



‘A world-proof life’:

Eleanor Dark, a writer in her times, 1901-
1985

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1985

By Marivic Wyndham

UTSePress, Sydney



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Cover photo Eleanor and Eric Dark at their Blue Moutains cave retreat, c. 1940s. Courtesy of Joris Ivens

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Prologue

It was in a late Australian spring day in 1986 that I first met Eleanor Dark. She had been dead for just over a year – a long quiet death had concluded a long quiet life, lived in the splendour of ‘Varuna,’ her magnificent home and gardens in the Blue Mountains. Her husband Eric – fourteen years her senior – had survived her, stubbornly clinging to the last threads of a hard-lived life, and to the memories of their sixty plus years as lovers, fellow intellectuals and humanists.

Since Eleanor’s death and for the duration Eric was day-camping on doctor’s orders on the ground-floor of ‘Varuna.’ For his bedside, he had chosen a little slice of the family’s elegant dining room. A tiny bed running parallel to the dining table hugged the long window overlooking the front entrance and the lush mature gardens he and she had brought to life and splendour over the years. One of many fruitful lifetime collaborations, the view from Eric’s makeshift bedroom was vivid poignant reminder of his lost partner and partnership.

I met Eric Dark only months before he died in 1987, his frail withered body no match for the dynamic imposing presence of the man himself. Or for the sharp translucent quality of the mind reflected in the poetic language and imagery with which he painted for me the lover and companion he now mourned. Eric had been exhausting – ‘divinely in earnest’ - in his endless physical, professional and political enthusiasms: no doubt about it. But for the woman who had shared – and endured – those enthusiasms, as I was later to discover for myself, he had been above all her life’s anchor and soul companion. Eric was the closest I would come to meeting the flesh-and-blood Eleanor.

Defying his doctor’s orders, Eric abandoned his bed to take me on a tour of ‘Varuna.’ With son Michael trailing behind, protesting hopelessly that *he* would do the honours, Eric led the way. This was *his* house and *he*, the host. The tour of the ground floor – living room, dining room, sun room, kitchen – took little time. Eric was keen to go upstairs. The room he wanted especially to show me required a long climb up the winding staircase to the family quarters. A determined Eric reached the top of the stairs and signalled to the right. Herein lay the heart of his ‘Varuna’: his and Eleanor’s bedroom for over half a century. A room with a view from its adjacent small terrace, the bedroom overlooked precisely the same aspect of their gardens as did his little bedside downstairs. I noted the coincidence, but it was no such thing. Upstairs or downstairs, Eric had invested that view with special significance. This had been their first shared view of daylight for over fifty years, he told me, it had been Eleanor’s one delight through the

long vigil of her last bedridden years. As the night descended on him, it was clear this view would also be his last.

The Eleanor Dark I came to meet that late afternoon at 'Varuna' bore little traces of the one I had met earlier that same year in the pages of a book of Australian women writers of the inter-war years where she featured as an 'exile at home.' Eric's Eleanor was the felt experience of the lover and comrade-in-arms. The Eleanor of Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home* was a ghost, summoned here and there to sit for group portraits with 'fellow' feminists and socialists, but one clearly ill at ease in her ill-sorted company. Refusing to sit still, this Eleanor would fade into thin air, leaving author, reader and cast of characters to wonder where she had gone.

Where did she go? And more to the point, wherein lay the 'real' Eleanor Dark, and where would I go to find her? The stark contrasts between the vibrant primary colours of the ardent lover, fervent thinker, strident humanist of Eric's portrait, and the pale spectrum of greys I managed to capture in the flickering flashes of the unwilling conscript in a group of 'exiles at home' perplexed me. Could Eric's flesh-and-blood lover and comrade-in-arms be the same Eleanor Dark as the ghost in Modjeska's contrived gallery of political icons?

Eric's Eleanor no less so than the ghost-like figure of *Exiles at Home* were refractions from a prism. As such they reflected not only on the observed but also on the observer. Each saw in the prism what each went to see, but not – never – the full rays of the prism itself. Many years and many journeys to the prism of Eleanor Dark have yielded their own refractions to me. But alas not – never – the full realities and rays of the prism itself. The Eleanor Dark I went looking for had her – my – own subtexts and subjectivities: as a Cuban-American-New Australian, I had different questions to pose, different answers to seek of the prism. For all my gentle and not-so-gentle probings, this hard fact was the sum total of the 'truths' which the journeys to and from the prism revealed to me inch by inch, step by step, season by season of consuming research. The rest would remain mere glimpses and glances of possible 'truths' and possible Eleanors.

The woman, the writer, the reluctant national icon that you are about to meet is thus in a sense my Eleanor Dark. Of her I have posed some simple, some impossible questions, and equally I have imposed some simple, some impossible challenges. Not least of which was that she be my own native companion through the labyrinths that we newcomers to an adopted homeland must negotiate in order to find our place in the timeless land.

Chapter One.

Tailoring her own suit of beliefs

Artists! The ruthless conceit of them! Painting as they felt, writing as they felt, making music; never caring whom they flayed and tortured, what unendurable agonies of human suffering, what hardly more endurable summits of human joy they captured and bound within the limits of their insatiable art.¹

If I could arrange the literature world to my satisfaction writers would never be photographed, and would be known by numbers instead of names.²

This story investigates and reinterprets the writing life of the important but misunderstood Australian novelist, Eleanor Dark. Since the 1970s, New Left historians interpreted her work (individually but mostly as part of a group) around the themes of socialism, feminism and radical nationalism.³ While all three contained a grain of truth, they obscured biographical and contextual dimensions which are central to a more complete assessment of Dark's life and work. In particular, these interpretations overlooked the origins of Dark's work in a relatively privileged experience of inter-war Australia, and classified her work in ways which did not correspond either to her own values or to her significance in the intellectual and cultural history of that period.

Certainly, Dark's political sympathies were generally with the Left on issues such as civil liberties and distrust of capitalism, but she belonged to no particular party or identified with any particular set of political beliefs. Political thinkers – Marxists, in particular – irritated her as intellectually pretentious and deliberately obscurantist in their language. Political labels offended her sense of individuality. The causes she espoused, the institutions and movements with which she aligned herself, the company she kept over time – all of which comprised a broad cross-section of Australian cultural and political life – did not add up to a particular ideology. A humanism of sorts laced and mellowed her thinking. Her socialism, though heartfelt, was sentimental, and her feminism, while marked by a militant phase in the 1920s, was always deeply qualified by her class alignment and her fear of the power of the masses. Her radical nationalism bore few traces of Henry Lawson's and Joseph Furphy's egalitarianism and masculinity. Dark was no democrat; she would have much preferred a meritocracy. Her sense of nationalism was essentially a metaphysical evocation of 'a

timeless land' rather than identification with particular class or cultural interests.

It is in these ways that Dark did not and does not fit the generalised categories into which historians have placed her. And it is also in these ways that Dark provides a new perspective onto the ways in which she and other cultural and intellectual figures of her generation attempted to negotiate a range of issues distinctive to inter-war Australia. These issues included nationalism versus internationalism, populism versus elitism, nation versus empire, the advocacy of a popular distinctive national culture without empowering the masses, liberalism versus socialism, indigenous versus European Australia, Old World versus New World values, bush versus city culture. What kind of society was Australia to be: an outpost of empire still, an American clone, or an independent society? Rather than relating Dark's writing to preconceived categories, I attempt to take seriously her own repeated emphasis on the place of the creative writer amid these conflicting social forces.

The creator and sole proprietor of a philosophy is not commonly receptive to the philosophies of others. The bloke who has accurately tailored his own suit of beliefs to his own measure out of the intractable material of study and experience, does not lightly exchange it for any ideology off the peg.⁴



The young Pixie, c. 1908-1910

Eleanor Dark (nee Eleanor 'Pixie' O'Reilly, 1901-1985) was born in Sydney into a cultured middle-class family and educated in private

schools. On her father's side, she came from a long line of artists. Dowell O'Reilly himself was a distinguished poet and short-story writer. As the family's finances grew tighter, her hopes of university and a writing career yielded to the business college and secretarial position, until marriage to Eric Payten Dark in 1922 improved her prospects dramatically. She lived most of her long married life in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains, writing in relative isolation from the society she perceived to be in crisis. In the 1950s, through the worst of the Cold War, she and Eric retreated further to hobby-farming in Montville, Queensland.

Her writing spanned seven decades. She wrote several non-fiction pieces and, in the 1950s, two travel pieces. She loathed the literary critic whom she regarded as a parasite of the artist, and refused to engage in any kind of literary criticism. Her body of writing was mainly fiction. She wrote her first verse at the age of three and continued to experiment across a range of *genres* well into her seventies, although the novel was her principal medium. She had a facility for popular romances which she exploited fully when her conscience allowed her. Her writing was distinguished for its form. She experimented widely with technique, and was among the early pioneers of modernist writing in Australia. Her literature provides an index of popular waves in fiction-writing. Her best writing derived from intimate knowledge of her material and first-hand experience of the character-types and worlds she created. She knew educated middle-class Australia from the inside, and could capture its essence and flavour with a few strokes of the pen. She mostly disapproved of suburbia and its values, and disassociated herself from it by reserving for it her most pungent social comments. The mind fascinated her, and the bush was her physical and spiritual solace. She drew compelling landscapes of each. In 1959, the Australian poet John Manifold caught the essence of these two streams in her work, indicating something of what her contemporaries valued in it.

It was not principally for their human characters that I used to read and re-read these early novels of Eleanor Dark, but for the feel of sunlight and the smell of boronia. The characters were living such intensely inward lives, so wrapped in reminiscence and self-analysis, that I didn't find them very good company. Their actions, rare in any case and impelled by a powerful head of emotional steam, were too premeditated, violent and tragic to strike me as real. But the landscape, the Australianism of the background, that was dinkum!⁵

Dark published ten novels, mainly in the 1930s and 1940s. Seven

were contemporary, the rest composed a historical trilogy. The first volume of the trilogy *The Timeless Land* (1941) brought her greatest fame both at home and overseas, especially in the United States where it was Book-of-the-Month. Set for a time in the school syllabus in New South Wales and Victoria, a generation of students learned the history of their country through Dark's fictionalised account of the beginnings of European settlement.

Yet the promise of a brilliant career in the mid-1930s was not fulfilled. Forces from within and without her 'world-proof life' derailed her work, and throughout her career, her reputation oscillated. Her first published novel *Slow Dawning* (1932) – by her own admission, a 'pot-boiler' – made little impact. It was then followed by the combined triumphs of her second and third novels, *Prelude to Christopher* (1934) and *Return to Coolami* (1936), which attracted Australia's most prestigious literary award⁶ and suddenly thrust her into the limelight of Australian literary life. The early novels demonstrated her interest and skills in techniques of psychological modernism. Dark's two Depression novels, in which she attempted to assimilate techniques of social realism, *Sun Across the Sky* (1937) and *Waterway* (1938), did not have the same success.

The peak of her career came with the publication of *The Timeless Land* (1941), but was followed by her wartime novel *The Little Company* (1945), effectively a manifesto from the alienated writer, which disappointed most readers. Her historical trilogy also finished unevenly. The second volume *Storm of Time* (1948) matched the first in critical reception and, arguably, surpassed it in quality. The third volume *No Barrier* (1953) failed altogether to find an American publisher and was in every way the poor relation of the earlier two. Adopting a new form, *Lantana Lane* (1959) surprised and pleased the critics with its sunniness and lighthearted wit, promising a new exciting chapter in her writing life. Dark's first book to be set and soaked in small town rural Australia proved to be her last published work.

The 'artist,' a 'world-proof life' and 'the little company' are key terms used throughout this book. Each term is Dark's, recurring and central to an understanding of the forces that shaped her writing life. The three are inter-related and together hold the kernel of the story itself.

Dark used the term 'the artist' liberally in reference to herself and to kindred spirits. Her conception of the artist defined her sense of self, her approach to her work and to her role in society. The concept was largely romantic, vague and anachronistic. A composite picture emerges through her writings of one possessed, empowered and frustrated by

being 'the artist.' The artist's was the 'peril and the solitude,'⁷ 'the hard and lonely alternative'⁸ of walking alone, bearing at once the burden of her own demons and of moral responsibility for struggling against the forces of darkness in society. The image of the writer it evoked – as impervious to outside forces and of independent conscience – was not new. In Australia, Christopher Brennan, among others, had identified with it almost half a century before. The lone artist working in 'heroic individualism' to produce what eventually becomes a disembodied text has, as Bernard Smith argued, a long pedigree.⁹ But for Dark, there was a rub, for she also sought a rapport with the wider community. While, on the one hand, she demanded solitude and obscurity for the artist as her right and the proper environment in which to produce her work, on the other, she expected warm sympathies from her community for her work.

The theme of 'the artist' is the principal thread holding the various elements – personal, intellectual, professional, political, creative – of the story of her writing life together. It encapsulates her privileged life and the distance she cultivated from her society.

'World-proof life' was to Eleanor Dark an ambivalent term, expressing the necessity for that distance, a wistful goal and the artist's burden. She first used it in conversation between two writer-characters in *The Little Company*.¹⁰ The meaning and significance she attached to this term over time must also be seen in biographical terms. Her experiences as a child informed the cocoon-like personal world she later shaped for herself. A miserable childhood set basic requirements of a high level of material and emotional security. Redlands, beloved *alma mater* in Sydney's Neutral Bay, provided the first model for such a life, and marriage to Dr Eric Payten Dark the resources – personal and financial – to create and preserve it. Time and circumstance tested its strength and resilience. It withstood and triumphed even over the worst of the Cold War in the 1950s, when the 'world-proof life' had its apotheosis in a little Queensland village 'round the corner from the world.'¹¹ When it and with it her art collapsed in the late 1950s, its undoing came – as it almost had to – from within that 'world-proof life.'

'Artist' and 'world-proof life' worked together. Each fed, reinforced and justified the other. In 1942, at the height of her writing career, an American academic wrote to Eleanor Dark asking for 'a brief biographical sketch' of her life. She expressed herself 'very willing to help,' but warned 'there's hardly material for such a thing, as my life has been uneventful to the point of being humdrum!'¹² All her life, Dark sought to deflect attention from her personal life to her creative work, partly to protect her privacy and partly because of her profound

conviction that the text was all: questions of who produced it, how and why should not intrude into the reader's reception of a work of art. Yet it is impossible to read her published work without reflecting on the way in which this private life fed the fiction and encapsulated for her the role of the artist. Dark preferred to conceal her biographical dimensions. So effective was she that at the height of her literary success in 1941, an article in *Smith's Weekly* noted: 'Australians know nothing about her. Her reputation abroad is higher than it is here in her home country.'¹³

'Artist' and 'the little company' also worked together. Being 'the artist' was her key into and principal bond with the small exclusive circle of writers that was her professional 'home' through the 1930s and 1940s, and was the model for her wartime novel, *The Little Company* (1945). The group was composed of prominent resident writers of the inter-war period. It included Vance and Nettie Palmer, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Miles Franklin, Frank Dalby Davison, and from time to time Jean Devanny, Leonard Mann, Xavier Herbert and Dymphna Cusack. Except for Nettie, all were primarily novelists, though many dabbled and some excelled in other forms of creative writing, such as poetry, short story-writing and drama. Women predominated in number but not, as Modjeska claimed, in artistic standing. Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938) placed him in a class of his own, as most in the group freely conceded. Dalby Davison's *Man-Shy* (1931) was a favourite within and without the group. Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and Dark's *The Timeless Land* (1941) were also widely recognised but, even within the group itself, with serious reservations and qualifications.

The group shared a peculiar generational perspective that marked them and their writings as unique in Australian literary history. Most were born around the time of Federation and came to share a particular sense of moment and mission in their approach to the development of a distinctive and indigenous Australian literature. This common heritage lent their literature of social conscience (widely different in character and quality in most other ways) its distinctive signature. The question of women and women's rights appears for its time in an unprecedentedly explicit and coherent way in the literature, but it was neither sustained nor widespread.

The group was the first in Australia to attempt to find a public role for themselves amid a changing society. In literary *genres* and criticism, broadcasting, journalism and other avenues of public intellectual activity, they registered the changing nature of Australian society. Their radicalism was defined by their context – rather than in opposition to it – and by the form of their work as much as its content. Some were

friends, but their main bond was a shared conception of the artist, as well as a conviction of themselves as artists. They differed widely on other matters. The politics of gender was not a feature of the group and never explicit, but was largely confined to particular individuals. They shared no particular ideology beyond a romantic attachment to the Common Man, a moral dislike of capitalism and a vague cultural commitment to rid Australia of its bonds with the Mother Country.

Seen in historical perspective, the little company had a similar sociological function to that identified by Raymond Williams in his study of 'the Bloomsbury Fraction.' It too was a loosely formed, small self-contained cultural group, without apparent anchors or codified guiding principles. Yet, like the British group, its significance to the period is considerable, not only in its achievements but in what 'their modes of achievement' yield about the values and priorities of their broader society.¹⁴

The role of the little company in the story of Eleanor Dark's writing life was critical. It confirmed her 'the artist' and provided her with collegial support and professional validation. But these came at a price. Like Eric in her personal world, this other half of Dark's 'world-proof life' played an ambivalent role in both facilitating and undermining her work.

Dark's personal context is important here in two main ways: because it underwrote her writing life, and because it is her personal context that makes her historically interesting and significant. The central aim however is not an exhaustive study of the personality formulation, but a development of the personal context of Eleanor Dark's writing life. As such, it is a biography of a writer, complemented by elements of cultural history and literary criticism, and its focus, scope and priorities are governed accordingly. Eric Dark, for example, plays a major role in this story not simply because he was her husband, but because of his crucial impact on her writing life.

No sooner had Dark stopped writing than critics began assessing her historical significance. The trilogy prompted the first considerations of her work: A.K. Thomson's *Understanding the Novel: The Timeless Land* (1966), Xavier Pons' 1969 Masters thesis 'La Société Australienne (1788-1814) dans la Trilogie d'Eleanor Dark,'¹⁵ and A. Grove Day's 'bio-critical' full-length study *Eleanor Dark* (1976). Pons and Thomson placed their studies in the context of historical fiction writing. Day located his investigations of 'the Lady of the Mountains' in the nexus between her real and imagined lives. None wove his subject into the broader fabric of Australian cultural, social and political life.

