presbyterian settlers,

she was never at home with either the theological language of Calvinism or its characteristic emotional attitudes¹⁹, & indeed was less divided here from Roman Catholics. (Those two sentences together are just one way of saying that she was never quite at home in New Zealand). She felt very strongly the differences in what she called "climate" between one Church & another; & was a supporter of moves in the direction of Church Union²⁰ less from temperament than from a firm & reasoned conviction that it was her duty²¹. Pending such Union, she had a truly Catholic²² way of quietly shuffling people into those religious organisations in which they would be least alone²³. For, with a keen eye for real originality²⁴ in people, a ready [3] encouragement of their personal sincerity, & an often sharp & frank discouragement of their insincerity, she combined a fine sense of the need of even the brilliant for the help of others. She was something like the Socratic "midwife", not forcing alien intellectual substances into others, but helping to bring to birth what was already in them²⁵. She discovered people's interests very rapidly, & could often put them on to literature that was "up their street" long before they could discover it for

accustomed as they had been in Scotland to regard the University as a national institution, the natural apex of an educational system." (Elder 1940, p.367)

¹⁹ Bethell's mother was Presbyterian and in a letter to Charles Brasch (July 31 1941) she states "religion as imparted by that mother, a sort of evangelical Calvinism, was gloomy & alarming – but it did touch up the conscience!" (Whiteford p.254).

²⁰ The Presbyterian Church first proposed Church Union to the Methodists and Congregational Churches in 1902 and discussions ran until 1905, it was also raised in 1916 and from 1918-1922. In the 1930s, moves were fitful, but did expand to include the Anglicans. The onset of war increased calls for Church Union and a Church Union Committee was established in 1940 under the convenorship of J.M. Bates (who had taught Prior Philosophy at Otago); a proposal for Church Union was presented and voted on in 1948 and while supported by a slim majority, this was not considered sufficient to proceed to union. One outcome was the appointment of a Doctrine Committee headed by J.M. Bates and this gave rise to Bates' *A Manual of Doctrine* (1950) which Prior reviewed for the NZ Listener, 6 April, 1951. (Veitch in *Presbyterians in Aotearoa* 1990, pp.141-2).

²¹ Whereas Prior was a strong supporter of moves towards Church Union from 1930s, articulating such move as the restoration of the Catholic Church (not to be confused with joining with the Roman Catholic Church); Prior therefore arguing for union of Protestant churches.

²² Catholic here used in the sense of universal, not Roman Catholic.

²³ Perhaps most clearly indicated with her directing of Woollaston, Kennedy and Summers towards the Quakers.

²⁴ Here, between 'originality' and 'in people' is a crossed-out section: ~~she had a fine sense of the need of even brilliant people for the help of others a rea~~

²⁵ This anticipating Whiteford's later description of her role as combining that of a spiritual director, an adult education tutor and friend and confidante (Whiteford, p.xx).

themselves²⁶. Her little reception-room at St. Faith's²⁷ was a wonderful clearing-house of ideas; her varied guests, often just passing through Christchurch²⁸ were again & again indebted to her for²⁹ the communication of³⁰ reflections – sifted in her memory by her own discriminating criticism – of other [4] guests whom they had little chance of meeting for themselves. The field in which my acquaintance with her was developed, while it was possibly the one in which she was least original³¹, may also have been the one in which she had most to give in this way as a “go-between”. And bearing in mind her own conviction of our need of one another's help, this may well be the most important function of all.

4 Conclusion

One thing we can be sure of, for some reason upon Arthur's return to New Zealand in 1941 his correspondence with Bethell seems to have concluded. As his marriage to Clare unraveled we know he fled to Christchurch and we can presume he would have discussed elements of this with her in person at St. Faith's. The despair that he entered into that gave rise to his period of atheism in 1942 may surely have tested their relationship, and would certainly have troubled Bethell. We do know³² via a letter to Mary (July 18th 1943) that there had been a conversation

²⁶ Such a discussion of religious and philosophical literature was central to the Prior-Bethell correspondence.

²⁷ The house at 47 Webb street, St Albans, Christchurch. Bethell purchased it in 1910 for her mother, then later gifted the house to the Anglican Church as a centre for training deaconesses. It was known as St. Faith's House of Sacred Learning (Bethell was born on St. Faith's Day, 6 October, 1874) and she lived there from 1934-1944. The large weatherboard house is no longer standing but an image of it can be seen in Simpson, p.38.

²⁸ We can surmise that Prior would meet her here whenever he passed through Christchurch in the 1930s and that, when stationed in Christchurch in the 1940s, before leaving for service overseas, he would have called on Bethell in the early 1940s.

²⁹ The original read: “for ~~passin~~ the”.

³⁰ The original read: “the ~~reflections of other guests whom they had little chance of meeting themselves. My acquaintance with her was deve. And. The field in which my own acquaintance with her was developed, while it was possibly the one in which she was least original, may also have been the one in,~~”.

³¹ That is, theology and religious philosophy.

