

## Introduction

Suzanne Aubert picked up her pen and began writing. It was 31 August 1924 and she was eighty-nine years old. ‘Dear Sister Clotilde,’ she began, ‘Much love for all from all in a hurry.’ She went on quickly to list her homely and important news, but love went in at the outset.

‘In haste, I will write to you soon again’; ‘writing between two trains’; ‘a letter on the trot’; ‘just a letter on the go’ – the title for this book presents itself in her own recurring phrases. Suzanne’s life was a very full one, ninety-one years packed with eventfulness. Nonetheless, it was a thoughtful life, in the partnership of reflection and action that she lived out and communicated to others.

Even an ‘on the trot’ summation of Suzanne Aubert’s record is consequently full. She was in her lifetime, and still is, a woman of national renown for her long formative contribution to Māori and Pākehā New Zealand, from 1860 to 1926. She stands out for her religious dedication, her intelligent, enquiring mind and knowledge of indigenous culture and biodiversity, her friendly, lively personality and sensitive, tolerant comprehension of changing social contexts. She is remarkable also for the extent of her activity and interests, her lobbying skills and extraordinary ability to galvanise helpers, her stamina in withstanding opposition, and the sheer persistence of her work for disadvantaged people in a still pioneering era of social welfare deficit. All this has earned her the respect and affection of New Zealanders from any walk of life, any faith or none. She left as a lasting legacy her own example and that of her Sisters of Compassion, the Catholic congregation she founded, and the only one home-grown in New Zealand.

Suzanne has her place also within the macrocosm of nineteenth-century European history. She was one of a wave of nineteenth-century French men and women who founded Catholic religious congregations that were engaged in France or overseas in active works of mission and social welfare. She was born in 1835 in the village of Lay, not far from the big industrial city of Lyon where she grew up. It was an area and an era pulsing with the contradictions inherent in the legacy of the French Revolution: strong socialist theory and worker action were building on the revolution’s republican

advances, while renewed Christian energy and confidence were rebounding from its anti-religious extremes. It was that energy which would bring Catholic mission to New Zealand. French men and women went out on mission first to their own countryside and cities, where they reconstituted France's collapsed religious social welfare infrastructures, and then took their Catholicism abroad in Europe's surge across the world.

Eighty per cent of all nineteenth-century Catholic foreign missionaries were French, mainly from around Lyon and Brittany. At the turn of the twentieth century, half of New Zealand's Catholic priests were still French, in addition to numerous French religious brothers and sisters, mostly in teaching. So, to this extent, Suzanne Aubert was one of many, and never without French companionship in her life in New Zealand.

New Zealand's Catholic faith was imbued with French characteristics from the very outset, especially the Marian theology of the first French missionaries of the Society of Mary who arrived in 1838 under the leadership of Jean-Baptiste François Pompallier. These Marists brought their reverence for Mary and a revived emphasis on her role in the early Church. Their Catholicism challenged the Protestants at a crucial time. Anglican Church Missionary Society and Wesleyan missionaries had already been in New Zealand for a generation, yet only in the 1830s were they finally making significant breakthroughs in Māori conversion. The French 'foreignness' of the newcomers revived British memories of the long conflict with Napoleon and heightened the alarm. Finding a mutually respectful *modus vivendi* was part of Pompallier's story, and would also be Suzanne's.

Practicality was part of the contemporary French religious experience, whether rebuilding churches or setting up new institutions. One consequence of the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods had been a requirement for most religious congregations to be engaged in active works rather than remain essentially contemplative. French religious sisters were finding fulfilment in sometimes adventurous expressions of their faith – travelling, making decisions and managing enterprises – while many of their married contemporaries, restricted by some of the legal innovations of the Napoleonic Code, might be leading passive and impeded lives.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, Madeleine Sophie Barat had founded the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, concentrating on education. In the 1820s, a laywoman, Pauline Jaricot, co-founded the hugely successful Society for the Propagation of the Faith, which supported missionaries worldwide. In the 1840s,

Françoise Perroton, then still a laywoman, left Lyon to spend twelve years in the Western Pacific as the sole Catholic woman missionary, the forerunner of the other *pionnières* of the late 1850s, and as such a founding figure for the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary. Also in the 1840s, Jeanne Jugan founded the Little Sisters of the Poor, whose vocation was to care for the aged. By the late 1860s, Euphrasie Barbier had founded the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, with one of its first communities being established in New Zealand. Despite never living in New Zealand (although Euphrasie had a long stay here during more than three years spent in the Pacific in the 1870s), these women have left their imprint.

But Suzanne Aubert did live here, and in this she both gave and gained. Her relationship with God was impregnated with humanity, and her unwavering adherence to her Catholic faith was tempered with an acute awareness of the variants of human experience. France's unceasing balancing act through the nineteenth century – the constant need to calibrate religious fervour and humanist republican secularism – was part of her family milieu; tolerance did not mean ceding one's values, it meant respecting the godliness within everyone.

