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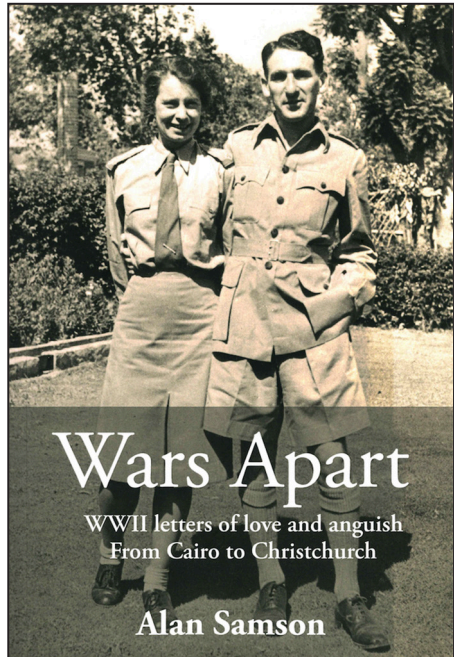
Parents' letters trace story of triumph and tragedy from Egypt to New Zealand

Wars Apart: From Cairo to Christchurch – WWII Letters of Love and Anguish, by Alan Samson. Wellington, New Zealand: Writers Ink, 2021, 274 pp. ISBN: 9780473531393.

IN his newly released *Wars Apart: WWII Letters of Love and Anguish from Cairo to Christchurch*, retired award-winning New Zealand journalist and academic Alan Samson tells the love story of his parents through the letters and photographs they exchanged while they were stationed in the Middle East during the Second World War.

They later migrated to New Zealand and their story continued from Cairo to Christchurch. Cairo was the place in which his parents began their story, which continued as they adapted to the diversity and triumphs of a new life in New Zealand.

A journalism lecturer who taught at Wellington's Massey University for more than a decade and a former



Pacific Journalism Review reviews editor, Samson uses his academic research skills and journalistic expertise in telling this story of love and anguish, hope and despair, of his own mother and father who had distinguished service records with the South African and British armies.

Both were English, yet his mother, Gwen, enlisted while in South Africa and became personal assistant to the two most senior South African officers, Field Marshal and Prime Minister Jan Christiaan Smuts and General Francois Henry Theron. His father, Norman, on the other hand, was a senior member in the organisation and transport of troops in Britain. They gained permission to marry in Cairo in 1943, were briefly united, but were rarely able to be together thereafter.

Towards the war's end, Gwen was repatriated home to the UK because of her pregnancy.

Norman was a civil engineer by profession and participated in the restoration work of London's St Paul's Cathedral and New Zealand's Rimutaka rail tunnel – then the country's longest – which opened to traffic in 1955. When he returned to the UK from the Middle East, possibly because of the horror of war that he witnessed, he attempted to commit suicide and was placed in an asylum.

The couple were divided again, but their letters of love and anguish continued unabated. It was not until 1947 that the couple were united at last and emigrated to New Zealand. Yet the post-traumatic stress of war continued to haunt them. Norman died of pemphigus vulgaris, an auto-immune blistering disease whose cause was possibly attributed to his wartime service.

Alan was 10 and his brother, Ken, 14, when his father died. Their mother died of lung cancer in 1980 when the author was in his early 30s. Her death was also attributed to her war service in the Middle East with the South African army due to her heavy smoking under the stress of war. She was an accountant and feminist activist.

At his mother's death, and 'amid a meagre collection of her mainly-chipped ornamental treasures', the author ran across an old suitcase in which there was a pile of old documents and photographs, together with 'a muddle of ancient letters that had been squirreled away' since well before his

birth. Many of the handwritten letters were difficult to read and that made the busy practising journalist Alan put them away.

It was not until the author's retirement from his academic career that he examined the 200-odd letters, most of which were air posted letters from Cairo during the war years. Most of the letters between his parents were stamped 'Passed by Censor'. While many of the letters were written when they were both serving in the Middle East, there were more from the period when his mother was repatriated to her father's home in Ayrshire, Scotland.

If you like to picture military history with some anguish and passion, then this book is for you as it captures the war in images and words. It is divided into 10 cantos, with each canto exhibiting a theme, beginning with canto titled 'A Love Story Unfolding: Cairo to Christchurch' and ending with canto 10 'Haere mai Aotearoa', the Māori words for 'welcome to New Zealand'. Throughout the chapters, the author skilfully places the letters in the framework of the war and other historical stages, a process which he characterised as 'a voyage of discovery'. In doing so, he tells us the story of the dire problems encountered by under-supported soldiers upon demobilisation—an issue which war historians never debated in their textbooks.

