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'Words with wings'

Speech presented at the Royal Commonwealth Society's Essay Competition Awards Evening, 2013

Dr Gerri Kimber, Senior Lecturer in English, University of Northampton

I am delighted to have been invited to talk to you tonight and I'm particularly grateful to the New Zealand High Commission for suggesting me as your speaker.

The winning essay in the Senior category of the Royal Commonwealth Society's annual essay competition: 'To boldly go: a letter to the lost girls', was written by an 18 year old New Zealander, Katherine McIndoe. Her essay is an excoriating exposé of the 100 million lost girls and women in the world – females who have no freedom of expression, who are silent, unknown or forgotten.

The zeal of Katherine's and Tabitha's essays reminds me very much of Katherine's namesake and fellow New Zealander, who came to England in 1908 aged 19, with a burning desire to escape the confines of her homeland and make her mark in the male dominated world of literature. Her name was Katherine Mansfield.

The world was a very different place a hundred years ago, with many dangers for young women, and the youthful Katherine Mansfield seems to have experienced most of them during a very experimental three years or so, including abortions, a still-birth and venereal disease. She was living the free life at a time when there was no contraceptive pill and no penicillin. Her early death at the age of 34 in 1923 from tuberculosis, can be related directly to her painful early past when she was experimenting so dangerously with 'life'.

I'd like to share with you a quote that I believe is well known throughout the Commonwealth, where Mansfield talks about the emancipation of women in her time, written in 1908:

I feel that I do now realize, dimly, what women in the future will be capable of achieving. They truly, as yet, have never had their chance. Talk of our enlightened days and our emancipated country – pure nonsense. We are firmly held in the self-fashioned chains of slavery. Yes, now I see that they *are* self-fashioned and must be self removed.

Katherine and Tabitha, I congratulate you on your prizewinning essays. Hopefully your pioneering words, as a result of the publicity engendered by this prize, will be read across the world. Like Katherine Mansfield, who wrote about the effects of the gas poisoning of soldiers at the front in 1915 – possibly the first writer to do so – her pioneering spirit continues in you. It is this trail-blazing spirit of the young, this boldness that in the past worked to change a literary landscape, can one day, we hope, work to change a gendered landscape, so unfairly biased against women in so many parts of the world.

This passage by the twentieth century French philosopher Gaston Bachelard speaks out loud and clear:

'What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born in the moments when we accumulated silent things within us. The brook will nonetheless teach you to speak, in spite of sorrows and memories. It will teach you euphoria through euphuism, energy through the poem. It will repeat incessantly some beautiful, round word which rolls over the rocks'.

Society in its many forms crushes and closes down that which it does not wish to hear. This is a common theme which passes down through the ages. Children and young people do accumulate silent things within them, the unspoken rages below the surface often causing anger, resentment and frustration. This can become a never ending cycle of pain, dissatisfaction and thwarted potential in later life.

We must encourage children – and young adults – to speak out, to use their voices in any way they can, to expose the covert, the hidden, and the silent things within them and the world that they live in. If we give freedom to these new generations, if freedom to speak can become their right, then the benefit to humanity as a whole will be immense.

This is the power of the written word. It is a liberating force in the Commonwealth. And therefore literacy for all children everywhere is so critical. If you can read, you can see what others are thinking. If you can write, others can see what *you* are thinking. In countries like Pakistan where women are refused an education and are being attacked for insisting on one, their oppressors are demonstrating their own fear of the power of the written word as in the failed attempt to kill the young Pakistani girl Malala who demonstrated in favour of getting an education. We simply cannot under-estimate this power of the written word and the passion for reading it.

This has been a wonderful year for Commonwealth women writers, where New Zealander Eleanor Catton has won the Man Booker prize for her incredible novel *The Luminaries*, making her, at the age of 28, the youngest author ever to win this most prestigious of book prizes.

And now Katherine McIndoe wins the Royal Commonwealth Society's Senior essay prize, and Tabitha Carr from Guernsey wins the junior prize with her essay on another aspect of the world's disadvantaged children. May both your essays have wings, and may they enact real change in the world.