A critical silence followed. Throughout the 1970s an occasional voice protested at her 'neglect' at the hands of Australian critics and the public generally. In 1977, Dymphna Cusack, prompted by the award of the Order of Australia to Dark in belated recognition for her services to Australian literature, remarked

How can it be that a country is so oblivious of one of her greatest writers, admired in Great Britain, Europe and America, that in the last three years of the academic list is represented by one book in one provincial university?¹⁶

The award sparked the first wave of reprints of several of her fiction novels.¹⁷

By then, the rescue of Eleanor Dark, individually and as part of a group of prominent women writers of the 1930s and 1940s, was already being effected by Left cultural historians. Drusilla Modjeska's 1973 Honours thesis, "'Hammer at Destiny': A Study of Eleanor Dark," employed methodological and conceptual tools of the new sociology of literature to access aspects of and approaches to her work. Literature was now being seen not just as a product of the author's imagination, but as an integral part of the author's way of assimilating and shaping the world around her. The thesis – 'a subjective exploration of her experience of the society in which she lived' – constituted the first serious attempt to consider Dark 'in relation to her times.'¹⁸ Modjeska set Dark within a feminist mould, casting her in the image of the angry woman of promise doomed by patriarchal Western society's gender-prescribed roles to have her energies misdirected, talents unappreciated, and promise squandered. In claiming Dark for radical feminism, Modjeska paid disproportionate attention to *Slow Dawning* which, while certainly permeated with militant feminism, is deeply qualified and of its own kind, time and place.

Modjeska's book *Exiles at Home* (1981) is the seminal piece on the subject of prominent (and promising) Australian women writers of the inter-war years. It claimed a stake in the inter-war period for feminist historians, and successfully launched the group as a subject in its own right. It pressed further the relationship between literature and history, from the biographical and sociological to the political. Literary texts were now 'bearers of meanings and ideologies within a culture.'¹⁹ While acknowledging the fact that Dark later disowned the work as a 'pot-boiler,' Modjeska continued to rest her argument about Dark's feminism largely on the basis of *Slow Dawning*. Dark's later literature in fact reveals a more complex feminism, which softened and eventually matured into what Pauline Johnson called 'feminism as radical humanism.'²⁰ The female hero type of her last novel is 'Gwinny' of

'Gwinny on Meat-day' in *Lantana Lane*, in potential only a precursor to the 1980s model of 'the superwoman,' equally competent in her domestic and public spheres. Her genius for organisation and 'fabulous memory' are cherished in the little village whose 'meat-day' tasks she runs expertly, but they are extensions of – not additions or alternatives to – skills developed as a farmer's wife and mother of five.²¹

Modjeska's book placed Dark for the first time within the broader historical context of Australian literary society of the 1930s and 1940s, grouping her with other prominent 'emancipated'²² women writers as 'exiles at home.' These women, she argued, had written under the burden of domestic and social gender-based constructions of their proper roles and place in society. Enduring patriarchal values surrounding cultural production, myth-making and the fostering of a national consciousness had conspired to diminish the impact of their work which, she argued, composed the best fiction of the period. Modjeska claimed for her subjects a dormant feminist consciousness. They were for her the precursors of modern women and their professional ambitions and dilemmas: seeking to satisfy intellectual and sexual needs, balance priorities of home and work, and make a mark in a society deeply embedded in patriarchal values.

Exiles at Home gave rise to considerable and sustained research activity, but to date, Modjeska's view remains fundamentally uncontested. The few challenges have been of degree, not of kind. Carole Ferrier's challenge to her portrayal of the group as 'an unproblematic sisterhood';²³ and Susan Sheridan's claims that the principal driving force behind these women writers' 'agenda' was not that of 'claiming a group identity as women' but as 'a part in the revived struggle for national identity'²⁴ are two examples.

One reason for the languishing debate is that as a 'type' these women writers became icons in similar ways and with similar results as the traditional Australian male 'universal' icon of the bushman-type, around which Russel Ward shaped his thesis of the Australian legend. The bushman was set in a timeless tough Australian physical environment, the woman writer in an equally timeless inhospitable Australian cultural, intellectual and social environment. David Walker's warning of over a quarter of a century ago to historians of Nettie and Vance Palmer – that 'canonisation will kill them'²⁵ – is relevant here. The same applies to the tendency among certain historians to assign them victim roles. Interviewing prominent figures of this group of women writers, Giulia Giuffré admitted to an 'overriding impression ...

not, I have to say, one of oppression, but of liberation, of freedom to think and to write.’ But she ascribed it to ‘the perspective of years’: ‘they did not want to waste time complaining about discrimination and difficulty.’²⁶

The evidence on Eleanor Dark and other women writers of the little company as revealed through their often voluminous collections of personal papers does not suggest that gender consciousness was either a sustained or a shared element in defining their sense of self as writers. Franklin, Prichard and Devanny each held strong long-standing views on ‘the woman question,’ but these neither stemmed from nor were fed by the group. As a group they interacted principally as writers. The ‘sisterhood’ did not exist there in any personal or political sense, while a profound and sacred sense of mission did – between all serious resident Australian writers of the period – about their place and role in creating a national literature.

This key distinction – between woman-writer and writer – also applies to the image of the exile and sense of alienation attached to Dark and female colleagues by Modjeska and others. Dark’s self-imposed exile from her society, following the defeat of Labor in the federal elections of 1949, was the exile of the radical, not of the Australian or the woman. ‘Home,’ both as family and homeland, was the bedrock of her personal and creative lives.

Australian writers generally have been cast in the role of victim. There is a long ‘victim tradition’ in Australian literary history, which over the years has embraced such disparate personalities as Henry Lawson, Christopher Brennan and John Shaw Nielson. Basically, this tradition sets the writer – the serious writer – against a grim background of community neglect, unenlightened local literary society, repressive government measures, paranoid censors, American and British cultural empires.²⁷ The tradition, fomented in the Left, had its apotheosis in cultural and political histories of the 1930s-1940s. It has now undergone a revival and not only by feminist historians. Another stream of the tradition poses the author as the innocent victim of the security organisations set loose on forward thinkers in the community in the Cold War. Fiona Capp’s *Writers Defiled* is among the contributions.²⁸ The case of Eleanor and Eric Dark, for one, reveals no victims.²⁹ They and the security officials assigned to their case were both creatures of – and agents in – Cold War Australia.

Essentially ideological interpretations of Australian literary culture of the inter-war years – male or female or both – emphasising the alienation of writers from their domestic and/or public spheres, overlook basic sympathies and values which they shared with fellow Australians

in the first, and the considerable degree of agency which they exercised towards them in the second of these spheres.

Developments in feminist historical writing of the 1990s, such as Patricia Grimshaw et al *Creating a Nation*³⁰, stressing the element of agency in place of alienation or victimisation, attempting to integrate women's and men's experiences, and adopting a conciliatory as opposed to a combative approach to gender studies are welcome. Dark herself had expressed similar views four decades before. In *Sun Across the Sky* (1936), she cautioned against the 'temptation to separate the inseparable, to compare the incomparable! To weigh the sun against the rain ... man against woman!' They were not 'opposite or even conflicting elements' but 'really complementary parts of a whole.'³¹

It was both the release of Eleanor Dark's private papers in the late 1980s and the weakening of victim-feminism as a political philosophy in the 1990s which led to a dilemma for the writers of her first full length published biography. *Eleanor Dark: A Writer's Life* (1998), written by Barbara Brooks and Judith Clark – short-story writers and essayists – was comfortably received by some critics who liked to continue to place Dark and other women writers of her period as victims of a masculine conservative society. These biographers' dilemma was that the continued placement of Dark in the long tradition of women victim writers sat uncomfortably with the privileged and introspective self-portrayal by Dark in her private papers. The authors neatly resolved their dilemma by not resolving it. They set the two polarities side-by-side without seeming to realise the tensions and contradictions of their portrayal. Indeed, it is hard to find a sustained and explicit central argument in this biography about Eleanor Dark's writing life. Rather, the woman writer that emerges through the narrative and the impressive mass of data about her life and literary contexts appears caught between two irreconcilable forces: on the one hand, the irrefutable evidence pointing to a writing life of extraordinary levels of emotional and material comforts, by far the most privileged among her little company of fellow writers, and on the other, a lingering attachment to the Old Guard feminism of the 1970s and 1980s that will not yield ground – or logic – to such evidence. Debra Adelaide's otherwise favourable review of this biography points to its 'sympathetic' reading of Eleanor Dark.³² In his review, Buckridge claims that 'Brooks positions herself neither as a judge nor as an analyst of Eleanor Dark, but as her interpreter and even, in an unusually personal way, as her intermediary to a modern readership.'³³ I would take these observations one step further and argue that a major flaw of this study lies in its uncritical reading both of Eleanor Dark's writing life and of the victim-feminist literature that first

brought Dark and fellow women writers of the period to public attention.³⁴

No other biographer since then has tried to tackle what is essentially a delicate issue for feminist thinkers wishing to present women writers as struggling against longer odds than men. Nor the equally sensitive issue for thinkers of the Left wishing to portray radical writers as victims of a politically and culturally inhospitable society. As a Latin American woman writer, stemming from very different cultural traditions of feminism and political radicalism, I did not embrace this study of Eleanor Dark's writing life either to confirm or debunk the dominant narratives of the times. Rather, to confront the voluminous material available with questions – and more questions – born of my own peculiarly cross-cultural curiosities about the Australian woman, the writer and the radical she was – in her own terms. In the process, I have evolved my own reading of Eleanor Dark, as both a tragic and triumphant figure in the Australian literary and political scene of her time: not primarily because of the burdens of patriarchal society and conservative political forces, but because of the unresolved tensions that existed within Dark herself, prisoner *and* architect of her 'world-proof life.'

I am more sympathetic to the initiatives of new cultural historians, which pose literature not as expressive but as constitutive of society, and dissolve earlier categories of class, gender, ideology into new categories of high-, middle- and low-brow culture. They provide wider and more thematically-sympathetic scope for investigating women – and men – writers' broad ranging activities and writings. The rescue of the reader as a critical partner in the production of literature is one example.³⁵ The biographies of fringe-dwellers of the Australian literary society of the little company – such as journalist Brian Penton,³⁶ popular writer Ion Idriess³⁷ and American literary critic C. Hartley Grattan³⁸ – are other examples. Each of these individual stories enrich and complicate the dominant narrative, and challenge the centres and peripheries of its cultural landscape of Australia. *Who* owned the definition of culture then is as critical an issue in this study as *who* owns it now.

This study links elements of biography, social and political change, constructions of national identity and cultural developments in Eleanor Dark's story. It employs 'the artist' as principal organising concept in her writing life for several reasons. 'Artist' is the only label Dark wore gladly; it defined her sense of self and of her basic function in society. The theme is a major preoccupation of her papers and of her fiction. Artist-characters inhabit – and disturb – many of her imagined worlds.

A clarification, however, is needed. To adopt 'the artist' as principal

conceptual tool in exploring Eleanor Dark's writing life is not to assume any particular level of artistry in her work. That Dark conceived of herself as 'the artist' does not mean that she was. Particular works may have earned her the title – *Prelude to Christopher*, most notably – but there was no general consensus among critics on the matter. Dark never quite shed the label of romantic novelist, first attached to her by Bernard-Eldershaw in 1935,³⁹ and fifteen years later, reiterated by another respected literary critic. An insightful and even-handed critic of her work, G.A. Wilkes wrote 'an interim report of her work' in 1951 in which he celebrated the maturing of her writing, but with reservations. On the strength of her early novels, he argued, only her psychoanalytical skills in characterisation and virtually peerless command of technique had saved her from being 'dismissed as just another romantic novelist.' *Storm of Time* represented 'progression,' but Dark remained 'in a quandary.'

The kind of novel she can write well ... no longer satisfies her; the kind of novel she wants to write, she has not yet achieved.⁴⁰

Lantana Lane may have tipped the balance for him and others. But the question of Eleanor Dark's artistry remains, much more so than Henry Handel Richardson's or Patrick White's, debatable.

This study contains elements of literary criticism, but it does not focus on Dark's writing primarily in qualitative or critical terms, nor deal principally with the artistry of her work, although both matters are clearly relevant. The focus is instead on the way she understood and functioned in the role of the artist, and on the interrelationships between her personal world, her literature and her society-in-crisis across the span of her writing life. It is mainly in this context that the question of her artistry and her integrity as an artist arise and are treated.

Dark's writing fulfils here several roles at once – personal, professional, political, creative, social – as it did in her own life. Form and content in her writings worked closely together. Dark's affinity with modernist techniques, for example, complemented her tendencies for difficult serious subjects. Both were aimed at a select audience drawn from the educated classes. Literature was a world she inhabited as well as created. It was a form of play, escape and therapy. Her fiction yields (much more than her personal and non-fiction writings) intimate glimpses of the complex inner woman: endearing and mean-spirited, capable of great compassion and great cruelty. Her portrayals of children are tender, those of middle-class small-town women, often punishing and unforgiving. The artist inhabits her literature in many

ways, including as characters in her stories. Dark's development of this self-portrait character type across the span of her novels suggests important continuities and ruptures in her own approach to the role.

I have structured this story around the theme of crisis rather than war for several reasons. It was basically, as David Carter argued, a sense of crisis – and the crisis mentality and crisis-readings of society it prompted in Dark and fellow writers – that shaped their responses to their society.⁴¹ Those who lived through the 1930s and 1940s were not then living in the 'inter war years' but through a succession of crises, mounting in tension and intensity which led finally – not inevitably – to the Second World War. Two of the most comprehensive studies of Australian literary culture of the first half of the twentieth century omit the critical years of the immediate post-war period.⁴² Yet it is to this period of reconstruction – moral, cultural and political – that the literature of Dark and other serious writers of the 'thirties and 'forties looked as if to Mecca. It is after the collapse of the vision of a post-war reconstruction into post-war disillusionment that their literature of hope soured into a literature of despair, even if – like Dark's *Lantana Lane* – it employs elements of pastoral, wit and satire to convey its message.

Dark's writing life, almost as long as her lifespan of almost eighty-five years, divided into private and public years. This study privileges the public figure and the decades of publication but not altogether at the expense of the private individual and the formative years of her thinking and her writing. The private years framed her public life. Chapter Two spans the formative years of the individual and the artist. Chapter Eight embraces the decade of the 'fifties where in another little mountain village Dark sought a personal resolution to major preoccupations of her writing and thinking of the public years. Each chapter in this book carries on its back her evolving notions and practice of 'the artist,' and the accumulation of the public and personal contexts that precedes it.

The decades of the 1930s and 1940s – the public years – constitute the bulk of my story. Eight of her ten novels were published in this period. These two decades enclose the string of crises – the Depression, the rise of international fascism, the outbreak of the Second World War, war itself and the Japanese threat to the Australian mainland, and the advent of the Cold War on the heels of peace – that lent her writing and that of the little company as a whole its peculiar place in Australian literary development. Chapters Three to Seven enclose these crisis moments individually, placing them in the context of Eleanor Dark's personal, professional and creative lives.

Dark's papers are very rich if also very narrow. They chart a detailed course and evoke vividly the spirit of her 'world-proof life.' They span

virtually her whole life and embrace her many private and public selves. Throughout, the authorial presence looms large. Dark's world was securely anchored and carried a sense of timelessness, because it was essentially a world of ideas which her 'world-proof life' had bred, fed and protected from challenge and criticism. It was a world that privileged thought over action, generally set and justified its own priorities, and which her fiction validated. They establish and reflect a sense of a world once removed from the crisis times in which it was set. They tell a compelling individual story, but at the expense of the collective one. Far from Dorothy Hewett's extravagant claim that the 'story of Eleanor and Eric Dark is the history of a nation,'⁴³ Eleanor Dark's life in particular is a poor index to the life of her community.

Its essence is captured in the last scene of *The Little Company*. Gilbert Massey, main protagonist, has finally triumphed over the 'artistic paralysis' that had gripped him through most of the Second World War. Resolute and focused, ready to make amends to his society-in-crisis for his long silence, he sits at his desk to write the definitive biography of his childhood idol, an obscure dead writer.

¹ Eleanor Dark, *Prelude to Christopher*, P.R. Stephensen & Co. Ltd., Sydney-Melbourne, 1934, p. 184.

² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nellie Sukerman, Curtis Brown, New York, 1.8.45, ML MSS 4545 22(25).

³ Humphrey McQueen's 1973 article was a breakthrough in establishing a socio-political, as opposed to a literary, framework within which to consider the place and work of Eleanor Dark in Australian cultural society of her years. While rejecting the old literary approach as narrow and unyielding, he substituted a doctrinal straight-jacket based on assumptions of ideological sympathies reflecting more his own than Dark's. She was, he said, 'clearly a radical.' McQueen attempted to define her politics through an identification of issues and themes characteristic of her generation of serious fellow writers. Such issues included women's liberation, nationalism, the plight of the Australian Aborigine, and 'the corrosive effects of Western civilisation.' Humphrey McQueen, 'The Novels of Eleanor Dark,' *Hemisphere*, Vol. 17, No. 1, January 1973, pp. 38-41. (Repr. in H. McQueen, *Gallipoli to Petrov: Arguing with Australian History*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, pp. 88-93.) McQueen's introduction to a 1990 edition of *The Timeless Land* does not qualify his earlier views. Drusilla

Modjeska's critique of Eleanor Dark has been sustained and dates to "Hammer at Destiny: A Study of Eleanor Dark", B.A. Honours Thesis, ANU 1973, (under the supervision of McQueen) in which she claimed Dark for radical feminism. In several published pieces since (not all related solely with Dark), Modjeska has considerably tempered and qualified her earlier views. Her *Exiles at Home* is the seminal piece on the subject of Australian women writers of Eleanor Dark's generation. Dark features in her book together with (and as part of) a close circle of prominent women writers over which Nettie Palmer presided. D. Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, London, Sirius Books, 1984. Barbara Brooks and Judith Clark attached similar labels to Dark: 'a socialist, a radical historian, a feminist, and an environmentalist.' Introduction to Eleanor Dark, *Return to Coolami*, Collins/Angus & Robertson, 1991, pp. i-x. See also Brooks and Clark's biography *Eleanor Dark: A Writer's Life*, Macmillan, 1998.