This empathy took her beyond an outsider's commitment; Suzanne bedded down in New Zealand. Her congregation was not a European construct as others were, even to the extent of bringing imported building regulations that faced houses to the cold south; it was grounded and local, not just by the accident of its foundation but in its spirituality. The women who lived with Suzanne observed her knowledge and love of the natural world around her – its animals and birds, its bush and gardens with their health-giving richness. They absorbed her guidance in the love and upbringing of children, and the care of the disabled and sick; her training was handed down in exercise books filled with practical hints on cooking, laundry, housework, sewing, nursing. They learnt that the strict routine of religious daily life could be adjusted to harmonise with the rhythm of life in the *kāinga* and on the *marae*, or with the call for help from a neighbour. They were told they needed to look out from their veils, to be alert to the human geography around them, mindful of need and ready to engage with people. These women were receiving a broad theological formation befitting their context – a context that called for clear-sighted, flexible responses to changing needs. Suzanne lived her six decades here through huge changes in society and landscape – changes so compressed in time and place that New Zealand has become a significant case study of major aspects of nineteenth-century world history.

Suzanne was twenty-five when she came. A French whaling ship, *le Général Teste*, brought her to Auckland on 30 December 1860, along with twenty-one other French, Italian and Irish new missionaries whom Bishop Pompallier had just recruited. These would all be victims of passage in various ways. At her fiftieth anniversary celebration in Wellington's Town Hall in 1910, Suzanne grieved that she was the only survivor.

She spent the 1860s in Auckland, where she lived through the turmoils of war, the inrush of Imperial troops, the disengagement of Māori from Christian mission, the removal of the capital to Wellington, the severe economic depression, the collapse of Pompallier's bishopric with his departure in 1868, the loss of some of the diocese's properties and the attendant opprobrium dealt to those left behind. By 1868 Suzanne – now *Sœur Marie Joseph*, Sister Mary Joseph, Meri Hohepa or plain Meri – was struggling, along with Peata, her Ngāpuhi fellow sister, to keep their school and home for Māori and mixed-race girls functioning. She was by then the only one left of the four French women in the Sisters of the Holy Family, the tiny congregation Pompallier had instituted for them, which was now effectively disestablished. The record of this first decade in her correspondence is very patchy. Nothing survives from Pompallier's era, and nearly all that remains are five private letters to two Marist priests, where Suzanne confides aspects of the complicated aftermath.

Faced with the outright opposition of a new Irish bishop, Thomas Croke, whose brief included tidying up loose ends left by his French predecessor, Suzanne refused his and her family's wish for her to return to France; she had vowed never to do this, never to let go of her missionary vocation. Instead, she went south across the diocesan border to spend the next decade at the mission station of the Society of Mary in Meanee,<sup>1</sup> in Hawke's Bay. Wellington Diocese had a French Marist, Philippe Viard, for its bishop, and after his death would have another French-trained Marist, Francis Redwood. Four years younger than Suzanne, he would for many years be her perceptive colleague and patron as well as her bishop, granting her considerable leeway in her causes and activities until their old age, when his increasing delegation of responsibilities to men less tolerant of Suzanne and her sometimes controversial social welfare projects would lead in 1912 to an impasse.

But this was far in the future. Meanwhile, in Hawke's Bay, the ageing pioneer French priests and brothers, who lived at the mission farm on the flats out from

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<sup>1</sup> Meeanee is the current spelling, but Meanee is the form in all documents used in this book.

Taradale, cherished and appreciated Suzanne – and scolded her for overwork and her absences on far-ranging mission circuits. They also gave her a French home, where their kindly father figures could ease her sadness at the death of her own father in 1871. In Auckland there was also a French woman, Marie Louise Outhwaite, who had taken Suzanne under her wing in the distressing final stages of her time there. Mrs Outhwaite became her mother substitute in New Zealand, and letters to this ‘*bien chère maman*’ constitute the main record of the first half of the 1870s.

In Hawke’s Bay Suzanne became the nurse – the ‘doctor’, even. Her interests and skills in medicine, chemistry and pharmacology, which she had been honing ever since her studies as a young woman in Lyon, were in demand not just by local Māori suffering from the post-war depression and alien epidemics, but also by the huge wave from 1874 of Vogel-sponsored European immigrants and their quickly growing families. Suzanne’s mission was already in both Māori and Pākehā realms, and increasingly in the overlap between them, especially in medicinal knowledge and languages. She was developing rongoā (herbal remedies) based on shared Māori knowledge of indigenous plants and her own research in European chemistry; she was also writing three works of Māori scholarship: an English–Māori dictionary, a comprehensive manual of bilingual phrases and cultural tradition, and an updated and enlarged Catholic prayer book in Māori.

After the collapse of mission during the war years, Māori receptiveness to Christianity of any denomination did not significantly revive until the mid to late 1870s, by which time Māori Anglican ministers were being ordained in Hawke’s Bay. The Society of Mary, however, under stress in France and with growing demand in other regions of the Pacific, could send no new Catholic priest to relieve the old pioneers whose health and stamina were declining. The Catholics were lagging behind. Suzanne became the representative and stopgap missionary for Catholicism to Ngāti Kahungunu, mostly at Pakipaki, and Ngāti Tūwharetoa at Tokaanu and Waihi on Lake Taupo. Her surviving correspondence from these years consists of her detailed, urgent letters on this topic to Father Victor Poupinel, the Marists’ mission correspondent in Lyon.

