

Independent and Spirited: Clementina Gordon (1918–2003)

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A printed invitation card, loosely inserted into an early printed book dated 1585, stating 'The Rev. Clementina M. Gordon, B.D. invites you to a Garden party at The Manse, High Street, Wivenhoe on Thursday July 1st, 1965' seemed unremarkable in itself, but what was intriguing was that this book, and a number of other works dating from 1578 to 1833, were donated to the Alexander Turnbull Library from the estate of Clementina Gordon in 2003, but with 'Opononi' given as her address. Why would someone with an interest in rare books and an obvious cultured background move herself, and her rare books, from England to the remote reaches of northern New Zealand, where the nearest centre was Kaikohe, 60 km away, and where events such as garden parties would be few and far between? Who was this woman who, at the age of 72, wrote from her sanctuary of St Isaac's near Opononi:

My father's old-fashioned gun happens always to be kept in my bedroom... at a pinch if I were ever in Diane W's situation, I would react with a 12 bore, just by instinct. I was taught to handle guns from about the age of 12, and at 7 am quite pleased that I got TWO black 'Captain Cooker' wild boars out of my bedroom window with one 0.22 shot! In fact the black one was only disabled, I had to put on a dressing gown and finish the poor brute off; still, there are some nice hams.¹

A search into the life of this woman was called for, and this article sets out to do just that.

Clementina Mary Gordon, or 'Clem' as she called herself, was born in Amesbury, Wiltshire, on 12 December 1918, the second child and only daughter of Peter Christian Gordon and Marian Alice Gordon (*née* Wakefield).² Her parents were well-to-do. Her father, a motor engineer, was a Lieutenant in the 1st Divisional Motor Transport Company in the First World War, but having fallen victim to the 1919 flu epidemic, spent much of his life as a gentleman of leisure.³

In adult life, Clem came across as independent and forthright, traits that can be found in abundance among her forebears. On her mother's side, she came from