- 4 Eleanor Dark, 'Dear Home Town,' draft of unpublished play, n.d., c. late 1950s. ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- 5 John Manifold, 'Our Writers: VIII. Eleanor Dark,' *Overland*, no. 15, winter 1959, p. 39.
- 6 The Australian Literature Society's (ALS) gold medal for best novel of the year.
- 7 Dark, 'The Peril and the Solitude,' typed draft manuscript, on moral leadership and other burdens inherent to the creative writer, unpublished, n.d., c. 1940s, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- 8 Dark, typed draft manuscript, unpublished, on the roles and responsibilities of the artist, n.d., c. immediate post-war period, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- 9 It is found in Greek mythology as well as in the writings of Nietzsche. The Greeks felt the creative urge to stem from divine inspiration; Nietzsche saw the artist, in Smith's words, as 'a god to himself, and hopefully to others: a man beyond morality who listens to his own inner voice.' Either way, it was in and through solitude that the act of creation was understood to take place. Bernard Smith, *The Death of the Artist as Hero: Essays in History and Culture*, OUP, 1988, p. 19.
- 10 Over drinks, at the height of the fears of a Japanese invasion of Australia, Elsa, a young brash writer, confides to Gilbert, older and

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- more established in the profession that “‘Mother used to tell me about you and your family – all shut up – and isolated in a kind of world-proof life.’ He interrupted quite angrily: “Nonsense! No life is world-proof now.”” (Dark, *The Little Company*, pp. 110-111).
- ¹¹ Eleanor Dark, *Lantana Lane*, Virago, 1986, p.254. First published in 1959.
- ¹² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Bruce Sutherland, The Pennsylvania State College, U.S.A., 18.12.42, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹³ *Smith’s Weekly*, 13 September 1941.
- ¹⁴ Raymond Williams, ‘The Bloomsbury Fraction,’ *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verdo, London, 1980, pp. 148-169.
- ¹⁵ Pons submitted his thesis at the Faculté des Lèttres et Sciences Humaines, Université de Toulouse Le Mirail, France.
- ¹⁶ D. Cusack, *Education*, 25 May 1977.
- ¹⁷ A second wave came in the early 1980s with the advent of Virago Press.
- ¹⁸ Modjeska, “Hammer at Destiny”, p. 4.
- ¹⁹ Modjeska, *Exiles* , p. 10.
- ²⁰ Johnson defined this brand of feminism as at once ‘both a manifestation of and an interpretation of modern humanism’ and ‘a critic of all those constructions of an image of human subjectivity which presuppose the normativity of a particular socialised gender identity.’ Pauline Johnson, *Feminism as radical humanism*, Allen & Unwin, 1994, Introduction, p. ix.
- ²¹ Dark, *Lantana Lane*, pp. 66-81.
- ²² Modjeska, *Exiles*, p. 1.
- ²³ Carole Ferrier (ed.), *As good as a yarn with you*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, Introduction p. 12.
- ²⁴ Susan Sheridan, ‘Women Writers,’ in Laurie Hergenhan (gen. ed.), *New Literary History of Australia*, Penguin, 1988, Chapter 20, pp. 319-336, p. 323.
- ²⁵ David Walker, ‘The Prophets Downcast: The Palmers and their Nationalism,’ *Meanjin*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1976, pp. 149-157, p. 156.

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- 26 Giulia Giuffr , *A Writing Life: Interviews with Australian Women Writers*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, Introduction, p. xii.
- 27 Lawson himself fostered the image of the victim-writer. ‘A Song of Southern Writers’ encapsulates main elements of the tradition cited above. First published in the *Bulletin*, 28.5.1892. It reads in part, ‘O the critics of your country will be very proud of you/ When you’re recognized in London by an editor or two./ In the land where sport is sacred, where the labourer is a god/ You must pander to the people, make a hero of a clod!’
- 28 Its embrace of Dark’s generation of writers has included women in a patriarchal society, visionaries of an unenlightened community, persecuted radicals in a neo-fascist state. Len Fox (ed.), *Dream at a Graveside. The History of the Fellowship of Australian Writers 1928-1988*, FAW, 1988; and Fiona Capp, *Writers Defiled. Security Surveillance of Australian Authors and Intellectuals 1920-1960*, McPhee Gribble, 1993, are only two non-feminist examples of the tradition at work in 1930s and 1940s Australian literary history. As recently as seventy years ago ‘almost an endangered species,’ Fox affirmed at the outset of his book, there seemed then to be ‘nothing that could be done to secure for Australian writers the dignity and respect – and the bread and butter – that were needed for the carrying out of their all-important work.’ (p. 3) Capp casts Australian authors and intellectuals on the one hand, and security agents, on the other, as victims and ogres respectively. Biographers of Eric Dark have portrayed him (and to a lesser extent) Eleanor in similar relationships with security organisations through the 1930s-1950s.
- 29 A special edition of *Hecate* entitled ‘Focus on Eleanor Dark’ and released to coincide with the centenary of her birth continues generally to promote the image of the victim-writer both in gender and wider political terms. *Hecate*, vol 27, no. 1, 2001.
- 30 Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation*, McPhee Gribble, 1994, Introduction.
- 31 Dark, *Sun Across the Sky*, p. 97. Some eight years later, she conveyed a similar message to an Adult Teachers’ Conference. ‘I mistrust any attempt to separate women’s problems from men’s problems. I feel that we should fix our attention rather on human problems’ for ‘neither sex will develop its full usefulness or happiness unless the other keeps step with it.’ In interview with

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- Dark by J. Ryall, 'Women's Peacetime World,' *Australian Home Budget*, July 1945, pp. 20-21.
- ³² Debra Adelaide, 'Remote control,' *The Australian Review of Books*, November 1998, pp. 20, 22.
- ³³ Patrick Buckridge, review of *Eleanor Dark: A Writer's Life*, *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 19, 1999, reproduced in the Questia Online Library, p. 2.
- ³⁴ What *Eleanor Dark: A Writer's Life (1998)*, published by Pan Macmillan Australia, lacks in critical analysis and sustained argument, it compensates for in its considerable wealth of material relating to the many and diverse literary and professional contexts in which Eleanor Dark operated. Brooks, in particular, also brings precious insights from within her own creative and professional experiences as an Australian woman writer to bear on her study of Dark: both in terms of the craft and the art of writing. It should also be noted that Brooks' entry in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* published some years after the biography goes some way towards acknowledging a critical point missing in her earlier study: namely, that Dark owed a major debt to Eric Dark for giving her 'the financial, emotional, and moral support that had been lacking in her childhood.' 'What she achieved as a writer,' she notes, 'was partly a result of his support and influence.'
- ³⁵ Two major examples of these histories are D. Walker (ed.), *Books, Readers, Reading, Australian Cultural History*, no. 11, 1992. In particular see Martyn Lyons, 'Texts, books and readers: which kind of cultural history?,' pp. 1-15. A second example is Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember. An oral history of reading 1890-1930*, OUP, 1992.
- ³⁶ Patrick Buckridge, *The Scandalous Penton. A Biography of Brian Penton*, UQP, 1994.
- ³⁷ Beverley Eley, *Ion Idriess*, ETT Imprint, 1995.
- ³⁸ Laurie Hergenhan, *No Casual Traveller. Hartley Grattan and Australia*, UQP, 1995.
- ³⁹ On the strength of her first three published novels, Barnard-Eldershaw labelled Eleanor Dark as "the unwilling romantic." M. Barnard Eldershaw, *Essays in Australian Fiction*, MUP, 1938. Chapter on 'Eleanor Dark,' pp. 182-198, p.184.

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- ⁴⁰ G.A. Wilkes, 'The Progress of Eleanor Dark,' *Southerly*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1951, pp. 139-148, p. 148.
- ⁴¹ Carter, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-180.
- ⁴² One of the inter-war years, the other of the twenty years after the war. Modjeska, *Exiles*, and S. McKernan, *A Question of Commitment: Australian Literature in the Twenty Years after the War*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989, respectively.
- ⁴³ Dorothy Hewett, 'Against the grain,' Review, *The Weekend Australian*, 12-13 September 1998, p. 11.

Chapter Two.

'Toys of her childhood,' 1901-1930

Her earliest recollections were of lively debates between her father and any one of a dozen friends who haunted their home to talk to him. Ideas, and the words with which to express them, had been toys of her childhood along with books and dolls.¹

So far as I remember I began writing when I was about seven. I used to mix it with dolls, and kick-the-tin, and climbing trees and later with tennis and basket ball and swimming – and I think I really regarded it as just another game.²

Long before writing became for Eleanor Dark her art, profession or calling, it had been the daily bread of the young Pixie O'Reilly. It had belonged to the world of magic and play of the young child, the world of the intellect and peer competition of the schoolgirl, the world of romance and fanciful illusions of the budding woman. It had been the flapper's principal weapon of rebelliousness, and the young bride's unit of barter for little extras needed around the house. From the start, Dark later admitted, she had had 'a remarkable facility' for verse which 'once broken into print,' she 'had no difficulty in selling.' This skill allowed her to establish 'a good trade in sonnets' which, at seven-and-sixpence each, were 'the same price as a bag of manure for the garden.'³ In time, the young Mrs Eric Payten Dark extended her 'flippant' attitude to her prose. Written in 1923, her first novel *Slow Dawning* had been produced 'deliberately with the object of making money,' a contrite artist later confessed:

I regard it as a judgment upon me that it was not published till many years later, in 1932, which meant that what money I did make out of it – and it did as well as I expected – I did not get at the time I wanted it.⁴

Plaything, magic wand, protest banner, pocket-money and many other things before it became elevated to 'art,' writing had woven itself into the fabric of the little girl's life even before she could read or write. It was something she acquired, not through mother's milk, but on father's lap. By the age of three, when she taught herself to read, Pixie had clearly already begun to internalise her father's hunger for the written word.⁵ Indeed, to the little girl the written word, either in the form of her own compositions or in the form of books in her father's

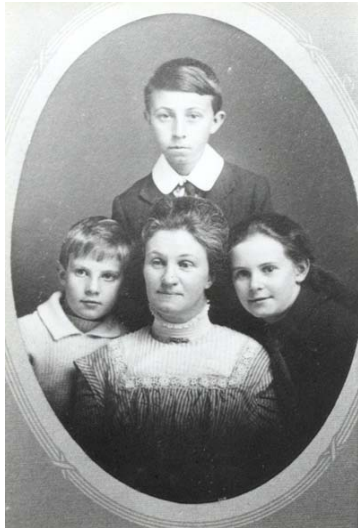
imposing library, appears to have been the beacon of an otherwise dark childhood.

By the time a confident and poised Eleanor Dark stepped out of her private world into the limelight in 1935 as winner of Australia's most coveted literary award, the relationship had fundamentally changed. It had been formalised and consecrated. The little girl and one of the 'toys of her childhood' were now a solemn pair: the artist and her art.

The thirty years preceding the crossing of the threshold from obscurity to prominence constituted the first half of the private years of Dark's writing life.⁶ The period embraces the experiences of childhood, boarding school, paid employment, early married life and a decade-long apprenticeship. It concludes on a high personal and professional note with the birth of her child and the writing of her first 'serious' novel. Witness to the child's gropings towards what Charles Dickens called 'the identity of things,'⁷ the emotional see-sawings of the schoolgirl, the experimental radicalism of the flapper and rise to respectability of the doctor's wife, the private years reveal the development of the character, emotional and intellectual baggage, politics and literature of the adult. From this raw material Dark fashioned her 'own suit of beliefs' on the woman question, socialism, nationalism and other major themes and preoccupations of her writings.

Dark's personal life never had its season of innocence, but her creative life did and that season is enclosed within these three decades: a time when writing was 'just another game,'⁸ before the act of publication and the extraordinary fanfare that accompanied her literary debut transformed the 'game' into a sacred mission, the toy into an icon, and the writer into a mystical creature of awesome proportions. One curtain rose and another fell at the investiture of the artist in 1935. These private years hold the principal key to what lay behind the fallen curtain.

Eleanor (Pixie) O'Reilly's childhood began in Burwood, Sydney, in August 1901. She was the middle child and only daughter of Eleanor McCulloch (1870-1914) and Dowell O'Reilly (1865-1923). Her two brothers were Dowell (Pat), born in 1899 and Brian (Barnie or Bim) born in 1905. Superficial knowledge alone remains of the McCulloch-O'Reilly marriage. Married in 1895, they honeymooned in Perth⁹ before settling in the first of fourteen houses in the Sydney area that would be 'home' in nineteen years of married life. After a long illness, Eleanor McCulloch died in 1914. Pixie had not yet turned thirteen.



Eleanor McCulloch and her three children –

*Pat, Bim (left) and Pixie (right)
sometime before her death in 1914*

Despite their importance, the historical record is slight on the private years.¹⁰ It portrays a quaint unruffled picture of a motherless childhood amidst literary and political enthusiasms largely generated by a father to whom she was devoted. Throughout Dark's life, historians of widely different perspectives on their subject, framed at one end by Grove Day's romantic image of 'The Lady of the Mountains' and at the other by Drusilla Modjeska's radical feminist portrayal of a frenzied insect 'stinging herself to death,'¹¹ drew essentially the same picture.¹² Day's is the critical one, for although his research into the family history was by far the most comprehensive, he too was led to reaffirm the validity of this version. The children, he recounted, were 'brought up to enjoy outdoor life and sport' and Pixie was a devoted understudy 'who admired her literary father.'¹³ Disagreement between these studies was largely of degree. Modjeska saw nuances and tensions in the daughter-father relationship, representing it as not altogether harmonious or static, but in so doing qualified rather than challenged the conventional picture. Though posing her subject in conflict with her father's fatalistic views of the 'tragedy of women,'¹⁴ Modjeska subscribed nonetheless to the patriarchal Dowell O'Reilly-and-his-world model of explanation of

Dark's early personal and literary development.¹⁵

Dark encouraged this singular version of her childhood. Her comments in a 1946 interview reveal the overall impression of a homelife driven by a vibrant intellectual life.

I grew up in a house full of books and constantly deluged with magazines, newspapers, pamphlets and all sorts of printed matter. I read anything and everything I pleased, and passed indiscriminately from children's books to adult books, and from rubbish to the classics, and, so far as I can remember, enjoyed them all.¹⁶

Until her death in 1985, she manipulated the bulk of existing material on the private years, most of which lay in her possession. Her responses to requests for biographical material invariably bore the same marks: apparent co-operativeness, expressions of regret about the scarcity and inherent dullness of existing sources – 'There's very little...as my life has been uneventful to a degree' – and release of a limited range of material characterised by silence on the subject of her mother, Eleanor McCulloch, countered by a strong emphasis on Dowell O'Reilly and his involvement with literature and politics.¹⁷



Dowell O'Reilly

Dark never possessed a monopoly on sources. *Dowell O'Reilly from his Letters* (1927), a collection of her father's letters to Molly, an English cousin (later to become his second wife), written during his inter-marriage years of 1913-1917, had been published some time

before her literary debut. Remarkably, until Brooks' biography some thirteen years after Dark's death, historians had failed to recognise its rich pickings. Why? The force with which Dark's version of her youth imposed itself in the minds and imaginations of her contemporaries suggests she may have held what might be termed a 'psychological monopoly'¹⁸ over the sources. It is only since her death, with the full release of her personal papers and against a sharpened background of those years, that the letters' silences, oblique backward glances at her parents' marriage and household, flashes of O'Reilly's shattered ego, poignant evocations his gropings towards a new sense of family amidst the ruins of a collapsed homelife, begin to fit together, yielding meaning and form to the landscape of those years.

Material released since Dark's death dissolves the myth of a happy, father-centred household. Pixie O'Reilly did not, it now appears, live in a household where literature and politics set the general tone of family discussions and social life. These were elements of the early years, but more as temporary and welcome distractions from a family life scarred by anxieties over health, finances and the parents' incompatibility. Pixie in no sense had a normal or happy childhood, but a lost childhood. Such a radically different picture leads in turn to radically different interpretations.

The virtual absence of Eleanor McCulloch¹⁹ from the story of her daughter's young years should not have been taken to signify the mother's lack of influence upon her daughter's young *and* adult, real *and* imagined, lives. Alive and dead, McCulloch was a haunting, disturbing presence in her daughter's life; her absence, in many ways, far more potent than Dowell O'Reilly's presence. The bonds of literature, philosophy and politics shared between daughter and father should not have led necessarily to the romantic stereotypes of master-disciple, virtuoso-understudy in which the relationship had typically been cast. O'Reilly was a loving but weak father, too insecure and too preoccupied with his own misfortunes to be of much support to his daughter. Though clearly fond of one another, there existed a definite emotional schism between them.

The new material also prompts a reassessment of the implications of the private years to Dark's literature. Here again the figure of O'Reilly is diminished, cast in a different perspective by two other figures in the landscape of her childhood: her mother and the poet Christopher Brennan, friend and colleague of Dowell O'Reilly. It was McCulloch and her complex legacy of anxiety and shame to her daughter that was the principal animating force of the writing itself. Brennan's influence

on Dark's writing has been noted, largely in the context of *Sun Across the Sky* (1937) and her characterisation of Nicholas Kavanagh, a eulogy for the dead poet. Brennan's influence, the material strong suggests, lay at the roots of her conception of the nature and role of the artist in society. Ironically, it was precisely those dimensions of Brennan, the artist – arrogant, elitist, inclined towards the notion of art for art's sake – O'Reilly most derided privately and publicly, which Pixie borrowed for her model of the artist: a misunderstood reclusive genius, indifferent to money, possessing 'a strange and a dangerous and a subversive power.'²⁰

Though useful, the new material has limitations. The record remains – and seems destined to remain – strongly biased in favour of the public and mature Eleanor Dark. Doors remain shut concerning the relationships and inter-relationships between the parents, Brennan and Pixie. Enough pieces of the puzzle are now in place, however, to discern the contours of the private years, speculate on remaining gaps, and pose new questions.