At last, in 1879, Father Christophe Soulas arrived from France. He needed Suzanne’s support and knowledge to help him regain lost ground. In 1883 she went further into the Māori hinterland, to the people of Te Atihaunui a Pāpārangi on the middle reaches of the Whanganui River, in order to assist him in reviving the old Marist mission at Hiruharama or Jerusalem (traditionally named Pātiarero). The view at

Hiruharama of the church and convent above the pā and the curve of the river is one of New Zealand's birthright images. A major letter Suzanne wrote during this time described the Christmas 1885 opening of the first church on that site.

This Māori area of bush and river became the 'cradle', as she firmly reminded her sisters, of their new congregation; it was the cradle too of her own reintegration in 1884 into formal religious life and her initiation to leadership when she was nearly fifty years old. The sisters began as a community in New Zealand of the Third Order Regular of Mary, the French Marist women missionaries who were active in Oceania and were by then formalised as a congregation. But in 1892, Suzanne's community became a purely New Zealand congregation instituted by Bishop Redwood and called the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion – more familiarly known as the Sisters of Compassion.

Commitment to Māori in mission, medicine and welfare in the 1880s meant being with them at drawn-out sittings of the Native Land Court in Whanganui. But being in the town also meant observing other needs, those of depression-affected Pākehā New Zealand. A year away in 1889 on a collecting tour to rebuild their burnt church opened Suzanne's eyes to the worsening welfare crisis throughout the country. The trials of unexpected birth and of old age, destitution and disability were exacerbated in a society that was then only in the initial phases of laying down its welfare infrastructure. Even with the enlightened innovations of the Liberal Government to come, such as the 1898 Old Age Pension Act, there was very little relief for any but the respectable 'deserving poor'.<sup>2</sup>

Decrepitude in itself very quickly stripped a person of respectability anyway, and old washed-up bachelors, remnants of the gender-imbalanced frontier life of the 1850s and 1860s, were now drifting from place to place, spending rheumatically homeless nights under covers of newspaper. Many young girls and youths of the family-prolific 1870s were now having unplanned babies. The girls would be branded for life, and their babies vulnerable in the homes of as yet unsupervised 'baby farmers'. It was not until 1894, with the implementation of the 1893 Infant Life Protection Act, that New Zealand began to monitor the care of its infants. Neither was there provision for people born with disabilities; nor for children with a single, working parent or with both parents having to work.

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<sup>2</sup> See Margaret Tennant, *Paupers and Providers: Charitable Aid in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1989.

Suzanne felt she needed to step into these zones of neglected welfare, even if it meant overstretching the resources of her little congregation and inviting public controversy. From 1891 she opened the convent door at Jerusalem to children and babies. To them she became 'Grandma'. Her letters from this time were often to officialdom, pleading their cause as she saw it.

In 1899 Suzanne herself moved to Wellington to be nearer those in need, although she never disestablished the river communities at Hiruharama and nearby Ranana. By 1901 penny postage had been introduced in New Zealand, and Alexander Hatrick's riverboats ensured quick and regular mail delivery. Thick packets of homely letters between the 'Jews' of Jerusalem and the 'Gentiles' of Wellington have survived.

Mother Aubert, as she was now generally known, could deal well with publicity on the whole, and being in the capital helped her to build networks of influence. She used her growing public profile strategically to galvanise support across the board, from parliamentarians, governors, wealthy Hawke's Bay runholders and city landowners to struggling rural and mining families. Whether they sent generous cheques or coal consignments or pumpkins, they all became part of a caring community, which she nurtured, appreciated and thanked in warm, lively letters. This sharing was our human heritage and privilege, each one of us being the embodiment of Jesus himself, his mother, Mary, and his father figure, Joseph: this was her deeply ingrained belief. From the outset, the sisters' services were to be given free of charge, without restrictions on gender, race or religious denomination.

During the first decade of the new century, the momentum increased even more: a home and nursing care for the 'incurably' aged and disabled; a soup kitchen for the hungry; a crèche for childcare; a large imposing Home of Compassion for parentless children, including, controversially, newborn infants, as well as a similar Home in Auckland; and two schools and missions still maintained on the Whanganui River. Suzanne, now in her late seventies, and her fewer than fifty sisters were essentially over-committed. At the end of 1912, the archdiocese conducted a much-needed review of the sisters' activities, workload and religious routine. Some good recommendations came out of this Visitation, but other changes were to be enforced which Suzanne could not countenance, such as closing the river communities and association with Māori, discontinuing work with young infants, and working mostly within the bounds of Catholic parishes.

Suzanne had run away from home to come to New Zealand in the first place; now in 1913 she effectively ran away again, without telling the sisters or church authorities of her decision to go to Rome and argue her case at the Vatican. Her prolonged stay there – six years – provides one of the richest seams in her correspondence, despite many letters being lost in World War I conditions. And yet, after she returned to New Zealand in January 1920, aged eighty-four, she continued to correspond at an astonishing rate despite cataracts and partial paralysis from strokes. This abundance of letters owed everything to the valuable partnership between Suzanne, whose brain was as astute as ever, and her intelligent secretary, Sister Angela Möller. Suzanne’s rules of etiquette still required handwritten letters in certain cases, and the last penned messages of the ninety-one-year-old woman trail faintly down the page.