³² I thank the reviewer of this article for reminding me of this in Jakobsen (2020) *Dispelling the Freudian Spectre: A.N. Prior's discussion of religion in 1943*.

with Bethell about his atheism and Freudian analysis wherein he communicated that:

I put forward the idea that Freudianism had performed a secretly Christian function for me at a time when I had so abused Christianity that it was impossible for Christianity to do me any good directly, or something like that.³³

In response, Bethell gave him a poem from Blake's Jerusalem and the value of it was such that he included it in his letter to Mary:

Each man is in his Spectre's power
Until the arrival of that hour
When his humanity awake,
And cast his Spectre into the Lake.³⁴

For our discussion, what is important about this record of a conversation was that it was a 'conversation' and indicates the depth, intimacy and detail of the conversations that had obviously existed alongside the letters. Also, that Prior's description of Bethell as 'Socratic midwife' occurred as much in conversation as in letters; that is, she had the ability and intellectual resources to draw upon in conversation to be able to immediately help and offer to others. Her influence was therefore as much verbal or rather, conversational, as it was epistolary.

Yet upon his exit from atheism and his return to Christianity, he does not seem to resume his epistolary relationship even if he almost certainly continued to make use of her 'little reception room' at St. Faith's. One central reason for this change seems clear; in meeting and marrying Mary he had no need of Bethell as an intellectual and religious sounding board. That intellectual religious and philosophical companionship which he

³³ Original: Prior, A.N., (1943). "Arthur Prior to Mary Wilkinson, July 18, 1943", The Ann Prior Collection, the Bodleian Library; pp.2-3. See: Jakobsen (2020) p.72

³⁴ Original: Prior, A.N., (1943). "Arthur Prior to Mary Wilkinson, July 18, 1943", The Ann Prior Collection, the Bodleian Library; pp.2-3. See: Jakobsen (2020) p.73.

lacked in his marriage to Clare³⁵ he found in his marriage to Mary as expressed in the sheer volume of letters from Arthur to Mary and the depth and range of their topics. It was this, I suggest that also enabled Arthur to gain a reflective distance on his relationship to Bethell and also, I further suggest, results in the brevity of his 'memorial'. Given the intensity and depth of their epistolary relationship, I would have expected a far more expansive contribution to the Bethell 'memorial' by Prior, even given the constraints of active service in wartime. But time and physical distance seem to have given rise to what may have been experienced as a somewhat troubling perspective for Prior; that is, for so voluble a communicator he found, on reflection, he now had little to say. She was, I suggest, a necessary and time-bound sounding board for a young man needing an outlet for ideas and discussions. His letters to her were stimulated by her interest in him and by, it is obvious, her questions, suggestions and challenges to his thinking in her letters. That is, his letters were as much for his own thinking and religious and philosophical development as they were a response and reply to her. In this way Bethell acted as a necessary intellectual midwife to Prior in a time of need. But he outgrew this need and with Mary found a true companion – both in his marriage and as an intellectual stimulus.

References

1. Breward, I. (1975), *Grace and Truth. A History of Theological Hall Knox College, Dunedin 1876-1975*, Theological Education Committee, Presbyterian Church of New Zealand.
2. Bloem, M & Martin Browne, M (2002) Colin McCahon. *A question of faith*, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum/Nelson: Craig Potton publishing.
3. Brasch, C. (1980). *Indirections. A Memoir 1909-1947*, Oxford University Press.
4. Copeland, J. (1996/2020). 'Prior, Arthur', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prior/>
5. Dickson, J (1899), *History of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand*. Wilkie & Company, Presbyterian Bookroom.

³⁵ I make this somewhat audacious claim because there is no change in subject matter and depth of discussion in Arthur's letters to Bethell once he meets and then marries Clare. (see Grimshaw, 2018).

6. Elder, J.R. (1940), *The History of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand 1840-1940*,
7. Grimshaw, M. Ed. (2018). *Arthur Prior, A 'Young Progressive' . Letters to Ursula Bethell and to Hugh Teague, 1936-1941*. Canterbury University Press.
8. Hulme, T.E.(1936) *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (edited by Herbert Read) Routledge & Keegan Paul, second edition. 1 (orig.1924)
9. Jakobsen, D. (2020) "Dispelling the Freudian Specter: A.N. Prior's Discussion of Religion in 1943" in Hasle, P., Jakobsen, D., & Øhrstrøm, P. (red.) (2020). *The Metaphysics of Time: Themes from Prior*. Aalborg Universitetsforlag. Logic and Philosophy of Time
10. McEldowney, D, (ed) (1990) *Presbyterians in Aotearoa*, The Presbyterian Church of New Zealand.
11. Simpson, P. (2016) Bloomsbury South. *The Arts in Christchurch 1933-1953*, Auckland University Press.
12. Trevelyan, J. (Ed) (2004) *Toss Woollaston, A Life in Letters*, Te Papa Press.
13. Prior, A.N. (1937a). John Everdean "The Artist's Creed", *Otago Daily Times*, February 20, p.5.
14. Ian Prior (2006), *Elespie and Ian. Memoir of a Marriage*, Steele Roberts.
15. Whiteford, P. (ed.) (2005) *Vibrant with Words; The letters of Ursula Bethell*, Victoria University Press.
16. Woollaston, T. (1980) *Sage Tea*. An Autobiography, Collins.