A manuscript of an unpublished early novel written sometime in the late 1920s, 'Pilgrimage,' and an extensive family history of the O'Reilly and Dark families²¹ compiled and written by Dark through the 1960s and beyond, are the largest pieces of that puzzle. Each contributes a distinctive perspective to the broader picture: the first, that of the creative writer on the eve of her literary career; the second, of the historian in the wake of her career. If 'Pilgrimage' is her most autobiographical novel, then the family history constitutes Dark's closest attempt at writing an autobiography. In 'Pilgrimage,' as author of the novel and through the character of Janet, Dark chronicled and interpreted herself as the Anne in the novel. In the family history, Dark, the historian – in the role of narrator of her own story – became both observer and observed, recording as well as overseeing the many private *personae* she had been over time: the hurt child recalling painful memories, the aggrieved daughter challenging her father's innuendoes regarding her dying mother's mental condition, the proud wife quietly boasting of her husband's transformation from a 'very delicate' child to an 'almost aggressively fit' young man; the doting mother offering 'a nice ancestor' to her son, as if it were candy. Together, the novel and the family history contribute not only a blend of factual and felt experiences – one aiming basically at a record of 'what happened,' the other, at an evocation of the lived experience of 'what happened' – but also a consistent story. There are no competing or conflicting 'truths' on the central matter of 'what happened.' Together, they frame the public years, lending continuity to Dark's story.

Written in the late 1920s, 'Pilgrimage' is a story of the writing of a biography. Janet, 'an elderly spinster,' takes on the task of writing about the life of young Anne – 'not only one flapper complete with certain mental and physical characteristics, but a disturbing nineteen-years-full of past as well!' Until her untimely death in child-birth, Anne's life parallels Pixie's closely. From 'the atmosphere of discord' that marked family life, the incompatibility of her parents and 'the miserable cat-and-dog life that her parents led,' the nomadic pattern of her school life, the pastoral world awaiting her at boarding school, her revulsion against the role of office-girl thrust onto her after leaving school, to the comforting familiarity of the man she married. Anne, too, has an intimate relationship with her art. Her 'creativity, however modest' – offsets the grimness of her childhood. Like Pixie, Anne's 'creativity' assumes at her whim different forms. A favourite toy of her childhood, with it she would 'draw things on brown paper with coloured chalks' and play the artist in a make-believe way, feigning the weariness of the genius and conceding melodramatically at the age of four that she 'felt that she had exhausted for the moment the possibilities of Art.' Anne's creativity is also a form of escape, allowing her 'to build a dream-world more pleasant than her own.' It is her constant companion – 'In school, out of school, she drew.' Mostly, her creativity is her lifeline: 'the last conscious, healthy wish she could find in herself.'²²

Forty years after writing 'Pilgrimage,' Dark returned to autobiography. This time she turned to her files. For decades she had been compiling material for a family history which she now began assembling and composing into narrative form. The family history was written primarily for her son and only child, Michael, in case, she explained at the outset,

you and/or your children should want to know something
about your forbears when there is no one left to ask.²³

Other forces also came into play here, most obviously the historian's revisionist impulse and the individual's spiritual journey to the roots of life.

Pixie O'Reilly had scores to settle. The process of writing the family history necessitated a review of existing sources, as well as an attempt to secure others to fill major gaps in the evidence. This latter layer of new material and interventions into old material contributes valuable new dimensions to the record. In dialogue with her past, the now old and weary matriarch felt bound to 'correct' the record, contributing her version of others' accounts. Like rock paintings on which generations of a tribe's chroniclers left their impressions, so with the family history,

one of whose principal strengths lies precisely in its complex layered quality. The surface text reads as a compelling account of two families, but its subtext – an old woman’s lone pilgrimage to a mixed unresolved past – distils the essence of the private years.

The story of Eleanor Dark’s early private years orders itself naturally into four major movements: childhood, embracing the period from her birth to the death of her mother: 1901-1914; late schooling, spanning the bulk of the Great War period: 1915-1919; training and work as an office girl, 1920-21; and marriage and early family life in Katoomba, running apace with a decade-long apprenticeship in her art. Each movement is distinct, encapsulating its experiences and engraving itself on her later life and writings.

Disentangling the strands and knots of the fabric of Pixie’s childhood is made particularly difficult by the nature of the available historical sources. Broken marriages, financial stresses, unhappy families and most pointedly mental illness – with the complex and pervasive taboos attaching to this issue at that time and to some degree still today – are not subjects which those most intimately involved in such calamities have the inclination to record in vivid detail. Quite the contrary. Even when they do, their recollections are often soaked in sentiment – pity, shame, bitterness, anger, confusion – and couched in emotive language. This is largely the case here, as the ambivalent collection of blurred images and impressions, oblique references, veiled comments that compose the bulk of the historical evidence for this period testifies.

The only exception is that of the figure of Dowell O’Reilly about whom the material – in terms of bulk and content – exhibits a deep bias. Portraits and self-portraits of Dowell O’Reilly, his personal correspondence, social critiques and creative literature, obituaries and tributes from close friends and colleagues, tales and anecdotes of his literary life, trace the various phases of his life from cradle to grave, his various familial, social and professional relationships. They also contain a poignant testimony of him as father, husband, artist and Australian by Molly, his second wife, in her Foreword to the published collection of his letters. The composite picture of the man that emerges through these sources may not be altogether appealing, but it is at least of a flesh-and-blood individual.

Almost the complete opposite is true in the case of the mother. Composed mostly of silences or innuendoes, an ominous dark shadow – of emotional stress and mental illness – hangs over the figure of Eleanor McCulloch. She has no voice of her own in the record. The character that emerges, mostly through the voices of her husband and daughter in

scattered references, is fixed within her adult domestic environment, and then more as a receding spirit than a living part of it. Its only qualifier is the strikingly soft and kindly image that emerges of her through the scraps of evidence available of Christopher Brennan's feelings for her, and reminiscent of the veiled ethereal portrait of 'the Beloved' in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; so that whether evoked in bitterness by her husband, in pity by her daughter, or in admiration by a poet-friend, the character of Eleanor McCulloch remains enveloped in unreality.

The record is even less enlightening in relation to the three O'Reilly children – Pat, Bim and Pixie – their personalities and activities, their interactions with each other and their parents. It is both ironic and significant that they do not come into focus in the record until after the death of their mother and the collapse of the family home, and then principally through their father's eyes and his letters to Molly. In addition to the information about her siblings that can be surmised from the clearly autobiographical novel 'Pilgrimage,' material on them is limited to a small collection of photographs: some taken with their mother, and mostly posed, as indeed all photos were at that time, formal, stiff even, being relatively rare occasions and requiring long exposures to secure the image.

Despite – or because – of their biases and omissions, sources relevant to Pixie's childhood bristle silently with anger and pain. Through the euphemisms, veiled accusations and hushed fears, through the father's protestations that

Only once did I stay away from home, boarding in
Sydney, for six weeks²⁴

and a relative's confirmation of McCulloch as 'a most devoted mother'²⁵, a picture emerges of a miserable childhood. Unlike the earlier picture drawn by Grove Day, composed of a lifeless collection of static pastoral images, this one is alive and in flux. It reveals an unfolding drama.

Everything points to the fact that the parents' marriage was a union of incompatibles: between a woman whose husband thought her of an 'ardent & superemotional nature,'²⁶ and a man whose devoted second wife described him as possessing a 'super-sensitive temperament.'²⁷

Eleanor McCulloch was 'devoted to music.'²⁸ Her gift of music is the singular uplifting theme of her story as it emerges through the family history: her piano – first 'a grand piano' alive with sound, later 'an upright' which she 'did not play often' and gradually sank into silence – a poignant symbol of the woman's fading life-force. After a long illness marked by bouts of depression and insinuations of mental instability,

she died in August 1914 reportedly of thyrotoxis, a disease of the thyroid gland. Even before the sudden decline of health that led to her death, she seemed stricken and distracted.

Her husband's references, made mainly in the months prior to her death, portray McCulloch clinically, as an odd specimen of humanity rather than a loved one in distress. In a state of 'ceaseless anxiety'²⁹, she was 'ordered into a private hospital for a month or so – to see no one – as she is suffering from "nervous breakdown."' ³⁰ Her death seemed to release in him a generous if eerie vision of the woman who had been his wife for almost twenty years.

The world – life itself – was really what it *seemed* to her – pitiless, cruel. Yet she sang a low, strange, childlike song to herself – to her children – loved all beautiful things – shrank from everything else. And silently, for 17 years, she loved me, & the work I loved.³¹

The genesis and nature of Christopher Brennan's acquaintance with Eleanor McCulloch are unclear.³² His biographer placed the weight of the acquaintance in the mid-1890s, asserting that she had 'exercised a profound (though almost invisible) influence on Brennan's poetry' and 'spiritual life.'³³ He suggested they may have shared an interest in 'theosophy and spiritualism' and that she 'perhaps existed for him principally in his imagination, as an embodiment of that feminine spirit which might lead him back to Eden.' Brennan inscribed his feelings in her copy of his *XXI Poems*.³⁴

The third, whose gracious influence
scarce seen perfumes my hidden course,
to you these songs how first my sense
& spirit turn'd towards their source.³⁵

Reportedly, news of McCulloch's death 'stirred him greatly' and 'had the odd effect of bringing Brennan and O'Reilly closer together.' By then, the men's relationship had a long tempestuous history.³⁶

O'Reilly is best known for his involvement in Australian literature and politics. He earned his living as Master at Sydney Grammar School and, from 1910 until his retirement, as an accountant. In the spring of 1917, three years after McCulloch's death, he remarried, his new bride an English cousin, Marie Molly Rose Beatrice Miles, he had met forty years before on a family visit to the Isle of Man.³⁷ In Molly, O'Reilly found the domestic contentment that had eluded him, and he abandoned himself to it:

I *know* that during the few years that remain to me, the
right thing for me to do would be to work regularly all

day at literature – discard all lesser interests – pleasures –
find my highest happiness in my highest works.

Yet tomorrow morning & every morning will be as all to
yesterdays – breakfast – pipe – stroll round garden –
inspect vegetables – *enjoy* myself till the post comes, &
so on to the inglorious end.³⁸

The couple spent six years together before O'Reilly died of cerebral thrombosis at the age of fifty-eight.

Pangs of guilt about wasted literary gifts hounded him to the end. While his output was small, his talents were never in question.³⁹ Friends and colleagues shared his sense of waste. So well recognised was it, that in the preface to his collection of letters, Molly confronted the matter. His lack of ambition and vitality, his perfectionism⁴⁰ and general underlying insecurities as an artist had contributed, she conceded, to a 'disappointed life – perhaps disappointing.'⁴¹

O'Reilly wrote verse,⁴² but is best remembered for his prose. Heralded at the time as highly original in form – 'something neither an echo nor a convention'⁴³ – and acclaimed by some as 'a masterpiece in a new genre'⁴⁴, *Tears and Triumph* (1913) both baffled and pleased critics, offering a sensitive and complex exposition of the plight of the modern woman seeking to reconcile intellect and sexuality.⁴⁵

The woman question was a major trademark of his brief political career. As Labor member for Parramatta (1894-1898) in the N.S.W. Legislative Assembly, O'Reilly proposed the first motion in support of women's suffrage to be carried in the State's Parliament. He sought re-election unsuccessfully in 1898, and again in 1910.⁴⁶ Politics was in his veins, however, and over the years his political humanism and labour sympathies led him to champion those he perceived as oppressed: from victims of the 1890s Depression⁴⁷ to William J. Chidley, an eccentric psychologist whose work and views on sexuality in the 1910s outraged genteel Australian society and made him a focus of police hounding and official investigation.⁴⁸

Significantly, while testimonies to O'Reilly abound – ranging from the widow's celebration of the father's devotion to his children, the artist's 'sincerity and originality of thought,' and the patriot's 'profound love of country,'⁴⁹ to colleagues' tales of the crude man 'bragging' to literary mates about his newborn son and 'the straightness of its aim, the abundance of its excrement'⁵⁰ – among the dozens of accounts none appears from his daughter, either privately (as she did for her mother in notations in the family history) or publicly. Approached soon after his death to edit his letters, she declined 'most strongly' on the cryptic

grounds that

the parent-child relationship is in a sense a bond, but in another sense it is a gulf.⁵¹

On the record as in life, Pixie kept her distance from her father.

Attempting a synthesis of the man's character is difficult given the conflicting spectrum of portraits, which reveal a man ahead and of his time, sensitive and vulgar, a visionary and a negativist, a loner and the prototype of Sydney's pseudo-bohemian male literary culture at the turn of the century. Among the most revealing and least attractive of the portraits is the self-assessment that emerges through *Dowell O'Reilly and his Letters*. Here the pathos is unrelieved and he appears a self-centred, life-negating individual who made a virtue of his lack of ambition⁵² and 'habit of loneliness.'⁵³ To Molly he confessed

I am a failure. I have attempted several things, writing, teaching, politics – drifted along, done just enough to live. Almost everyone believes in action – “getting on”. I don't – I believe in *inaction*, and getting off whenever possible.⁵⁴

Two years before Pixie's birth, her parents' marriage was already in trouble. O'Reilly reportedly complained then that 'his wife was threatening to leave him “with a brat on his hands.”'⁵⁵ Such stresses led him sometimes to seek refuge with friends or in a hostel. His absences were typically of four to six weeks' duration and, by his own admission, his contact with his family at such times ranged from 'constantly' to not at all.⁵⁶ In 'Pilgrimage,' a mixture of resentment and regret informs the question of the parents' marriage. Significantly, their first scene together foreshadows the ultimate breakdown of the relationship:

Her father's voice burst out near her – her mother's clashed and warred with it.⁵⁷

Rich in family tales, legends and folklore, the family history offers the barest information about the marriage, but exposes chronic financial problems and increasing health concerns. The first so traumatised young Pixie that she later blamed the fact that the family was 'always hard up' for her 'phobia about financial security.'⁵⁸ Illnesses and talk of illness permeate the record as they permeated McCulloch's last months. Her anxieties over Bim, her youngest child, after he contracted whooping cough on Christmas Day 1913, were later seen by the family as the beginning of the end of her life. Dark dated the onset of her mother's 'thyroid trouble' to this period,⁵⁹ after which it 'grew rapidly worse.'⁶⁰ Childhood no doubt had its bright moments, but glimpses of these are so rare – 'swimming at Balmoral and Edwards beaches' with a cousin, for

example⁶¹ – they seem an aberration.

An oblique portrait of the marriage emerges through O'Reilly's published letters where significantly the sole mention of McCulloch⁶² records the fact that: 'In three days it will be a year since Eleanor died.'⁶³ But one need not interpolate to find evidence of O'Reilly's feelings on the question of marriage generally and, by implication, his own. 'For the man,' he wrote the year before his wife's death, marriage meant 'either the crippling or obliteration of his real, lonely, self.'⁶⁴ Months after her death, his bitterness, if not towards his wife then towards the institution from which her death had released him, had intensified. Marriage

must always be the tragedy of conflict, or the cunning hypocrisy, or the numb indifference that it always is. I have never yet known a "happy couple", though we are all of course familiar with heroic liars of both sexes.⁶⁵

The battlefield that was home extended to warfare between their two families. A visit by McCulloch and her children to O'Reilly's sister's cottage in the Blue Mountains prompted a rift between the two women over 'words' spoken to McCulloch by her sister-in-law 'about her treatment of her children.' During his wife's 'long illness,' O'Reilly noted, 'my sister never once went to see her.' When she finally recanted, the dying McCulloch refused to receive her. After McCulloch's death, antagonisms erupted into open confrontation. A curt letter from O'Reilly to a brother-in-law – addressed as 'Mr McCulloch' – declared that he was leaving at Mr McCulloch's office '(1) Eleanor's jewellery (2) Deed of Heathcote Land (3) The "will" the children talked about! (4) One share 10869 in Civil Serve Co Op Soc.' Still pending, O'Reilly acknowledged in cold legal language, was the return of his wife's furniture. In the meantime, he asked for 'whatever receipt is necessary to cover my responsibility.'⁶⁶

Pixie resented her father's treatment of her mother, which transcended the issue of whether McCulloch had been "a most devoted mother"⁶⁷. Bigger and more intimate implications flowed from his innuendoes about McCulloch's mental condition. 'D O'Reilly,' the daughter-historian handwrote in the files, 'says in letter that during last ten days her mind failed.' Admitting to remembering 'symptoms of this,' she hastened to offer qualifying evidence, recounting an incident soon before her mother's death when

she told me that one of the nurses had stolen a ring of hers (which I remember quite clearly) & this was not among her fine bits of jewellery when they were given to

me after my marriage by Uncle P.V. McCulloch (solicitor). So her mind must have been at least intermittently clear. I am sure I saw this ring in window of 'antique' shops in Kat (Katoomba) sometime during 2nd World War.⁶⁸

The sensitive question of Eleanor McCulloch's mental state remained a barrier between daughter and father.⁶⁹ Dark ensured that their views appeared side-by-side in the family history. This attempt, half a century later, to rescue her mother's reputation may appear strange, but a more disturbing issue was involved. O'Reilly's version happened to fit a disturbing pattern in his wife's family. Mental instability is a thread in the story of the McCullochs and fear of its implications to her and to her progeny haunted both the young and the mature Eleanor. With the fictional Anne, Dark seemed to share 'that strange, instinctive fear of her own mind which she had dimly realised in her far too early childhood.'⁷⁰

McCulloch's legacy to her daughter was unhappy. But an artist's real and imagined lives are ultimately inextricable, and elements that impoverish one often enrich the other. Her mother's legacy of suffering and pain became a moving force behind Dark's finest works, many of whose characters, relationships and passages possess the demons of McCulloch. The prime example is Linda Hendon in *Prelude to Christopher* with her futile struggles to grip the two most precious and poisoned parts of her life: her sanity and her marriage.

'Pilgrimage' already shows McCulloch's powerful influence on her daughter's creative life. Recalling the last time she saw her mother, Anne, the cynical flapper, suddenly reveals herself deeply vulnerable. The change is dramatic and the language itself becomes suddenly melodramatic. The mother-and-daughter parting scene is the novel's most intense moment. Twelve-year-old Anne prepares to leave the bedside of her dying mother in hospital.

I remember that as I gave her a little wave from the doorway I felt a sudden rush of tremendous affection for her. I wanted to go and throw myself on my knees by her bed and kiss her face and hands and stay, for a long time, with my arms round her.

Anne thinks of looking in on her again, but 'didn't' and 'walked home' instead. Janet, familiar with the ways of her elusive biographical subject, alerts the reader – and perhaps the future biographer – to the significance of this tale.