Correspondence is mutual recognition and action, a way of loving and seeking love, of virtual touching and being touched, all crucial for human health and survival. For both writer and recipient, a letter is an extension of daily life.<sup>3</sup> Even when there is dissent or hostility in a communication, identity is acknowledged. This was especially important in the nineteenth century when, for the first time, people en masse learned to read and write; and when they also left their home towns and hamlets in waves for alien industrial cities or unknown dots on the surface of the globe. The gift of expanding literacy was well used; letters had real currency in people’s lives, whether they were simple family epistles or beautifully crafted exchanges between two kindred souls, each animating the heart and intellect of the other. The letter itself, with the writer’s actual touch lingering on the page, was an artefact to be treasured, and the safe passage of mail became endowed with an almost religious duty and dedication.

In her *Manual of Maori Conversation*, Suzanne allotted high value to the section ‘To write a letter: Mo te tuhituhi pukapuka reta nei’. There are forty-two entries, including: ‘There must be some letters for me at the post-office: Kei te poutapeta ano pea etahi pukapuka moku.’ ‘Are there any letters for me?: He pukapuka ano ranei moku?’ ‘I was grieved at not receiving an answer: I pouri ahau i te korenga whakautu kupu mai ki au.’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mireille Bossis, ‘Methodological Journeys through Correspondence’, in *Men and Women of Letters*, Yale French Studies No.71, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> S.A., *New and Complete Manual of Maori Conversation*, Wellington, 1885, pp.114–16.

Letters were copied, if possible, in case ships sank, but countless letters were lost. Suzanne's family correspondence is one wistfully huge loss, but the mail service was not responsible. She exercised her right to destroy the letters she received regularly from home – far more than one a month, she mentioned in an 1870s letter. Even with incoming correspondence falling off with the passage of years and the death of her mother, the sum would still have been impressive. They were undoubtedly burned in her urgent conflagration just before her departure for Rome in August 1913. Under suspicion by the local Catholic hierarchy, and with some sisters then struggling with their loyalties, Suzanne would not have wanted personal documents, revealing whatever family financial issues, foibles and stresses there were, to be available to interested eyes during her absence. And thereafter, as her secretary Sister Angela observed, Suzanne quietly disposed of family letters after reading them.

A torn scrap marking a page, and thereby escaping destruction, is a poignant remnant. It dates from 1868 or 1869, after her parents had moved from Lyon to live in the country at Chollet, close to St Laurent-en-Royans in the Vercors region. On one side her mother enquires after Suzanne's original companion, Antoinette Deloncle, whose own mother is anxiously awaiting her overdue return to France. But Antoinette never arrives, instead living on until 1904 in mental asylums in Sydney. On the other side is Suzanne's father, his handwriting affected probably by a stroke.

...You'll keep us informed of things as they develop around you. You are in winter whereas for a week now we've been having very hot weather. Our countryside is very charming at present and there are nightingales all around us in the evening.

I am leaving for Lyon tomorrow.

With much love

Your father

Aubert

I write with great difficulty.

A Catholic nun was largely expected to have left her family for God, in the form of her religious sisterhood. This also might entail the supervision of her letters. Religious dedication was expected to override nostalgia for home. Suzanne's own letters home may not have contained the detail of daily life and the emotions of letters written by some Protestant missionary wives – women whose family correspondence was their lifeline. After all, she needed to validate her hard-won choice of vocation. But her letters would undoubtedly have been written with the liberty of expression her

personality and anomalous situation allowed her. There would have been some supervision of her mail in the 1860s, but after the collapse of the tiny Auckland congregation, within the greater collapse of Pompallier's diocese, she was a laywoman and only unofficially a 'sister' until 1884. And then, although once again a nun, she was the largely unhindered leader of women much younger than herself. Her ink could run fairly freely.

Yet her side of the family correspondence has not survived either. If Suzanne had been a secular settler wife and mother, letters over the decades of separation could have been circulated around family left behind, then in later years around adult daughters and sons in New Zealand, to be passed down through the generations and preserved. But the family correspondence of Catholic religious was more vulnerable. Childless, these people became with the passage of years a vaguely remembered old great-aunt or uncle somewhere out there ... and their letters disappeared in garret clean-ups. Suzanne's closest 'descendants' were two nephews. Maybe her letters had been progressively 'tidied' after the death of her younger brother Camille, a priest, in 1891, then her mother Clarice in 1894, her older brother Alphonse in 1912, and his wife Gabrielle in the 1920s. Neither of the nephews – named Louis for their grandfather and Camille for their uncle – settled down in one place for many years. They were still unmarried, although around forty, at the time they were fighting, along with eight million other Frenchmen, in the trauma of World War I. Neither their situation nor their disposition could easily safeguard Suzanne's letters.

Suzanne would definitely have written hundreds and hundreds of letters to her family over the years. One rare survival, written in Jerusalem on 30 April 1895 to her brother Alphonse, indicates that she was still writing steadily into her old age – and even much later letters from Rome would refer to news from France. This particular letter to Alphonse covers family changes after the death of their mother the year before. Suzanne had ownership of the maternal family home, in Tarare near Lyon, and Alphonse was contemplating moving there. There is caution and reserve in her writing; the subtext of Alphonse's negotiation over family inheritance is not far below the surface.

Dear Alphonse

Seeing that your sons are keen on foreign stamps, I'll write to you using two of our lettercards so that they'll both have some stamps. I received your letter about the house

in Tarare and I've just written on the subject to our cousin Henri. I want to be helpful and please you, but everything will need to be arranged in such a way that I will never be exposed to any obligation to send money from here, because I don't have any and never will.