The extent of his parents' hardship shocked Alan, particularly knowing that his father was unable to cope with his return to jobless Britain and was voluntarily institutionalised in two

asylums. However, the author also tells his parents' story of enduring love as recorded in their surviving letters and a wide range of previously unpublished historical photos, most from the Samson family collection.

He said the letters they exchanged offered him a social history story about the intensity of his parents' feelings and about their mutual affection which never faded. He argues, though, that he could not write explicitly about the war, but there was 'scope for reading between the lines' about it. One should stress here, though, that when Samson wrote this book his intention was not to pay tribute to just his parents, but to all those who lived and died during the war period.

If anyone had wanted to bring to the attention of readers the agonies and sorrows of war in a personalised manner, they could not have done it better than Alan Samson in *Wars Apart*. His chronicle of the dialogue that went between his parents through their letters is a superb personalised account of a critical period in history. As he put it: 'The adversity—and triumphs—they experienced as they laid down new roots in Christchurch is very much part of a thread that began in Cairo during World War II.'

Indeed, rarely have we come across intellectuals like Samson digging to tell us a story hidden in their ancestral history. Kudos is due to him for genuinely and intelligently bringing to light the suffering and anguish that the war inflicted on his parents and the many others like them whose

stories have not yet been told. Their lives behind the lines is a story worth telling, and Samson tell it all well. A future Kiwi scholar could perhaps also endeavour to document how New Zealanders stationed in the Middle East perceived the region through the lenses of its place and people.

While reading about the war is not new to us, readers will find Samson's account both intriguing and engaging. The book's letters and album of photos offer us a window through which we can see the despair and love of a British couple involved in war. The book is a long overdue addition to the modern historiography of that period and a valuable reading for those seeking a different view and a moral appraisal of how the most destructive conflict in human history affected citizens.

Samson's dedication of his book to his brother and their children echoes the passion that bonds New Zealand families—a reality which I, a Cairene, witnessed while living there. It is also worth mentioning here that the author, whom I taught journalism with at Massey in 2003 and 2004, and his brother Ken, came full of passion to visit Egypt in 2005, touring and discovering the old and new in its capital, in the city where their parents married. They exhibited in their visit a great desire to discover places in Cairo, the city where their parents met and corresponded to each other.

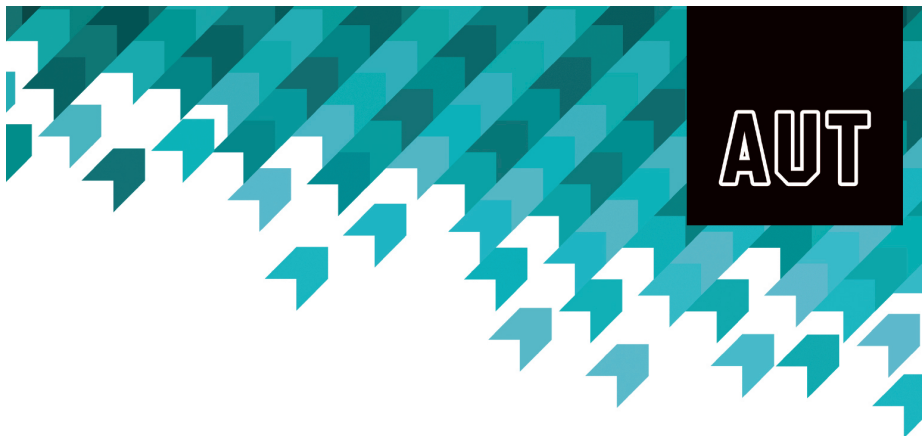
Perhaps they also wanted to pay tribute to their fellow New Zealanders who died in the Land of the Nile. More than 1100 of the 7240 Commonwealth

soldiers buried in Egypt's El-Alamein Cemetery on the Mediterranean coast are New Zealanders. Once Alan and Ken completed their visit to Egypt, they moved south to discover the beauty and culture of sub-Saharan Africa.

This spirit of Kiwi adventure is best told in Samson's 2021 book *Me And Me Now: A 1970s Kiwi Hippie Trail Adventure*, in which he records

his adventures as a young New Zealander and latent journalist travelling through the Southeast Asian countries of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in the early 1970s.

A review of *Me. And Me Now* is on page 265



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