For here I had flesh and bone, deny it as she might. And I know that if she were given the chance to undo any one

past action of her life it would be that walk home in the gathering dusk that she would choose, while her mother was dying in the hospital behind her.⁷¹

Eleanor Dark's feelings for her father lack this intensity and complexity. If McCulloch's spirit haunts the passionate rocky terrain in the landscape of her daughter's writing, then O'Reilly's inhabits mostly the pale monotonous plains. In abrupt contrast to the disturbing Linda Hendon in *Prelude to Christopher*, is Professor Channon, Lesley's widower father in *Waterway*, the character most closely fashioned after O'Reilly in Dark's fiction: an ineffectual, though kind, man. In 'Pilgrimage,' in contrast to the powerful mother-daughter relationship, is a low undercurrent of affection for a father deeply flawed but loved nonetheless. Complicating the cluster of images evoking O'Reilly in his daughter's literature is Linda Hendon's Uncle Hamlyn. Irredeemably evil, Hamlyn is unlike O'Reilly except he too torments his young charge with the thought of a possible hereditary streak of madness. While O'Reilly may not have intended to convey that message, Hamlyn was consistent and deliberate in his 'gently-spoken promise of ultimate lunacy' and references to 'the family tree.'⁷² Where within these images lie Pixie's feelings for her father? The answer might well encompass them all.

The parents' respective legacies to their daughter were also vastly different in other ways. McCulloch's was subterranean but fundamental to her daughter's evolving sense of self, O'Reilly's was largely in the realm of things acquired: culture and ideas. He made the world of literature her own⁷³ and endowed the woman question with keen relevance. He awakened early her social conscience to the 'evils' of imperialism and capitalism. He bestowed on her his abiding love for an Australia mature and self-assured, without anger or nostalgia towards Mother Country or Mother Culture. Indeed, a defining feature of the Australia both fashioned in their imaginations and writings was that it belonged outside the strictures of convention and tradition. This positive sense of being a fugitive of Western civilisation and thus free from its restraints informs O'Reilly's poem 'Australia,' first published in 1894.

When Nature's heart was young and wild,
She bore in secret a love-child,
And weeping, laughed – too glad to dress
Its lawless naked loveliness.⁷⁴

To his daughter, her father's most precious legacy lay in his family stock: particularly, a long pedigree of artists,⁷⁵ and no apparent trace of mental problems. The marriage of Rosa Smith to Canon Thomas

O'Reilly – her father's parents – in the mid-nineteenth century, the family historian argued, constituted a watershed in the family's already pronounced artistic tendencies.

My father was a writer, and had some gift for drawing; his brother, Tom, and his sister Rose, also did some writing though I think none of it was published except a very small book of verse. My brother, Pat, drew well and, when he died, left among his belongings a few pages of MS, evidently the beginning of a novel; I have produced some books, Bim you know about. My cousin has written at least one play.⁷⁶

McCulloch's and O'Reilly's legacies to their writer-daughter were vast, yet large holes remained. It is in this context that Brennan's impact is best understood: against the background of a childhood devoid of magic and adult figures of authority, and O'Reilly's inadequacies as an individual and a writer. The self-pitying O'Reilly was not one to captivate the imagination of the romantic young writer-to-be, while Brennan and his legendary physical, intellectual and artistic presence was. Pixie was not the first to be so taken. O'Reilly pronounced him only half in jest "Brennanus Rex", and in his funeral oration fellow poet John LeGay Brereton, anointed him on behalf of 'all the poets of Australia' as 'a prince of their order.'⁷⁷

In terms of personal contact, there was hardly a basis for a relationship between Brennan and Pixie. They met rarely and briefly and almost certainly never again after an accidental meeting soon after McCulloch's death. The girl's infatuation, however, was not so much with the man but the poet and his genius, and the spirit of Brennan permeates her literature and conception of the artist. In time Dark contributed her share of extravagant imagery and praise to the one whose essential qualities, as she understood them, came also to define her self-image as an artist: a creature half-demonic half-angelic, above the profit motive, living in 'royal solitude,'⁷⁸ his work – though 'a light and a benediction' – unappreciated by 'nine-tenths of mankind.'⁷⁹ In some novels, Brennan's spirit assumes the form of a character; in others, it embodies the essence of art. Nicholas Kavanagh from *Sun Across the Sky* is the most quoted and obvious Brennan-like character in Dark's literature.

Laughter thundered out of him, rich and Rabelaisian. Speech was no longer a mere medium of communication – it was art – a black art – a magic with which unguessed miracles could be wrought. Imps, devils and satyrs came to his summons – the world and the nether-world, the

firmament and all its angels were the playthings of his speech.

Poetry flowed from him unendingly, Latin hexameters, the folk songs of Germany, the French of Mallarme, the ageless beauty of Biblical prose, and through it all there burned incessantly the vital spark of his own genius.⁸⁰

The fact that Dark was then nearing middle-age and Brennan had been dead for four years underscores the enduring force of his impact. Kavanagh is only one of a pedigree of Brennan-inspired characters stretching across two decades: from 'Pilgrimage' to *The Little Company*. Preceding Kavanagh by almost a decade is a literary friend of Anne's father in 'Pilgrimage':

Anthony Baring – huge, like some lumbering animal, tossing back his mop of black hair, quarrelsome, smelling of beer, his great intellect somehow shining darkly through it all, like a mirror lying at the bottom of a muddy pool.⁸¹

Almost a decade after Kavanagh emerged Scott O'Laughlin: a neglected misunderstood artist,⁸² fondly remembered by Marty and Gilbert Massey, major protagonists in *The Little Company*, as their literary mentor and beacon of their childhood. In *Prelude to Christopher*, Brennan's spirit resides not in the character of d'Aubert, the quintessential artist, but in the essence of art itself which d'Aubert represents.

With Eleanor McCulloch's death the family was split into its four surviving parts. Henceforth, the family history records bluntly, there was 'no real home or family life.'⁸³ Dowell moved to a Woollahra boarding house, Pat worked on a farm and Bim boarded at a preparatory school in Hayfield.

Thirteen-year-old Pixie went to live with her maternal grandmother in Cremorne in a household composed of various McCulloch relatives, including a great uncle and several of her mother's siblings. Here another emotionally turbulent world and another set of disturbing McCulloch family problems awaited her. With the exception of the grandmother, 'a grand old lady' of strong mettle, and Uncle Ted, 'a good-natured bloke,' the McCulloch 'ménage' [sic] consisted of ill-adjusted parasitical adults who bickered and drank and were more a source of anxiety than comfort to Pixie. One uncle was 'usually broke' and 'often drunk,' while the great-uncle 'lurked upstairs in his room reading magazines,' rarely bothering to make an appearance except for meals. There was 'total war' between the great-uncle and the aunt; when

they met they were 'like a couple of cats suddenly spitting and snarling at each other.'⁸⁴ The erratic behaviour of Aunt Ethel – 'sometimes the indulgent aunt ... sometimes violently hostile' – particularly distressed young Pixie. In moments of rage the aunt mortified her, telling her 'what a nuisance it was to have me there, and what a burden I was to Granny.'⁸⁵ The move from Lindfield to Cremorne necessitated yet another change of school, the fifth in nearly as many years. With her mother's death, the whole structure of Pixie's young life – social, institutional, affective – had effectively collapsed.

Neither O'Reilly nor his new living arrangements – what he called his 'solitary cell,' his 'unsuitable old hole' – recommended themselves as a new focus of family life. A depressive character, he rarely socialised, preferring to spend his leisure hours cloistered in his small flat. He spoke of the children as his 'sole excuse for existence, and only remaining interest'⁸⁶ yet rarely saw them. Instead, he regularly posted them chatty notes: encouraging Pixie on her latest scholastic achievements,⁸⁷ and cheering up young Bim.⁸⁸ Pixie paid her father 'flying' visits and they sometimes met in town, but she seldom stayed with him and weeks went by when the two lived separate and unconnected lives.⁸⁹

The parent's instinct sometimes conquered the widower's tendencies to wallow in solitude, and O'Reilly would struggle to retain some illusion of a family. In a letter to Bim, he asked:

Did you see a glorious golden sunset the other evening. I did. And Pixie was watching it from Neutral Bay.⁹⁰

He also planned outings to concerts and plays, attended school activities. A letter to Bim anticipates with excitement their attendance at a performance at Mosman Town Hall where Pixie was to appear 'dressed like a young man.'⁹¹ While they met only rarely as a family, the few images evoked of such times suggest a core of warmth at the heart of their unorthodox family life.

Pixie arrived for tea – they (sister and younger brother) jumped into each other's arms, and finished, as always, with a wrestle. Powerful Pixie stills holds her own, but she is amazed at the wiriness of his [Bim's] slim body and limbs. The old silver candlesticks, with red shades, cast a festive glow over our tea-table. We were a happy party!⁹²

Despite or because of the trials of childhood, Pixie was becoming a strong confident girl. Her father drew a profile of her to Molly shortly after her mother's death – 'only thirteen, the child's mind still controls the woman's form':

Pixie came on a flying visit yesterday; surf bathing had browned her like a bronze statue. There is something fine about Pixie – a quality in her character that compels respect. Hers is a free aggressive individuality out of fashion among average women.⁹³

The father-daughter relationship underwent a fundamental change in these years. Pixie becoming increasingly his icon of strength and character, describing her variously in his letters to Molly as: ‘stalwart Pixie,’ ‘powerful Pixie,’ ‘fine-minded Pixie,’ ‘so direct, so clear-headed, such a brave happy heart and faith in life.’ Gradually, she assumed the carer’s role in the relationship, a development O’Reilly welcomed. He worried Pixie ‘constantly by doing things she thinks she could do,’ he wrote to Molly. She was ‘really such a help to me; anxious to help cook and tidy up,’ he wrote on another occasion.⁹⁴

Another O’Reilly pen portrait of Pixie – of May 1915 – provides a timely glimpse of the thirteen-year-old girl at the outset of the Redlands years. Childhood may have scarred her, but it had not crushed her.

Pixie – you see her – hazel eyes, beautiful bronzy hair, large strong mouth, good skin, perfect teeth. Unlike her father, she never merely exists – not for one instant. She must *live* all the time – a regular cascade of vitality.⁹⁵

The decision to send Pixie to Redlands, made and financed by Dowell O’Reilly, was inspired. The school was the perfect tonic for her erratic childhood: a world of security and stability with clear boundaries of behaviour and a team of responsible adults to enforce them; a world that underwrote a child’s right to innocence, where newspapers were banned to keep away ‘the horrors of war’⁹⁶; a world of privilege and plenty. Here Pixie could relax her guard and, like Anne of ‘Pilgrimage,’ learn to laugh ‘just for the sake of laughing, without any scorn or irony or bitterness.’ The refugee from a broken home and veteran of five schools abandoned herself utterly to her new world. ‘School is simply glorious--at least this school is,’ she wrote to a cousin. ‘I never cared much for the others and I wouldn’t leave for anything.’⁹⁷ A boarder from 1916, Pixie saw little of the odd *ménage* in Cremorne and only slightly more of her immediate family. Eager to escape her past and its associations, she preferred to spend most school holidays with her new school-friends and their families.

The hunger for life evoked in O’Reilly’s 1915 portrait of Pixie fed on every aspect of the school’s rich curriculum and social life. Hopeless in mathematics, she compensated with excellent performances in history and scripture and very soon attained first place in literature.⁹⁸ One

composition so impressed her English teacher that she felt sure her student ‘must unmistakably [sic] possess the divine spark.’⁹⁹ The momentum of achievement never waned. On graduation, Pixie received the most coveted of the school’s academic awards.¹⁰⁰



Left – Pixie and fellow actor/student in costume dress, the Redlands years. Right – The Redlands Graduate

Redlands fed her a positive image of herself in other ways too. She was popular with every rung of the school’s population, inspiring the ‘undying schoolgirl passion,’¹⁰¹ of younger students as well as affection and respect from her peers. She was, a fellow boarder recalled, ‘friendly to all but she didn’t seek popularity. People were attracted to her, it was as simple as that.’¹⁰²

Young Pixie appears to have mastered the art of remaining an integral part of her new world while retaining her individuality and private space. Thought by her peers to be ‘popular with the teachers’ and ‘wonderful fun, full of life and ideas,’ even her closest friend then felt her also to be a thing apart: both in talent and temperament. She

stood out intellectually, as well as for her acting abilities, for which 'she was always given the leading roles.' In a school where most of the students 'thought little if anything about politics,' Pixie was known to hold 'her own very firm views on such things,' although 'she kept them very much to herself.' The embryo of the fiercely private writer she later became was also in evidence here: 'her writing interests and talents,' a close schoolmate remarked, were 'not obvious to any of her school friends until her very last year when it was announced that she had shared a special writers' award.¹⁰³ From these years, emerged close and lasting friendships. Some, like Dorothy 'Teddy' Hudson and Mary Alice Sheffer (later to marry Herbert V. Evatt¹⁰⁴) became the sisters she never had.

Pixie also forged close relationships with her teachers, in particular Misses G.A. Roseby and May Roseby, headmistress and English teacher, respectively, who encouraged and celebrated her efforts. Successful professional women, outspoken and with progressive notions of child psychology, education and politics, the Misses Roseby presented her with a new model of womanhood. Passionate in their concern for society's oppressed, these pillars of the establishment pronounced themselves committed to radical social reform. Theirs was a brand of radicalism familiar to Dowell O'Reilly's daughter which in time she adopted as her own. It was the radicalism of the enlightened elite in society, not altogether in keeping with, but of no fundamental threat to the capitalist and conservative society to which they belonged and from which ultimately they derived their position and power. There are radicals and then there are radicals in every society. If anything, the Misses Roseby variety of radicalism – a patrician (paternalistic even) concern for the welfare of the 'lower orders,' with more in common with the Fabians in Great Britain than the revolutionary communist movements – served to lend a silver lining to the established order.¹⁰⁵

In time, the generational gap between Pixie and the Misses Roseby seemed to narrow and eventually disappear, and when later the three women shared impressions and frustrations of their respective professions, they did so in the language of the radical and the spirit of comrades-in-arms waging a common struggle to bring enlightenment to society. Removed from the world of the uneducated masses, they saw their educative role primarily among the unenlightened of their own world: the author, within her typically educated middle-class readership, and her teachers, among the student-parent-Old Girl population that composed the Redlands community. 'Quite a long programme in front of us, isn't there? All needing drastic reforms & education,' Miss May once exclaimed to her old pupil after describing a recent meeting of 'the

Old Girls' – 'dear things' – whose conservative instincts irked her socialist conscience.¹⁰⁶

The relationship between teachers and ex-student eventually embraced more than intellectual and ideological affinities, as half a century of correspondence testifies. They shared genuine affection. Among the select few treated to publishers' complimentary copies of Dark's novels, the Misses Roseby used these opportunities to encourage her in the combined image of the enlightened intellectual and the artist. Some forty years after the event, Miss May recalled the essay that had given her 'first revelation' of her student's 'genius' and which brought with it 'such responsibility and hard work!'¹⁰⁷ More than mentors and loving aunts, the Misses Roseby remained for over half-a-century dotting fairy godmothers to their Cinderella. A note from Miss May after receiving *Sun Across the Sky* evokes this aspect of their relationship.

Quite apart from its beautiful literary style I love the wide scope & warmth of your sympathies. How you have come by such wisdom I can't understand as you haven't, after all, left so many years behind you. We feel fearfully proud of you Pixie.¹⁰⁸

Redlands provided Pixie not only with flesh-and-blood models of the new woman and the radical intellectual she eventually adopted, but also with models of community and sisterhood that later featured prominently in her vision of the 'good society.' To the casualty of a chaotic discordant homelife, the order and harmony she sensed in Redlands' social and ethical landscapes, and the strong *esprit de corps* within its small close-knit student-teacher population seemed the Mecca of human society; its political innocence, as she saw it, proof of its genuineness. It had been a place, she recalled nostalgically three decades later, where she had been 'subjected to no "Red" or otherwise "subversive" propaganda, but where values were sound, and thinking encouraged.'¹⁰⁹ The Redlands model of a small integrated community of kindred spirits bound by common values and commitment to the well-being of the group entered Dark's literature in various guises: a small group of medical healers, a close circle of harbour-side dwellers, a little company of writers, a brief band of farmers.

Redlands was also a privileged female world, inhabited and run by spirited, intelligent individuals whose horizons included the prospect of university and professional life. Indeed, for its time, an unusually high percentage of its graduates went on to pursue tertiary education. Some became doctors, and at least two of Pixie's contemporaries also went on to pursue writing careers.¹¹⁰ This first experience of a sisterhood informed Pixie's most striking and radical notions of the new woman. A

major example lies in the militant image conjured by Valerie – female doctor and heroine of *Slow Dawning* – of ‘her fellow-women’ as an ‘army of women’ claiming their birthright to full intellectual and sexual lives, performing

not only the artistic or intellectual work to which their natures inclined, but the normal functions of wifhood and motherhood as well.¹¹¹

Leaving school was a catastrophe for Pixie, casting her from the world that had been seat of learning, playground and home for the last five years – the first happy years – of her life. Redlands had not only dazzled her, but fundamentally changed her consciousness about herself, her society and her place in it. Because it left untouched the socio-economic underpinnings of her personal world, the experience doomed her to profound dissatisfaction with the life awaiting her outside the walls of Redlands.

Amidst the gloom, a glimmer of light. For the first time, a warm family circle awaited Pixie. With the world still at war, Molly had hazarded the long sea journey to her new husband and home. Everyone seemed to bask in the new-found domestic environment, except Pat, by then a shell-shocked casualty of the Great War. He died in 1926, reportedly of tuberculosis, and haunted his sister’s literature in the image of the soldier broken by war. The most explicit portrayal is Colin in *Return to Coolami*, a dissolute young ex-soldier from the Great War whose attempted suicide is foiled at the last minute by a family member.

Molly was the catalyst of the family’s dramatic transformation. An insight into her character and vital role in making a family of the loose strands of the McCulloch-O’Reilly household appears in the family history. A ‘gifted artist,’ Dark wrote, Molly set out to make ‘a light-hearted thing in stained-glass window effect’ for the verandah of the new house.