You say you want to buy a court registrar's practice. Think it over carefully before deciding to shift from Chollet. If you aren't successful with your registrar's business, you won't have a home base any more. I can't assess the issue and advise you from afar; but have a close look at all the aspects.

I'm really sorry that you haven't been able to find work for Louis. Things must be going very badly in France if there's no way for him to find a settled occupation. So, Camille will be taking on the risks and chances of a career in the military. I wish him every success and, above all else, that he stays a good Christian. Our cousin Armand has set him the example here and I pray with all my heart to the good Lord that he will follow it.

I'm distressed to hear that you are still suffering from your poor foot. It's the sad fact that we've reached the age of aches and pains and infirmities, but we'll just have to resign ourselves to the will of God and sanctify the little time we still have in this world.

Give my very sincere friendly greetings to your dear wife and affectionate regards to her family.

I have written several times to Tarare, but no reply. Mesdames Périer must have forgotten how to hold a pen. What has become of Joseph Poupelier? Is he alive or dead? Married or not?

I send you all tons of kisses. It's midnight and I'll have to leave you for now. I have so many works on hand here that I'm snowed under on every side.

Your beloved sister,  
Sr Mary Joseph Aubert

The other people referred to were also family: her Périer aunt and cousins, and Alphonse's two sons, Louis and Camille. Cousin Henri had her power of attorney. In the event, Suzanne proceeded to make over the house to Louis, who kept this letter on its two lettercards and handed it on to his daughter. Nothing else has been found so far; nothing has emerged from the attics of four houses associated with the family over the years. Her intimate family correspondence, therefore, has stayed with her alone.

Given that Suzanne was a congregational founder, we might expect her letters to contain considerable spiritual guidance for her daughters in religion. But we do not find this until 1915, late in her life. For one thing, she was not at the head of a community until she was nearly fifty, and no new congregation was founded until she was fifty-seven. Even then, with Ranana only five kilometres down-river and the sisters regrouping at weekends at Hiruharama, there was no other community to exchange

letters with until 1899, when she went to Wellington and set up a new community there. Admittedly, she could have been writing more spiritual content in her letters during the year away on her collecting tour in 1889; the same applies to the Jerusalem correspondence until the novices came down to Wellington after 1904. The strange, controlling personality of Father Soulas, and his ability to access the post office run from the convent, could account for some reticence. Women were canonically not expected to preach, and he was increasingly seeing himself not just as mission priest but as ‘Farmer, Postmaster and above all Founder of Nuns’, even ‘Master of Novices’, as Marist Father Olier reported with concern in November 1903.<sup>5</sup>

Suzanne, nonetheless, was inculcating her farsighted spirit in her sisters from her first days with them – by her example, as part of her daily conversation with them, through the practical and comprehensive constitutions she wrote, and through her formative talks. There are references to their content in some sisters’ notes. These ‘conferences’ to the novices revealed her tradition of ‘Martha and Mary hand in hand’, of spirituality allied with practicality. They would have been the prototype of one important spiritual document that does come within the domain of her letters. This was her ‘Letter to the Novices’, which she first called ‘Mother M. Joseph and her chicks’. She sent it from Rome as her Christmas present for 1915 with the closing message: ‘May this poor scribbling help you a little on the way to heaven.’ It is framed as a relaxed, conversational catechism.

One of the areas of learning she set for these young women was, instead of reading numerous pious texts, to study in their minds the concept of the Crib, Christ’s birth narrative, and to apply the many messages they ‘read’ in it to their own experience as Sisters of Compassion. The reality of their everyday life and the essence of the biblical story were to be integrated. For instance, the leftovers or ‘broken food’ the sisters received for their patients and themselves were depicted in Suzanne’s nativity scene.

*52 What a lot of things you can read. What else do you see? ...*

I see that vigilance in the patient performance of our daily duties is a good disposition to hear the voice of God. [The shepherds] ‘were watching in the fields, minding their flocks’ ...

I see by the attention paid by Mary and Joseph to the Shepherds and to the Magi, charity and real Christian politeness and courtesy.

I see in the humble offerings of the Shepherds how ready we must be to share whatever we have with Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the poor ... The shepherds could only

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<sup>5</sup> Olier to Superior General Fr Martin, Wellington, 2 Nov. 1903, APM OP 418.

give out of their poor fare, usually a sort of bread baked with a little oil under the ashes, and milk and honey when obtainable. Seeing the destitution of the Holy Family, they very likely, with their good simple hearts, brought pieces of their bread, and a drop of milk, part of their own meals, what you would call broken food to the Queen of heaven, to her husband and to the Divine Baby, and they were gratefully received.

Oh! Sisters of Compassion, who have the privilege to live on alms, do not turn up your noses at broken food. Think of the crib and relish the bits you collect. Broken food was blessed, I cannot say at the table, for there was none, but in the cave of Bethlehem ... Did you ever think of it?

In another section, she encouraged the novices to develop the trusted qualities of Jesus' faithful donkey – in Rome she was surrounded by donkeys, the common beasts of burden. The third quality was patience.

*93 The virtue that everybody preaches and so few practise?*

Just so.

*94 But what is patience?*

It is to know how to wait; how to bear and forbear for God's sake.

*95 With whom have we to be patient?*

First with God.

*96 Patient with God!! Oh! that is rich. We always thought[t] that it was God Who had to be patient with us?*

Yes, God is most wonderfully patient with us, but we also must be patient with Him, that is to say: We must know how to bear the crosses and trials He sends us. We must know how to wait for Him. In some instances that patience is called: submission, resignation, etc. ...

*99 But to do that have we not to be patient also with ourselves?*

To be sure we have. We need the greatest patience with ourselves, because there is a constant warfare between our soul, our intellect, our reason, our poor human nature, our natural inclinations, our higher aspirations (those of grace). When the soul says 'Yes', the body says 'No'. When the heart says 'Yes', the [head] says 'No'. When our higher aspirations want to lift us up, our natural inclinations drag us down. It is most trying, and we want patience with every part of us, and with the whole of us.

From patience with God and with themselves, she moved the novices to the next step of patience with others – fellow sisters getting on their nerves; crying, sodden-napped babies; and the cranky elderly.

She also addressed the strain on young sisters of fundraising in order that their services be given free of charge.

44 *Then, begging in the houses of the rich is an apostolate?*

It is an apostolate which has a good side, but is fraught with many drawbacks, even with serious dangers ... We are exposed to boast of what we are doing, and even of what we do not do, to hear vain praises which make us swell with vanity like the frog, and fill our head with nonsenses and the spirit of the world ... Be polite without flattery, be humble without cringing; respect yourselves ... Seek first to please God for whom you are begging, in begging for the poor, and He will make you find the necessary resources. You ought to desire nothing more than that. The poor have no superfluity.

Jesus was to be seen even in the worst degradation of the men around them.

40 *Well, that is understood. It applies to all men, but you are not going to tell us to see Jesus in women?*

First, when we speak of men we speak also of women ... When the Son of God became man to redeem us, He hid Himself nine months in the womb of a woman. His sacred body was formed with the purest blood of a woman. His heart began to beat in the bosom of a woman. His first smile and his first caresses were for a woman. He has abandoned Himself completely and lovingly to the care of a woman ...

When you are in [the] presence of poor unhappy women, see in them the living image of Mary; see in them your Mother, who is also the Mother of Jesus and see Jesus in His mother. A woman, Saint Elisabeth, has been the privileged human creature who has recognised Him there.

Suzanne wrote other texts on spirituality on her return from Rome, including a similar document for her professed sisters, which went, along with the 'Letter to the Novices', into the *Directory* published in 1922. Her spiritual guidance, however, was usually communicated implicitly in her letters, and rarely expressed as explicitly as in this 'Letter' with its direct idiomatic style modelled on her talks and conversations with the sisters.

A different type of letter, characteristic of much nineteenth-century missionary discourse, exists in Suzanne's correspondence, mainly in her mid-career writing. Typically, this was an outsider's account to 'armchair missionaries' at home of the geographic and ethnographic 'frontier-lands' these Christian scouts were exploring. The narratives were destined, it was hoped, for publication in the relevant missionary annals – in the case of Catholic Europe, in the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*, or later the Marist *Annals of the Missions*. As such, they were crafted pieces worked up from drafts, aiming to inspire their readers with apostolic enthusiasm and to attract support and funding for the mission society. As well, they were adventure narratives per se, part of nineteenth-century Europe's reach around the globe.

Even if the writers were sensitive to the indigenous culture they were describing, as Suzanne definitely was, their observation was through the lens of their own culture. This sense of distance was reinforced in the editing process, when the narrative was usually abridged and paraphrased. When we read the entries on New Zealand in the *Annals*, we are usually not reading the original text. Suzanne wrote some letters of this type in the 1870s and 1880s, and a few underwent editing and publication. Any reproduced here are from the original manuscript.

Epistology is the study of letters as a genre in history and literature. Our fascination with letters is reflected in the extensive publication projects that have been undertaken, whether a relatively modest eight volumes of Robert Louis Stevenson's edited letters, or forty volumes of Rousseau's. The editor sometimes selects with biographical clarification as a criterion; or the elucidation and amplification of the letter-writer's particular philosophy, interest, gift or cause; or the literary quality of the letters themselves, as in C. K. Stead's selection of Katherine Mansfield's correspondence.<sup>6</sup>

For this edition, there have been three main criteria. The first was to provide the widest representative range on the longest timeline possible, in order to do justice to the great span of Suzanne Aubert's life. The second was to include some incoming letters for the dynamics of exchange – the very meaning of the word 'correspondence' – and also letters about Suzanne or the situation, to provide invaluable context. The third criterion was to include only complete letters, in order to avoid the temptation to skirt around segments and slant representation. This was faithfully respected, until the multiplication in her old age of letters with overlapping subject matter led to some excerpting, signalled when this begins in Chapter 12.

Suzanne was one of many founders of Catholic congregations and the publication of her letters is therefore part of a wide field. Larger religious congregations have had complete collections of their founder's letters edited, printed and sometimes published. These are read mainly by their members, in the Vatican II spirit of rediscovering the original spirit, or by religious historians. The academic world also sees huge projects of complete correspondence undertaken in the domain of 'epistolary literature', with a mainly informed in-house readership. However, just as I wrote the biography, *The Story*

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<sup>6</sup> *Katherine Mansfield: Letters and Journals*, selected by C. K. Stead, Auckland, 2004 edn, p.14.

of *Suzanne Aubert*,<sup>7</sup> for a general readership, *Letters on the Go* is also intended to be as inclusive as possible. This has required narrowing the selection down from about eight hundred surviving letters.