It covered two windows with pictures of the family; in one my father appeared clad in bathers and blowing smoke-rings from his pipe, while she knelt, looking very demure and stitching at a bit of needlework. The other showed Pat in uniform, Bim, also in bathers, paddling the little canvas dinghy, and myself arrayed for basket-ball and wielding a tennis-racquet. The three males had small haloes – she and I very large ones.¹¹²

Pixie, a close Redlands friend later recalled, ‘adored’ her stepmother. The feeling was reciprocated. Each filled a void in the other’s life, particularly after O’Reilly’s death in 1923. Molly offered

Pixie another model of the new woman: domestic but not domesticated, a mother-figure who was also an intellectual and an artist. Soon her impact was reflected in her stepdaughter's literature. Mrs Hendon in *Prelude to Christopher* represents the first of many impressive older women¹¹³ whose blend of mellow yet commanding personalities bore Molly O'Reilly's stamp.

But home no longer held centre stage for Pixie. On the brink of adulthood, she was looking outward and to the future. Anne's feelings as she approached a similar crossroads hint at what this major juncture may have signified to Pixie:

She says that she longed desperately for the University ... she knew that it would be impossible for her. Obviously, when she left school she must earn money; her father, she knew, could not help her; her grandmother had done all she could in making these precious school years possible. She saw, however hard she looked, nothing but office work. There must have been no particle of her being that did not shrink from the very thought of it, but there it was, looming up like a vast black menace at the end of the bright road she was treading.¹¹⁴

Pixie's teachers were clearly in favour of her doing further studies. One of them wrote to Dowell O'Reilly soon after graduation entreating him to consider sending her to university and confessing that 'the prospect of an "office" for her rather grieves me.' She consoled herself with the fact that 'if you decide upon that, the knowledge of men & affairs that some experience of business life would give her would be valuable, and would serve as a stepping stone.'¹¹⁵

But university, a world of ideas to which Pixie felt drawn and for which Redlands had well prepared her, was not to be. Of the various obstacles to it – a mediocre performance in mathematics, O'Reilly's resistance to the idea, and patent lack of funds – the last one was insurmountable. Her family simply could not subsidise her studies¹¹⁶ – or her literary ambitions. It was the matter of finances, not as Modjeska argued 'the reality of her socially defined role as a woman,'¹¹⁷ that forced Pixie to abandon hopes to study and write.¹¹⁸

The third movement of these private years is so brief that it might be mistaken for an interlude. It lasted barely two years, including a four-month shorthand and typewriting course at Stott & Hoore's Business College and eighteen months as a typist in a solicitors' firm in the city. But to Pixie, the period was an eternity, and in its indefiniteness lay part of its bleakness. Still mourning the world of affluence, erudition and conviviality Redlands symbolised, she was suddenly thrust into what

she saw as a male-dominated concrete jungle, where her new colleagues were office girls, and her new tasks manual and technical. It was a brutal change in expectations and environment. The much devalued self-image they combined to produce helps explain the young woman's savage response to her work years.

The record is particularly slight and vague on this period. A group snapshot of Pixie with work colleagues, a few cryptic notations, the relevant section in 'Pilgrimage' and a peculiarly virulent breed of 'flapper literature' constitute the sum of the evidence. Thus, while the occasional phrase suddenly conveys with great economy of language the depth of her contempt for this world – 'a dreadful dump'¹¹⁹ she later described the business college she attended – this period relies mainly on her fiction to suggest both the experience itself and Pixie's response to it. Anne's experiences of this interim period between school and marriage seem to mirror Pixie's closely. Business college is 'a torment – ugly sounds, harsh textures, ugly people, and above all, ugly places.' She feels alienated from fellow students.

She counted, from the thirty odd pupils, four who looked 'decent,' as the schoolgirl accepts the term. The rest were frowsy-haired, under-washed, over-powdered, their ages ranging from twelve to about thirty-five.¹²⁰



Pixie with colleagues of the solicitors' firm of Makinson, Plunkett and D'Apice, 1920-21

Employed as an office typist, Anne feels alienated from the

mechanical nature of the work, the unequal power relationship between office girl and male boss, the painted glamour office-girl type, the coarse people with whom she is forced to mix. Anne's contempt – and class consciousness – extends to 'the lift-man' who is 'fifty or thereabouts, pallid enough, grubby enough – but that was to be expected.'¹²¹ Anne's rejection of the role and world thrust onto her after leaving school takes the forms of psychological withdrawal and unrestrained outpourings about the types who people that world.

Pixie's similar response is reflected principally in her 'flapper literature,' that phase of her writing of the 'twenties and early 'thirties in which both her heroines and victims brandished a marked gender-consciousness and actively flaunted their disregard for society's moral conventions, particularly on questions of sex and sexual transgressions.¹²² A few short stories and two novels – 'Pilgrimage' and *Slow Dawning* – provide a thinly-veiled backward glance at this world. From this literature, two major themes emerge. One is an affronted sense of the dignity of woman, prompted as much by the demeanour of the office-girls themselves as by their male bosses' treatment of them. The other is a fierce alienation from this urban setting's material, human and spiritual ugliness and squalor. 'Benevolence: the Story of a Hypocrite' (1926) paints a scathing portrait of the office world's sexual politics, mechanisms of class and gender oppression, and underclass of female victims. The crux of the story comes when Jean, secretary and recent sexual conquest of her boss, Mr Massingham, 'sitting dizzily at her typewriter,' realised 'that perhaps she was going to have a baby.' Jean has an abortion and returns to her job, wiser but soured and set on 'a revenge dreadful in its subtlety' against which Massingham stood helpless, for

his disgrace lay not in the fact that he had seduced an ignorant girl, but in that she had vanquished him by refusing to "fall."

This period radicalised Pixie's views on the woman question, and it is here that Modjeska's image of Dark as an angry insect, stinging herself to death, belongs.

Pixie's response transcended gender matters. In 'Pilgrimage,' the weight of the story's sympathy lies wholly with Anne and the clash of her aesthetic sensibilities with the 'ugliness' of the life of the common people – 'the scrapings of a city' – with whom she was forced to associate. 'I am used to the way she sits with her eyes on her lap,' her biographer testifies, 'while the tram crawls through sordid places of dirt and poverty.' In one of the most troubling passages of Dark's fiction, Janet explains that to Anne 'rubbing shoulders' with ugliness of any

kind was 'a torment.' A 'newsboy's hideous "Pye-poa!"' would cause her to 'wince involuntarily,' when 'a repulsive old man brushed past her in the street' she shivered. She allows that they 'probably had no chance to be clean, and they certainly could help neither their voices nor their grammar.'¹²³ In *Slow Dawning*, for all its militant feminism, the principal antagonist is neither Man nor the society he rules, but 'the prejudice of millions – with generations of other millions behind them'¹²⁴ which frustrates healer-reformers like Valerie. Significantly, given the militant feminism ascribed broadly to Dark principally on the strength of this novel, the human face which these amorphous masses assume belongs to a woman – Valerie's maid, Mrs Gillogley – good-hearted but stupid, of a cast of mind and level of class and culture so low that reason was absent. To Valerie, heroine of the story, she was a 'fragment of ignorance and devotion'¹²⁵ as well as a symbol of the vast forces of darkness confronting the enlightened elite.

It's funny, of course, but tragic, too. In one little woman it's a joke, but in thousands of little old women it's a catastrophe. It's Ignorance and Superstition--my pet ogres; I fear them so--wouldn't you, if you had swotted for seven years to learn your job ... and then had Ignorance, who left school when it was fourteen, tell you it 'didn't 'old with' your diagnosis? What do they go to doctors for?¹²⁶

The brevity of this period belies its importance. The phobias and aversions Pixie developed to city life, manual labour, the working class and the masses governed the fortress-like world – the world-proof life – she later shaped for herself.¹²⁷ They also left strong marks in her politics. Redlands gave her a privileged perspective of society. Her experiences as an office-girl exposed her to life from below. Their combined effect was to crystallise her sense of identification with the privileged.

Implications flowed to her approach to the woman question, socialism and society. Modjeska's and McQueen's¹²⁸ focus on *Slow Dawning* as evidence of Dark's militant feminist stage oversimplifies what was even then a deeply qualified feminism. Experiences of this period may have radicalised her thoughts on the woman question, but also qualified them fundamentally. *Slow Dawning's* heroine Valerie was first and foremost an intellectual and a visionary. Her basic sympathies and loyalties lay with the enlightened elite in society. Her kindred spirits were not gender-based but culture-defined. Her feminism, like her creator's, was a feminism from above which looked down with pity and contempt at the masses of lesser-educated women.

This period played a similarly ambivalent role in shaping Dark's socialism and identification with fellow Australians. Her only first-hand experience of working life and working-class fellow Australians confirmed her sense of alienation from the Australia of what her father once called 'the swearing, sweating, tobacco-juicing proletariat – the "breeders."' ¹²⁹ Like her socialist father, Pixie came to be repelled by the human face of the oppressed masses. To be a radical thinker was one thing, but to rub shoulders with flesh-and-blood proletarians was another. Hers remained the drawing-room socialism of the Misses Roseby. Her mental map of society held two principal opposing camps: one composed of enlightened, gracious individuals, another of a mass of senseless people performing senseless labour. Yet how to extricate herself from the material and psychological 'dump' in which she found herself? The prospects looked dim.

Marriage, a family and domestic life, some feminist historians have argued, frustrated the careers of Australian women writers. ¹³⁰ Yet Dark's case defies this argument. Marriage – to Dr Eric Dark, her father's friend and himself recently widowed – did not sink her writing ambitions, ¹³¹ but rekindled and sustained them, rescuing her from the grim life and prospects of the office-girl.

Like Dick Prescott, Anne's husband-to-be in 'Pilgrimage,' Eric Payten Dark 'had been woven into the background' of Pixie's early life 'as a figure is woven into a tapestry – fixed and unchanging.' ¹³² Association between the two families had begun with Eric's and Dowell's fathers' connections through the Church. ¹³³ It was later resumed when as student and master, respectively, at Sydney Grammar School, Eric and Dowell themselves met and a lifetime friendship was forged through common interests in 'cricket, Cadets and the school magazine...' But most especially poetry. O'Reilly remained Eric's literary mentor through university, writing to a poet-friend that,

A boy – Eric Dark – in the Medical School is just where you and I were 20 years ago – perhaps more so. He writes fair verse now ... a rare character, simple, steadfast – divinely in earnest. ¹³⁴

After graduation, Eric worked briefly as Resident Medical Officer at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney before enlisting with the medical corps. He left Australia in March 1915 to join the Guards Division's field ambulance. Wounded and gassed, he was sent home, and married his childhood sweetheart, Kathleen Aphra 'Daidee' Raymond. After further service, he returned to Australia in July 1919 and was awarded several military honours, ¹³⁵ including the Military Cross earned at Passchendaele. The official citation reads:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in leading his bearers. He displayed great gallantry and disregard of danger in moving about in the open under the heaviest shell fire, collecting and evacuating the wounded. He worked continuously without a rest for thirty-six hours, by his energy and determination contributing largely to the rapid clearing of the battlefield.¹³⁶

After a year of marriage Daidee died of septic peritonitis. Her death devastated Eric. A lengthy letter to their son John soon after the tragedy, then ‘a happy little devil of four and a half months,’ speaks movingly of ‘the speck of eternity fate granted to us’ and offers a glimpse of his vast sense of loss.

What a companion she was; mood melting into mood as subtly as the lights and shadows changed over the mountains, and valleys, from the lightest gaiety to high seriousness, from coquetry to tenderness; from idle dreaming to restless energy; from mad-cap fooling to passionate loving.¹³⁷

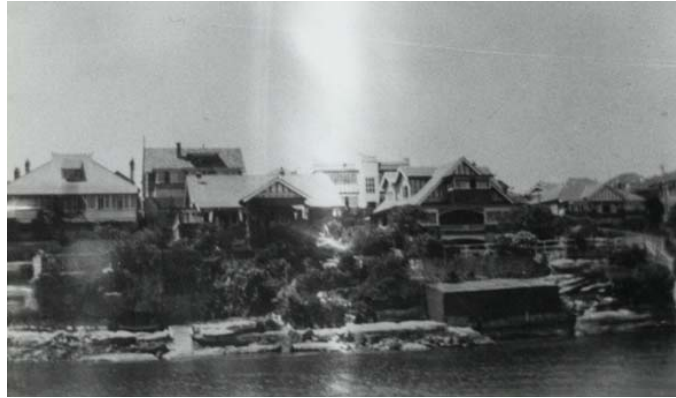
Some seventy years after the tragedy and not long before his own death, Eric Dark was still castigating himself – as husband and medical doctor – for not having appreciated early enough the seriousness of her condition.¹³⁸

Memories of Daidee remained with Eric Dark throughout his life, but it was not until after Eleanor’s death that Michael Dark first heard his father refer to his first wife and to their brief time together, which he described as ‘a time of uninterrupted bliss.’ Shown Eric’s letters to his first wife, Michael Dark said he could hardly recognise his father from the letters, ‘so gay and carefree’ he seemed. His parents’ marriage had not had the light heartedness he sensed in his father’s earlier marriage. It had been a more serenely happy relationship.¹³⁹

Like O’Reilly before the advent of Molly, Eric carried a terrible burden of guilt. But he was a life-affirmer. With maternal aunts assuming John’s care, Eric returned to Sydney University as a demonstrator in anatomy. Romance overtook his plans for a surgeon’s career.

Eric Payten Dark and Pixie O’Reilly were married on 1 February 1922.¹⁴⁰ The wedding reception, held at ‘Benison’ – Dowell and Molly’s home in Vaucluse – was a small discreet affair, in deference perhaps to the bridegroom’s recent loss of his first wife. Before yielding to her new life and image, Pixie made two gestures to her flapper days: suggesting to her fiancé they live together before marriage at least for a

time;¹⁴¹ and pressing for assurances of permanent full-time house help so she could pursue a career free of domestic responsibilities.¹⁴² Eric's strict Methodist upbringing and regard for her father's feelings¹⁴³ prompted him to reject the first suggestion outright, but not the second. From the outset, he was his writer-wife's staunchest admirer and ally.



Waterway country. 'Benison,' Vacluse, amid other well appointed Sydney harbour residences.



*Dr and Mrs Eric Payten Dark, 1
February 1922, at their wedding
reception in 'Benison,' Vaucluse*

Becoming Mrs Eric Payten Dark transformed Pixie's horizons: lifting her to the status and lifestyle of a doctor's wife,¹⁴⁴ and allowing the frustrated writer the indulgence of a decade-long apprenticeship. Though she retained her 'phobia about financial security' long after its causes had disappeared, Pixie O'Reilly would never be 'hard up' again.¹⁴⁵

In her husband Pixie O'Reilly found a rare combination of lover, guardian, colleague and friend; much rarer still, he remained so throughout six-and-a-half decades of married life. 'A very bad little sonnet for a very good little wife,' written for his second wife, encapsulates the blend of pain, gratitude and passion Eric brought to his new marriage. Its first verse reads:

When as the years stretched onwards, black as night,
And every hope lay dead within my heart,
And each dear memory, like a poisoned dart,
Wounded me fresh, you brought the steady light
Of friendship, showing the world new-born & bright:
Then love came softly, calling me apart

And flames that smouldered sullen as a burning-ghost
Were quenched, & earth shone joyous in my sight.¹⁴⁶

Eric Dark was a daunting, commanding presence. His physical and intellectual stature exuded great, often intimidating, confidence and vitality.¹⁴⁷ Twelve years Eleanor's senior, he had survived a general and a personal catastrophe. Life had seasoned as well as toughened him. He comforted the child in Pixie with soothing words

I'm so glad you've got the sky & trees & flowers to come
close to you, & soothe away all the ... fret.¹⁴⁸

and poured out his passion to the woman

I just want you, & nobody & nothing else in the universe
is any good at all.¹⁴⁹

Her circumspect personality and the dearth of her letters to him make it more difficult to locate Eleanor's feelings, but clearly she returned his devotion. Evidence lies strewn across the spectrum of her writings of the period: in the soft imagery – 'the firelight, love-light, candlelight of home'¹⁵⁰ – characteristic of her love poetry of the 1920s; the string of doctor-hero characters that begin to people her imagined worlds; the celebrations of the 'sex union' of her heroines from *Slow Dawning* onwards, all of whom seemed to share with Valerie the view that:

Together with eating and sleeping it is the most important
thing in Life, because it keeps Life going, and it *should*
be entirely beautiful.¹⁵¹

Temperamentally, Eleanor and Eric were opposites. His gregariousness, thirst for adventure, relish of controversy and rock-like sense of security and stability contrasted with her craving for privacy, sensible ways, loathing of conflict and publicity, and hunger to belong. In the essentials – moral values, social instincts, civic consciousness, commitment to family and community, respect for the land – they were one. Their affinities included literature and history, tennis, bushwalking and mountain-climbing. Both liked their comforts, but shared spartan and utilitarian tendencies. They had curious, questing minds, and bodies that thrived under rigorous physical conditions. Though their fluency in Biblical language signified intimate links with church life and beliefs, both were by now confirmed agnostics.¹⁵² Affinities and similarities aside, a principal strength of the relationship lay in the implicit understanding that each was first and foremost an individual, free to pursue their own interests and priorities. That they stood political poles apart until the advent of the Depression, Eleanor later remarked, made no impact on the relationship: 'without any feeling whatever arising

from it,' he would vote Nationalist and she Labor.¹⁵³

A year after their wedding, the couple left the city behind to make their home in the Blue Mountains. 'The bush after the city,' Eric reflected then, 'always makes me think of that lovely benediction: The peace of God, which passeth all understanding.'¹⁵⁴ Other forces, some with the potential to disrupt the relationship, also lay behind the move. The ghost of 'Daidee' haunted bridegroom and new bride alike, if in different ways. Concerned about Eleanor's kidney ailments, Eric insisted on a healthy rural environment within reach of Sydney's superior medical facilities.¹⁵⁵



The original 'weatherboard Varuna' and its new mistress, c. 1923



Katoomba – situated in the upper Blue Mountains, a short train journey from Sydney – was a strong contender, and the timely sale of a medical practice there sealed the matter. By March 1923 the couple, later joined by young John, had settled into ‘Varuna,’ a weatherboard house set among three acres of bushland, two kilometres from the centre of town. O’Reilly’s death a few months later, followed by that of Pat in 1926, drew Molly and Bim increasingly on visits from Sydney¹⁵⁶, thus turning ‘Varuna’ into the new focus of family life. The rhythms of life were conspiring to shift the centre of gravity of Eleanor Dark’s life from the hometown of her youth to the little mountain community that would be home for the rest of her life.

Katoomba possessed all the advantages and disadvantages of a small country town. Its magnificent setting and small population offered space and privacy,¹⁵⁷ and the small but thriving artistic and intellectual community the promise of kindred spirits. The new arrivals partook of their new hometown’s *esprit de corps*, increasingly identifying with its cultural life, and in time also with its politically radical subculture.¹⁵⁸ This was the Katoomba the Darks made their own, and from whose ranks they drew friends, tennis and golf partners, bushwalking companions and political soul mates.

There was another, more orthodox Katoomba. Suspicious if not intolerant of ‘eccentrics,’¹⁵⁹ mainstream Katoomba was a conservative middle-class stronghold. Glimpses of this Katoomba and Eleanor’s contempt for it abound in the early novels. Almost invariably it is its womenfolk who as pillars of the establishment – ‘good ladies of the church’¹⁶⁰ – she portrayed scathingly.

For the moment, the young wife’s sights were set on establishing the essentials of their future life together. Eric’s successful but demanding practice, involving both surgery hours and house calls, provided the financial basis for an increasingly secure and comfortable family life. ‘Varuna’ was its hearth: main focus of personal and social interactions. The Darks shared a passion for gardening, spending long hours planning, shaping and nurturing the grounds. They combined aesthetic and functional considerations, and soon established a small orchard and vegetable garden.¹⁶¹ Keeping O’Reilly abreast of his daughter’s new life, Eric regretted that

the housework doesn’t leave her much time for playing
about in the garden, but today she spent some little while

‘deblighting’ apple trees with a kerosene rag, while I pruned.¹⁶²

The transition from ‘flapper’ to doctor’s wife was smooth. From the start, the division of labour in ‘Varuna’ was traditional. Eric was the breadwinner, and Eleanor, the housekeeper, responsible for social entertainment, sewing, mending, curtain-making, scone-baking, jam-preserving and other activities with which she filled her domestic life. Loath to admit it, she proved not dissimilar to those domestically-driven females whom she punished in her fiction. Eleanor flaunted her dislike of housework, but was houseproud. Although servants bent to her exacting standards, she drove herself as hard to reach and maintain those standards when no house help was available.

Resisting the image of the domestic woman, Eleanor also resisted that of the lady of leisure. To colleagues and literary advisers, she preferred to stress the occasional problems of maidlessness, but the facts speak for themselves. In addition to her considerable literary output in the ‘twenties – two novels and over a dozen short stories and poems – she also indulged in a rich outdoor, social and cultural life. By the end of her first year in Katoomba, a proud husband recounted sixty years later, his wife had won both the ladies’ tennis and golf singles.¹⁶³

Through the 1920s, the Darks wove themselves into the fabric of their community. They forged friendships with kindred spirits, mostly professionals like themselves of Leftist views who liked to mix rigorous climbs and bushwalks with equally rigorous discussions of world affairs. Generally, the set of people they met at the tennis court, in bush or mountaineering expeditions and at the theatre, was the same with whom they shared music evenings at home and earnest intellectual discussions over dinner.

Individually and as a couple, the Darks fitted well into their new community. The Redlands years had been Eleanor’s apprenticeship for her new life and role as doctor’s wife. Years and holidays spent with wealthy friends and their families had polished her social graces. Less than a year after their move, invitations were ‘pouring in’ for them to join in various activities.¹⁶⁴ By then ‘Varuna’ boasted a home-made tennis court, so they were able to return hospitality in what was a favourite form of entertainment in their circle.¹⁶⁵ An inveterate joiner, Eric seized every opportunity to involve himself in various aspects of community life.

With fellow Katoombans Osmar White and Eric Lowe, he founded the Blue Mountaineers, the first rock-climbing club in N.S.W.¹⁶⁶ Over many years, Eric led his small team in expeditions that included the first

recorded ascents of Belougerie and Crater Bluff in the Warrumbungle's, the Fly Wall on Narrow Neck and Arethusa Gorge in the Blue Mountains. His prowess in this field is legendary. Osmar White, later to become a respected journalist and foreign correspondent, shared many of those experiences and expeditions. 'Since those days,' he later recalled,

I have seen many fine rock climbers in action in many parts of the world, but I cannot recall one with a more delicate precision of movement, more rhythm, or a more impressive style than the small, red-headed leader of the Blue Mountaineers. He was a joy to watch – and an object lesson for all boof-heads who fail to distinguish the difference between morale and recklessness. To the best of my knowledge, Dark never had a fall during his long climbing life, although he drove himself to the physical limit. He was an inspired route-finder and expert at assessing with uncanny accuracy the highest and lowest common denominators of any climbing team.

A capable climber herself, Eleanor sometimes joined him.

She also became part of a cluster of writers that included, among others, fellow mountaineers White and Lowe. Recalling later the 'little group' of writers¹⁶⁷ that met to 'read one another's work' at 'Varuna,'¹⁶⁸ White remembered Eleanor as 'his mentor, even if unintentionally.'¹⁶⁹ A frustrated actress, Eleanor featured in at least one production of the Leura Dramatic Players, a local amateur group. A review in the *Blue Mountain Times* noted that she had been 'excellently cast' as 'the ex-wife' and described her performance as 'subtle and effective.'¹⁷⁰

Beneath the surface of this rich expansive life lay unwelcome legacies from the past. Some were irritants, like Eric's fascination with war and the military. Others went deeper, particularly Eleanor's frustrated maternal instincts and, not unrelated, the care of young John. Both went to the heart of their new life together and in both lurked the ghost of 'Daidee.' Eric's dread of losing his second wife to another troubled pregnancy amounted almost to paranoia; for almost a decade he refused to contemplate having a child. Eleanor's kidney ailments, which led to a first operation in 1922, entrenched him in his position. To his wife, who had assumed motherhood would follow naturally soon after marriage,¹⁷¹ his intransigence proved difficult to bear.

The fact that through these disappointments she remained principal carer of another woman's child – particularly given the tensions which from the outset caring for John introduced into the newlyweds' lives –

compounded the problem. Three-year old John arrived in 'Varuna' already with serious behavioural problems. The decision to send him to a local boarding school at such an early age bespeaks the desperateness of the situation. A letter from Eric to John forty years later offers an insight into this three-way relationship of the early days. 'Eleanor,' Eric claimed

gave you all the affection and care that any woman could give to her own child, but you never made any response; I think it is impossible to go on giving love indefinitely when no love is returned.¹⁷²

Eleanor Dark's circle was finally complete with the arrival of Michael Brian Dark on St. Valentine's Day 1929, reportedly 'the happiest day of her life.' The birth of Michael – her first and only child – effectively laid to rest the ghost of Daidee.

Motherhood brought its own set of pleasures and pressures. With no positive model to follow, no sisterhood to lend support, she was thrown onto her own resources. Through the usual anxieties over the child's well-being,¹⁷³ adjustments to decade-long rhythms and routines of domestic life, compromises of priorities, she evolved a model that seemed to foster warm bonds between mother and child.

The mother's priorities superseded the writer's, as these comments towards the end of the baby's first year suggest:

Must just wait till Michael is at school. If I do try to snatch an hour the poor darling really tries to keep quiet and out of my hair, but at that age it can't be done. At this moment he has an old tin tray and is filling it with stones and scraping them up and down on it to make what I'm sure he thinks is a *beautiful* noise.¹⁷⁴

The years of frustrated motherhood had ended. They yielded another precious fruit in the form of *Prelude to Christopher*, Eleanor Dark's strongest claim to artistry.

Marriage had transformed Pixie O'Reilly's professional horizons as dramatically and permanently as it had transformed her personal ones. A writing life that seemed destined to remain a pipedream became real. Eric facilitated every aspect of it: financial, practical, moral, psychological. He shared her awe of the artist and the written word. He harboured no doubts of her artistry and needed no convincing that her calling was superior even to his.

I knew she was going to be a writer. I was sure. She had written a couple of little poems. I've always had immense

respect for the written word and I think it goes right back to my infancy. My father taught me to read on the first chapter of the Gospel According to St. John. You remember the opening of that, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.’ Well, I think that got into my infant consciousness and came out with this enormous respect for the written word. That was one of the things that attracted me to her: I was sure she was going to be a great writer.¹⁷⁵

From the time of his proposal of marriage, when he promised to provide permanent and full-time domestic help,¹⁷⁶ Eric’s support of his wife’s literary ambitions never waned. An impassioned plea on her behalf to his estranged son John in 1961 leaves little doubt where his priorities lay. He argued that

with creative writing every interruption is apt to [sic] put the writer off the track, and sometimes the track is never found again. Factual writing, such as you and I may do, is quite different, and is easily picked up again after interruption. I believe that her work is more ultimately important than either you or I.¹⁷⁷

Did Eric mean to write ‘you or I’ or ‘yours or mine’? He may have meant what he wrote. Eric’s influence on his wife’s writing was not always felicitous, but it was not for want of support or commitment on his part. For better or for worse, across the story of Eleanor Dark’s writing life from the time of marriage looms the figure of her husband as self-appointed minder of the artist-in-residence: facilitating time, making space, ensuring privacy, singing her praises, battling her critics, celebrating her triumphs and, most importantly, confirming her in the belief that she was an artist.

Eleanor’s domestic world held yet other treasures for the writer later to quarry. Lost for a role after her husband’s death, Molly threw herself into the task of advancing her stepchildren’s ambitions, including undertaking ‘the drudgery of searching publication’ for Eleanor’s work.¹⁷⁸ It is hard to imagine a better literary agent. Quite apart from her unquestioned loyalty and commitment, Molly brought to the task the artist’s perspective as well as precious literary contacts in England.

Thus freed to abandon herself to the creative aspects of her work and in the safe obscurity of her pseudonyms – ‘P. O’R’ or ‘Patricia O’Rane,’ and very occasionally ‘Nora Keelard’ and ‘Henry Head’ – Dark made the 1920s into a laboratory of her writing career.¹⁷⁹ Here the craftsperson she later disclaimed to be engaged in wide experimentation with various literary *genres*, style and content, forms of narrative,

colloquialisms, satire, portraiture and characterisation, perspectives and audiences. By the time critics of the mid-1930s seized on what in the Australian context was her pioneering use of modernist techniques – flashback, time compression, stream of consciousness – Dark had spent over a decade mastering, refining and adapting the tools that by then marked the great literature of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and others. Difficult to handle, these modernist techniques nonetheless suited her tendencies towards psychoanalysis in characterisation, elastic conception of time, drawing and probing of inner landscapes.

Early in the period, Dark's distinctively different approaches to her verse and prose – light and serious, respectively – also began to emerge. Her poetry tended to be romantic and soft – 'the firelight, love-light, candlelight of home'¹⁸⁰ -, the voice of innocence appealing child-like to conventional notions of the healing power of faith:

Oh pray for me if you have One to hear,
For I have eyes to see,
And yet no voice to praise the beauty near.
Oh pray for me!¹⁸¹

Her short stories and novels, typically hard-edged and bearing a serious message, reflected a much more studied, self-conscious approach. Here the perspective varied widely and issues ranged from censorship, the media and the advent of consumerism, to sex and office politics, religious hypocrisy and rural versus urban values. She dealt with controversial issues – abortion, adultery, extra-marital sex, male brothels – controversially, and almost invariably the literary *persona* she adopted implicitly or explicitly was male.



*A portrait of the artist by her artist
brotherBim, c. 1930*

From a safe distance, the apprentice scanned and studied developments in the Australian literary scene. Framed at one end by Nettie Palmer's survey of *Modern Australian Literature 1900-1923* (1924) and at the other by H.M. Green's *An Outline of Australian Literature* (1930), the 'twenties saw early attempts by cartographers of a national literature to chart its development as a discrete body of writing. Meanwhile, artists themselves were seeking to direct that development with new theories and definitions of Australian art that aimed to liberate the creative spirit from the shackles of convention and local preoccupations. Christopher Brennan's 1927 piece 'Some Makers of Australia' argued for a universalist approach to the 'poet's "national" task.' Norman Lindsay's *Creative Effort* (1920) posed 'a new aesthetic programme' for the country's 'Urban Intelligentsia',¹⁸² which emphasised 'gaiety in art' and defended 'the individuality and freedom of the artist against a wowseryish Australian society.'¹⁸³

In the second half of the decade emerged two of the most successful names in twentieth-century Australian creative writing. Ion Idriess and Henry Handel Richardson raised lowbrow and highbrow Australian literature, respectively, to new levels.¹⁸⁴ Between these polarities of culture lay exciting developments in the novel, around which were forming the vague contours of a new force in Australian literary life: the

little company. In 1928, under the pseudonym of Brent of Bin Bin, Miles Franklin launched the first of her *Up the Country* series; the following year came Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929), a controversial story of a fateful love bond between an Aboriginal woman and a White man that broke new ground in subject matter and her sympathetic treatment of it. The decade ended with Vance Palmer's *The Passage* (1930) awarded both the *Bulletin* and A.L.S. for best novel of the year.

Eleanor Dark was still a few years away from emerging into this scene. She was also mentalities away from the confident serious writer who in the mid-1930s joined others of that select group in a common vision and mission of a 'people's literature.' For the present, writing remained a pliable versatile tool which, in whatever ways and for whatever ends she used it, she controlled. Generally unrefined and immature in places, Dark's literature of the 1920s had nonetheless a free uncontrived quality that disappeared with the 1930s and her embrace of serious writing. Unencumbered by pressures to conform or the burden of an established reputation or even name, untied to a given medium, formula or tradition of writing, the apprentice wrote mainly to suit her whims and perceived needs, financial and otherwise.

Written to sell, many of her short stories conformed generally to popular market demands. Her skills in churning out romantic tales and melodramas were well suited to capture 'the woman reader,' discovered by American and British magazine publishers in the 1920s, and soon after assiduously courted by their Australian counterparts. Even the *Bulletin*, bastion of manhood, capitalised on the trend with a new weekly *The Australian Woman's Mirror*. An occasional contributor, Dark was asked by the editor for contributions 'with a strongly sentimental note – you know the sort of thing'¹⁸⁵ to their new journal. She did. Only the previous year, in 1923, the journal had published her short story 'Take Your Choice,' a romantic melodrama in which Daphne and Jim's 'war love; passionate, intense, with a note of desperation' consumed them with 'a feverish anxiety to live every second of their little time together.' Once apart, Jim struggled 'by sheer force of love to drag his spirit close to her' while Daphne longed for 'his arms and his lips and the smell of his rough tweed coat.'¹⁸⁶

Dark's approach changed dramatically as through the late 1920s she turned increasingly to the novel as her principal medium. The same blunt distinctions noted earlier between her verse and prose – light and serious, respectively – now applied between her short stories and novels. As if following an inner plan, the writer and her writing turned ever more serious in subject-matter and treatment of it. The trend

concerned her literary advisers. Keen to encourage what, on the strength of her earlier prose, had seemed a promising author, agents, would-be publishers and their readers gently advised her against it. But the strikingly similar advice they offered – to turn to ‘something more cheerful,’ ‘in a lighter vein’¹⁸⁷, not ‘so tragic’¹⁸⁸ – went unheeded. Sometime in the three-and-a-half year process of writing the novel she hoped would establish her name in Australian high literary society, a consciousness – and preciousness – settled on Dark that overturned her whole approach to her work and eventually the work itself.

Her response to the chorus of pleas for ‘something more cheerful’ in the midst of the Depression could not have been more eloquent: *Prelude to Christopher*, a work of unrelieved pain and desolation, aptly described by Franklin as a ‘terrible’ novel in the true sense of the word. The long apprenticeship was complete. Pixie O’Reilly and her favourite toy had yielded to the artist and her art.

The older Dark guarded her apprenticeship no less jealously than her childhood from the prying eyes of posterity. Thinking it had yielded ‘rather unpromising material’¹⁸⁹, she sought to deflect attention not only from her poetry and short stories, but also her two novels of the 1920s – *Slow Dawning* and ‘Pilgrimage’¹⁹⁰ – of which she had ‘no opinion at all’ of the first and ‘only a little’ of the second.¹⁹¹ Few disagreed. *Slow Dawning* disappointed author and publishers alike; its sales figures stopping ‘at a very low figure.’¹⁹² ‘Pilgrimage’ made the rounds of several British publishers before it was withdrawn.

The significance of Dark’s literature of the 1920s transcends questions of literary merit. Herein lies the playground of the apprentice, the laboratory of the future writer, the seedbed of her serious literature. Dark’s prose of these years also provides a useful – if idiosyncratic – barometer of shifts in gender relations at home and at work, as well as an index of other social as well as technological changes like the advent of the wireless.

More importantly, the 1920s embrace the writer’s innocence, its quality captured in ‘The Book, The Bishop and The Ban,’ an otherwise unmemorable short story of 1923. A far cry from her reverential, awe-inspiring portrayal of Nicholas Kavanagh a decade later, Dark’s characterisation of Eustace, author of *The Book*, mocks the moral preciousness and pretentiousness of the artist. An uninspiring and uninspired creature, Eustace is the anti-hero as well as the story’s sole object of gentle ridicule. The story revolves around a scheme by which his girlfriend Esmeralda hopes to persuade The Bishop to apply The Ban in order to ensure *The Book*’s commercial success. Eustace’s delicate artistic sensibilities are affronted by Esmeralda’s ploy to corrupt

the language and imagery of his masterpiece in order to attract censorship and thus high publicity and high demand for *The Book*. Initially troubled about what he called ‘this mutilating of my work’ – ‘this sacrilege’ – he eventually succumbs to Esmeralda’s persuasive arguments and allows her to adulterate his work at her whim. The moral of the story is that the cunning artist can turn the weapon of censorship into a tool of profit.

Eustace was made. His bank account swelled rapidly. [He says to his new bride] “My artistic reputation is ruined, but there are compensations. My fortune is made.”¹⁹³

Such a story and such a character could not and did not make the crossing between the private and public years of Dark’s writing life. Chaotic and crude, irreverent towards the artist, it remained a period piece. It belonged to the writer’s season of innocence, a time when writing was ‘just another game.’