In setting out to edit these letters, I have tried to keep in mind several responsibilities to Suzanne, the writer, and to you, the reader. As well as the question of criteria and accessibility, there are issues of translation; of Suzanne's privacy, and that of others; of her purpose and selectivity in writing – what has gone in and been left out; of different draft versions; of editorial commentary; and of the influence our individual selves and our different era have on our reading.

Translation is a major issue for New Zealand Catholic history, and its place in New Zealand and Pacific history overall. The huge archive of correspondence of the New Zealand and Oceania mission is not familiar to many historians and the wider public, as access is still mainly in French. Although the missionaries' letters up to 1854 have now undergone careful editing and are available, they are naturally the original texts, although a co-operative translation project is under way. The Sisters of Compassion, as a New Zealand congregation, fronted up to their own need for English versions of Suzanne's correspondence years ago, and the late Marist Father Maurice Scully made significant inroads into the French documents in their archives. However, whether earlier translations have existed or not, letters from all sources included in this book have been translated afresh and, in the case of Suzanne's, with her typical rhythms and idioms in mind.

Another facet of language is Suzanne's use of English. She was a talented linguist and quickly gained a command of idiomatic English, but occasionally a word or phrase pulls us up short in an otherwise correct and colloquial passage. For instance: 'I have a heap of letters to answer. I must be laconic.'<sup>8</sup> The word *laconique* is normal French for 'brief'; *le laconisme* is 'brevity'. '*Excusez pour aujourd'hui mon laconisme*,' she once wrote to Isa Outhwaite.<sup>9</sup> We would not say 'I must be laconic'; the word has another overlay in English. There are a few other examples of 'false friends' in her English. We find 'condescension' for helpful co-operation, 'misery' for extreme poverty and hardship, 'sympathetic' for pleasant or likeable, and so on.

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<sup>7</sup> Jessie Munro, *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*, Auckland, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Aubert to Sr Clotilde, Wellington, 21 Aug. 1924, SOCA 25H/4.

<sup>9</sup> Aubert to Isa Outhwaite, Rome, [5] Apr. 19[14], ACDA CLE 125–4; SOCA 15/8.

When we read private and confidential letters, especially those of a former era, we are essentially unauthorised readers of texts with allusions we cannot fully understand. We need to keep a certain reserve, a spirit of enquiry, as we read. To whom was it intended, when and why was it written, and under what circumstances? Was it an initiative or a response? What else was happening at the time? The letters that Suzanne intended to be passed on to the Propagation of the Faith would be hoping for a readership of thousands. But a few were very private, to one person only, as in a February 1913 draft of a letter to Bishop Vernon in Dunedin, where its various over-writings show her anguish over the recent Visitation.

The letters of isolated Catholic missionaries could occasionally have a confessional quality. In an introduction to his translations of early Marist Brothers' letters from New Zealand, Brother Edward Clisby outlined the two types of letter the rule required the brothers to write to their Superiors in France. One was an open document describing their experiences; the other, the 'letter of rule', was more intimate and confessional, 'an account of the state of my soul', as Brother Claude-Marie Bertrand put it in one of his letters. The first type could be released for publication in the annals; the second was for the eyes of the Superior alone. Basically, the writer could offload in confidence anything he needed to – complaints, temptations and discouragements. 'Such letters', Clisby wrote, 'offer an unexpected insight into the interior lives of the men of the mission and serve to underline their humanity.'<sup>10</sup>

Suzanne's letters from 1868 to 1871 are examples of these. They were never intended as documents for family, friends or the public. She had been ill, overworked, and for a long time without steady, trusted guidance. Bishop Goold and Jesuit Father Dalton, on their Visitation from Australia of the devastated Auckland Diocese, had conducted retreats, given counsel, encouraged confidences, and asked also for accounts in writing. The little Congregation of the Holy Family no longer existed, and Suzanne was drawing closer to the Marists. Father Reignier, visiting from Hawke's Bay, probably encouraged her to begin writing to Father Poupinel, whom she had met in 1866, and to Father Yardin, who had been a director of conscience for her in Lyon in the late 1850s. Her letters to them, with confidences partly solicited by them, were

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Clisby, 'The Brothers at Pompallier House', Pompallier Symposium 2004: 'Te Uru mai o te iwi wiwi: The French Place at the Bay of Islands'.

written to surrogate directors of conscience in a burst of a young woman's pent-up emotion.

Vivid and dynamic though they may be, these letters belong to Clisby's second category. Poupinel, who himself had earlier referred to Pompallier's situation in Auckland as a 'hornets' nest' (*un guêpier*), gently reined her in. She promised to 'padlock her mouth'. In reading this sort of private letter, we need to try to understand the context.

Suzanne was perceptive in her appraisal, yet with her warm and optimistic nature she could initially hero-worship men she admired, relaxing and showing her dramatic and impulsive side. From Sydney, Marist Father Joly wrote in 1873 to Poupinel in France that Suzanne had been inspired by the visit to Hawke's Bay of yet another French Marist from Sydney, Father Forestier.

He appears to be in good odour, not only of his pipe but of sanctity in the opinion of Mademoiselle Aubert. He saw a lot of her during his stay in Napier. She even made a retreat under his direction without Father Reignier's knowledge. She's just written him a letter that I've read even though it was written for him alone, where she entrusts him overmuch with her confidences and makes fun somewhat of the others. She's urging him to go again to Napier and promises to keep him informed with everything going on.<sup>11</sup>

To some extent, in reading Suzanne's letters in Chapter 1, we are like Father Joly, seeing a text written solely for the eyes of another.

The contents of a letter are naturally selective according to its addressee or purpose, and this has implications in historical documents. William Colenso, the Church Missionary Society printer and a keen botanist, has provided a good case study in selectivity. He set out in 1841 on a long journey to distribute new texts and also to collect specimens to send to Kew Gardens in London. Lydia Wevers, in her book *Country of Writing: Travel Writing and New Zealand, 1809–1900*,<sup>12</sup> points out the discrepancy in his two versions of the one event. As the naturalist reporting to Kew, he makes little if any mention of his lay missionary alter ego. In his set-piece nineteenth-century explorer prose, Māori are 'unnamed natives', 'guides and Baggage bearers' who 'service the explorer's needs'.

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<sup>11</sup> Joly to Poupinel, Sydney, 24 Feb. 1873, APM OP 458.

<sup>12</sup> Lydia Wevers, *Country of Writing: Travel Writing and New Zealand, 1809–1900*, Auckland, 2002.

His journal, on the other hand, which he copied and sent to the Church Missionary Society, does not mention botanising but concentrates on proselytising and the distribution of his newly printed biblical texts; and on the drama of his confrontation with Catholic Father Baty, who most frustratingly was out in the lead on the same track at the same time. Yet this doctrinal duel with the Catholic priest does not appear in his botanical narrative. He chose to vary his authorial voice for different purposes.

Suzanne occasionally did this in her mission activity letters of the 1870s and 1880s, crafted for the annals with the aim of spiritual edification and in the further hope of keeping coppers rattling into the mission boxes. So any hints of dissension among missionaries would most likely be excluded. In her vivid account of the 1880 opening of the church at Pakipaki, symbolising the renewal of Māori mission after a lapsed decade and a half, she skirts carefully around the distress lurking in the background. There was trouble with Father Soulas, and the ageing Father Reignier had declined to attend. The Pākehā had offended their marae hosts by not participating, except for Suzanne and Brothers Basile and Cyprien, in the hākari meal. In her public letter, there are only oblique references to this; all in all, the event was overwhelmingly positive for her anyway.

More than one version of a letter might exist because copies were sometimes kept in case of loss; or rough drafts were tucked in the back of old diaries or exercise books. Slight differences between the wording of a draft and the final letter can be quite revealing. There are a few instances in Suzanne's case where the draft is all that remains, for example an 1887 letter to her brother Camille, documenting her intention that the rongoā bicultural medicines project was to be for the benefit of Māori mission. In another example, a succession of two or three draft versions can be deciphered in Suzanne's crossings-out and over-writings.

It became evident as the book progressed, with people, places and events multiplying greatly, that the value of these letters would be lessened without an accompanying narrative to interpret many references and contexts. This book is naturally a companion volume to *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*, but with the explanatory commentary it also stands alone.

As editor I also recognise the risk, in reading old letters, that we may appropriate and retro-colonise nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought, letting our reactions be overly influenced by subsequent shifts in philosophy or dogma. The belief of the times, referred to occasionally by Suzanne, that dead babies may be welcome 'angel

advocates' in heaven is less appealing to a liberal modern reader. But there is hardly anything that is repellent in her moralising; admonition about hellfire and damnation is singularly absent.

The journalist Frank Morton wrote of meeting Suzanne at the newly built Home of Compassion in 1908:

I went out with an artist friend who desired to paint her portrait. She would not consider the portrait project, but she insisted that we should take tea with her. The place was still a d[i]lapidation, order coming slowly out of chaos; but she took us to a room apart, and chatted gaily in her own language as we waited. She talks with a voluble brightness, in an accent that is not strictly Parisian. Her kindly, gentle humour often flashes into a very sprightly wit. And she shows pre-eminently as what you call a good woman. She neither whines nor poses. Her religion is of the rare and wholesome sort that is entirely of the heart, and radiates constantly from the heart outward. Her sympathies are too deep for wanton display, and her humanity is without capitulation.<sup>13</sup>

This is the woman of the letters. Whether Suzanne was writing informally to her 'dairie' (her friend Isa Outhwaite) or to 'Biddie' (Sister Bridget), or using the very formal closing phrase to Cardinals van Rossum and Gasquet of 'kissing the sacred purple' (the cardinal's ring), there is a noticeable constancy of tone and content, a common thread in the straight talking and the warm ending. Over the long years, what does not change is the impression of the realness of the woman writing. Even brief, telegraphic letters are alive with her awareness of what's going on, her engagement with her correspondent, and her grasp of important detail to share with that person. Hundreds and hundreds of people came into the flow of her pen or the rhythm of the typewriter: fellow missionaries and advisers-cum-spiritual directors; family, friends and 'grandchildren'; government officials, notables and supporters; priests, church hierarchy and fellow religious – especially, of course, her sisters. Her letters, crafted or jotted 'on the go', went 'with plenty love'.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Things Visible', *The Triad*, 1 Apr. 1908, Vol.16, pp.38–9.