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- ¹ Eleanor Dark, *Waterway*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p. 190.
 - ² Interview with Eleanor Dark by Mrs J. Moore, Broadcast in National 2FC, Women’s Session, 14.11.46, ref. ST 333 2/1 Box 1, Australian Archives. Courtesy of Geoff Harris, ABC Documents Archives.
 - ³ Kylie Tennant, interview with Eleanor Dark, ‘A little company against the bulldozer mentality,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14.2.74.
 - ⁴ Jean Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, Ch. XXVII ‘Writers at Home,’ pp. 245-256, Frank Johnston, Sydney, 1945, p. 248.
 - ⁵ His ‘habit with books,’ Dowell O’Reilly acknowledged, was not that of ‘the wine-taster, the gourmet’ but of ‘a glutton, a drunkard.’ Letter from Dowell O’Reilly to his English cousin, Molly Miles, (first-half of 1914), in M. O’Reilly (ed.), *Dowell O’Reilly from his Letters*, Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1927, p. 20.
 - ⁶ The second, spanning the ‘fifties and beyond, lay at the other end of the ‘public years’ of the 1930s and 1940s.
 - ⁷ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Penguin Books Ltd., New York, 1965, p. 35.
 - ⁸ Borrowed from second introductory quote of the chapter.
 - ⁹ See newspaper cutting containing notice of the marriage in ML MSS 4545 15(25), Part 1(2).

¹⁰ Of the few studies that have considered these years, four in particular – spread evenly across the last three decades – stand out. They are A.K. Thomson's monograph – *Understanding the Novel: The Timeless Land*, Jacaranda Press, Queensland, 1966, – the first to be devoted exclusively to Dark and her literature, Drusilla Modjeska's 'Hammer at Destiny: A Study of Eleanor Dark,' Honours, ANU, 1973, the first feminist critique on the subject; American Professor of Literature, A. Grove Day's full-length biocritical study of Eleanor Dark, the first biography of the writer, *Eleanor Dark*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976; and Helen O'Reilly's brief personal profile of her second cousin – 'The Timeless Eleanor Dark' – in *Outrider*, 1989, p. 43, its main significance resting not so much in its content – most of which is derivative and some which is mistaken – but in the fact that it constitutes the only published account of the author by a member of her family.

¹¹ Modjeska, 'Hammer at Destiny,' p. 17.

¹² Day probed most rigorously into his subject's family history, and it is in this context that Eleanor McCulloch features in the account. No further substantive references to her are made except to note (though leaving unexplored the significance of) the timing of her death 'when the girl was barely in her teens, on August 6, 1914, about the time of the outbreak of World War I.' (pp. 17-19) Day's picture of the O'Reilly household is a cultured and wholesome one: with literature and politics, its twin pillars; the children 'brought up to enjoy outdoor life and sport,' (p.19). Day, *op. cit.* Thomson's picture of 'a bookish and political family' led him to conclude that from her father Dark had 'both absorbed and learned a great deal.' Thomson, *op. cit.*, p.4 He was the first but not the last to summon the character and early life experiences of Lesley Channon to substantiate his claims. Of these four studies, two critical differences separate Helen O'Reilly's from the others: first, that it was written by one familiar with Dark's personal history from the inside; and secondly, that it had the benefit of access to the Mitchell collection of Dark's personal papers. Despite these advantages, no fundamental differences can be discerned between this and pre-1986 representations of Eleanor Dark's early years. The same silence concerning the mother (except to note her death), the same father-centeredness, the same emphasis on literature and politics as defining features of family life characteristic of the earlier studies remain. Like Thomson and Modjeska, O'Reilly chose the character

of Lesley Channon – with ‘the thoughts and emotions of a youthful Eleanor’ – to suggest links between Dark’s fiction and life, tensions within her companion-cum-housekeeper relationship with ‘her widower father’ and other matters. O’Reilly, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

- ¹³ Day, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- ¹⁴ Modjeska, ‘Hammer at Destiny,’ p. 16.
- ¹⁵ She also chose the character of Lesley Channon and the young woman’s resentment of gender-prescribed conventions – that ‘automatically’ made her her father’s ‘housekeeper’ while the ‘very thought of suggesting that he should darn my stockings is ludicrous’ – to reinforce a sense of Pixie’s own resentments about having ‘to fulfil a female role in her father’s domestic arrangements’ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
- ¹⁶ Interview by Mrs J. Moore with Eleanor Dark, 14.11.46, Broadcast in National, Women’s Session, 2FC, ref. ST 333 2/1 Box 1 Australian Archives. Courtesy of Geoff Harris, ABC Documents’ Archives.
- ¹⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Professor A. Grove Day, ‘1964’ (c.May), NLA MS 4685 #2.
- ¹⁸ Through a combination of factors – the quiet but imposing presence of the woman, the fact that it was she to whom as an oracle they went for guidance and information, the personal character of those requests and her easy accommodating manner – the custodian of the bulk of the sources of her youth was apparently granted by her historians custodianship over the ‘truth’ of that youth. The fact that at a surface level her fiction seemed to confirm this version may have also been a factor.
- ¹⁹ Eleanor McCulloch was her maiden name. To avoid confusion between mother and daughter, both Eleanor O’Reilly, in this story the name is used to refer also to the married woman.
- ²⁰ Eleanor Dark, *Sun Across the Sky*, Collins, London, 1937, p. 14.
- ²¹ Dark’s regretful remarks to her son about the meagreness of the material available on ‘The Smiths’ – her father’s maternal branch of the family – which ‘stops short at your great-great-great-grandfather Smith’ are an indication of the ambitious scope of this document. Family History of the O’Reilly and Dark families,’ ML MSS 4545/15 Folder 1, 1/65. Within the record, the History is unique in several respects. It sets out in impressive length and breadth of scope

her family's and to a lesser degree her husband's ancestral lines. It is also unrivalled in the wide diversity of the material informing it: ranging from hearsay and gossip (duly noted) to published material (duly referenced), from quaint family legends to painstakingly researched, minutely detailed genealogical trees. Dark's is a palpable, sometimes intrusive personal presence throughout the narrative.

- ²² Eleanor Dark, typed manuscript of her unpublished novel, 'Pilgrimage' (c. late 1920s) with two endings, in ML MSS 4545 1(25), p. 3; p. 14; p. 120; p. 10; pp. 121-125.
- ²³ Segment of letter from Eleanor Dark to Michael Dark, 1967, Eleanor Dark, 'Family History of the O'Reilly and Dark families,' ML MSS 4545 15(25) 1/7.
- ²⁴ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to 'Pid' (A.B. Piddington, husband of his sister Marion), 17.5.17, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ²⁵ Handwritten note, 'Pid' to Dowell O'Reilly, (c. 1914), ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ²⁶ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to A.B. 'Pid' Piddington, 17.5.17, ML MSS 4545 15(25), Part 1(2).
- ²⁷ M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, Foreword, p. x.
- ²⁸ As a young woman she sometimes taught the piano in order to supplement the family's resources. Her daughter remembered fondly 'a grand piano' and times when together with 'Pat' they would 'sit under it while she was playing – glorious reverberations!' Family History of the O' Reilly and Dark Families. ML MSS 4545 15/25 1/30.
- ²⁹ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to a Dr Blackwood, 29.6.14, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ³⁰ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to Lady McMillan, 25.5.14, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1 (2).
- ³¹ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to Mary Gilmore, 14.8.14, ML MSS 4545 15(25), Part 1(2).
- ³² If his friendship with O'Reilly is any measure, they may have met as early as 1889, before Brennan's departure for Europe.
- ³³ Axel Clark, *Christopher Brennan: A Critical Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Victoria, 1980, p. 212.
- ³⁴ Clark was shown the inscription by Eleanor Dark. *Ibid.*

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- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79. Clark explained in his endnotes to the book that ‘the first’ was probably Elisabeth Werth, the wife of the poet but that he had ‘no idea’ of the identity of ‘the second,’ p. 309.
- ³⁶ In the 1890s, the friendship had suffered a major setback prompted by the publication of a satirical poem written by O’Reilly and clearly directed at Brennan. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- ³⁷ The bulk of his lengthy courtship correspondence with Molly is preserved in *Dowell O’Reilly from his Letters*, published by her *in memoriam* a few years after his death in 1923.
- ³⁸ Letter from Dowell O’Reilly to Pat O’Reilly, 13.8.20, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ³⁹ Then and later, his works attracted considerable praise. Long after he ceased writing and even after his death, a small but select group of devout followers – including Nettie Palmer and American literary critic, C. Hartley Grattan – continued to celebrate his literary gifts as well as mourn their unfulfilled promise. See for example Nettie Palmer’s private comments recalling ‘(t)hat dancing, light style of his,’ his ‘great range of ideas--humour of an original kind, playful intimacy, fury that, without explaining, he let you feel and share,’ while imagining ‘what he would have done in an ordered world that let him exercise his full talents.’ Diary entry, 4.5.34, ‘Fourteen Years,’ in V. Smith (ed.), *Nettie Palmer*, University of Queensland Press, Queensland, 1988, pp. 130-131. See also C. Hartley Grattan’s detailed comments of O’Reilly’s work in his essay ‘Australian Literature,’ first published in 1928, and the result of his investigations into Australian literary and cultural development during his first visit to the country in 1927. Here he described O’Reilly as an ‘extraordinary writer’ and *Tears and Triumph* in particular as ‘sheer brilliance.’ ‘It would be difficult,’ he contended, ‘to find another writer who so skilfully blends scientific facts with a leaven of imagination.’ Grattan’s essay was reproduced in full in ‘C. Hartley Grattan’s View of “Australian Literature”’ in 1928, *Antipodes*, Spring 1988, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 20-23.
- ⁴⁰ Nettie Palmer noted privately that he ‘was one of the most laborious of writers; a story or an essay took him months of work. Even his letters--there’s evidence that he would carry a letter around in his head for days, whittling at it in odd moments and half-arguing with the person who was to receive it.’ Diary entry, 4.5.34, ‘Fourteen Years,’ in V. Smith (ed.), *Nettie Palmer*, p. 130.

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- ⁴¹ M. O'Reilly, *op. cit.* Foreword, p. vii.
- ⁴² Four years after his first publication – a little book entitled *Australian Poems* – at the age of nineteen, the more substantial volume *A Pedlar's Pack* was released. Its sales were so disappointing, however, that its author is said to have 'destroyed all the copies he could locate.' Entry for O'Reilly, Dowell Philip in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1891-1939, p. 93.
- ⁴³ Newspaper clipping from *Melbourne Age*, 6.11.43, 'Poet & Thinker – Dowell O'Reilly – Half Forgotten Australian,' in ML MSS 4545 16(25): 7/96.
- ⁴⁴ Entry in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁵ Whatever his intellectual approach to 'the woman question,' O'Reilly was not a man ahead of his times in his own private thoughts and communications on the subject. In a letter to his friend and literary colleague, J. Le Gay Brereton, O'Reilly's approach to his 'dinghy' as if it were as a submissive woman, object of ridicule and pity, reveals a much less enlightened aspect of the man's thinking on the subject. 'her mast waves kisses to the blue – and her lines! Odds [sic] breasts and bottoms! A matronly little virgin who doesn't talk – except when spoken to – Heaven shield her from the copra that boreth in darkness, and the oyster that rippeth at noonday' Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to J. Le Gay Brereton, 1907, ML SS 4545 15(25) 3/103.
- ⁴⁶ In an interview when he was ninety-one years of age, Eric Dark argued that O'Reilly had lost the election by only 'a dozen or so votes.' The loss had been due, he said, to the fact that 'a group of his supporters were down doing railway work somewhere down the south coast and he hadn't enough money to pay their fares up to vote.' Interview by Robert Darby with Eric Dark, in 'Varuna,' Katoomba, 25.11.80, 22 pp.: 1/7-8 TRC 896, Duplicate Transcript. Original held in the Oral History Section of the National Library of Australia.
- ⁴⁷ Article in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6.1.1899, in ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2) reports on a meeting of some 1,000 unemployed men held the previous day at Chalmers Church, in Castlereagh St., Sydney. O'Reilly's intervention, making comparative remarks about the N.S.W. and Victorian governments' policies to help their unemployed, was 'objected to' by some in the congregation because he himself was not unemployed. At the moment, Eleanor Dark handwrote: 'This Mr O'Reilly almost certainly D.O'R.'

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- ⁴⁸ William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, OUP, Australia, 1985, entry 'Chidley, William James,' p. 152, lists Dowell O'Reilly as member of the Chidley Defence Committee.
- ⁴⁹ M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, Foreword, pp. ix-x.
- ⁵⁰ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
- ⁵¹ The request came from her stepmother soon after O'Reilly's death. Molly O'Reilly herself undertook the job, also writing an elegant and moving introduction to what became *Dowell O'Reilly and his Letters*. Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 27.1.48, NLA MS 1174/1/7371-3.
- ⁵² M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27 – 28.
- ⁵⁵ R. Brennan, *Paterfamilias. A True Story*, p. 9 quoted in A. Clark, *Christopher Brennan*, pp. 160-161.
- ⁵⁶ In compilation of papers marked 'Details from D O'R's papers,' bearing his handwriting. ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁵⁷ E. Dark, 'Pilgrimage,' p. 9.
- ⁵⁸ Eleanor Dark, typed notation, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 3/139-141.
- ⁵⁹ Eleanor Dark, note written on a calendar sheet of 11.8.64, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁶⁰ Eleanor Dark, handwritten note, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁶¹ Eleanor Dark Papers. Family History, ML MSS 4545 15/25 Pt. 2 1/31
- ⁶² The collection spans McCulloch's last month of life. Edited by Molly for publication, it is possible that she may have culled material that included other references to Eleanor McCulloch. McCulloch's absence from this collection transcends the quantifiable, however.
- ⁶³ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly, unaddressed but clearly intended either for 'Aunt Lou,' his mother's younger sister in England, or her daughter Molly, or both, 3.8.15, from Woollahra, in M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 55.

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- ⁶⁴ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to 'Dearest Aunt Lou,' 30.11.13, from Lindfield, in M. O'Reilly (ed.), *Dowell O'Reilly and his Letters*, Simpkin, Marshall, Kent & Co., 1927, p. 2.
- ⁶⁵ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to Molly, 8.12.14, from 34 Queen Street, Woollahra, in *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.
- ⁶⁶ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to a Mr McCulloch, 13.10.14, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁶⁷ Handwritten note of 'Pid' to Dowell O'Reilly, undated, ML MSS 4545 22(25) Pt 1(2)
- ⁶⁸ Eleanor Dark, handwritten note, '1914,' in ML MSS 4545 15/25 Pt. 1(2).
- ⁶⁹ It was clearly with some relief that over half-a-century after the death of her mother an elderly Eleanor Dark alerted her son to the appearance of a recent publication – *The Scottish Radicals* (1975) – dealing in some detail with her mother's family and which, she remarked, 'provides us with a nice ancestor.' Eleanor Dark, handwritten note, n.d. (late 1960s-early 1970s), in ML MSS 4545 15(25) Pt. 1(2).
- ⁷⁰ E. Dark 'Pilgrimage,' Chapter 7, p. 123.
- ⁷¹ Eleanor Dark, 'Pilgrimage,' unpublished novel, c. late 1920s, in ML MSS 4545 25, p. 39.
- ⁷² E. Dark, *Prelude to Christopher*, p. 53.
- ⁷³ Even though it appears, in the light of Eleanor Dark's comments to her American biographer, that too much was made in the past of her involvement in her father's literary world, there is clear evidence to suggest that such figures as Lionel Lindsay, J.J. Quinn, Christopher Brennan, J. Le Gay Brereton and Ethel Turner Curlewis visited her home on occasion and, at least in one instance, she played a kind of hostess-cum-housekeeper role in helping entertain her father's literary friends. See letter from Dowell O'Reilly to Molly, 3.10.15, in M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op.ct.*, pp. 60-62.
- ⁷⁴ Dowell O'Reilly, 'Australia', originally appeared in *Australian Poems* (1894) as quoted in *The Prose and Verse of Dowell O'Reilly*, Angus & Robertson, Australia, 1924, p. 8
- ⁷⁵ The fact that the O'Reilly family tree also contained its fair share of dissolute aristocrats, blood-thirsty warriors and suspected political terrorists did not trouble the family historian, whose sensitivity to dark forces in her past lay elsewhere.

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- ⁷⁶ Eleanor Dark Papers. Family History of the O'Reilly and Dark families, ML MSS 4545 15(25). 1/77-78
- ⁷⁷ Quoted in R.G. Howarth, 'Personalialia,' *Southerly*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1949, p.210.
- ⁷⁸ Eleanor Dark, *Sun Across the Sky*, p. 166.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- ⁸¹ E. Dark, Pilgrimage,' Chapter 4, p. 64.
- ⁸² Without making a direct link between Brennan and this character, the literary critic Uther Barker sensed in O'Laughlin a powerful force in the book. In a letter to Eleanor Dark he wrote: 'O'Laughlin, I feel, is the character which dominates, almost symbolically, the background, and incidentally, influences the lives of those lesser figures of 'The Little Company.' He it was that seemed to demand, as well as promise, the fuller and richer product of your pen.' Dark's response, if there was one, is not available. ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ⁸³ Eleanor Dark Papers. 'Family History' , ML MSS 4545 15/25 Pt. 1 1/51
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/50/51.
- ⁸⁵ 'Family History,' ML MSS 4545 15(25) Pt. 2 1/50-51
- ⁸⁶ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to 'Molly,' 8.12.14, from 34 Queen Street, Woollahra, M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 29.
- ⁸⁷ Handwritten note from Dowell O'Reilly to 'Dear Daughter,' written at the back of Redlands School Report of Quarter ending June 17, 1915, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁸⁸ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to 'My very dear Ba Rie' ('Bim'), 'Wednesday night,' (c. 1915-1916), ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁸⁹ Taken ill once after becoming a boarder in her new school, it was three days and only after she was 'up and about again' before anyone thought of ringing her father, who apparently remained unconcerned about this extraordinary lapse. Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to Molly, 1.5.16, M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- ⁹⁰ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to 'My very dear Boy' ('Bim'), 28.11.16, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁹¹ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to 'My very dear Ba Rie,' 4.12.15, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).

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- ⁹² Letter from Dowell O'Reilly unaddressed but clearly to Molly, 24.6.16, M. O'Reilly (ed.), *Dowell O'Reilly and his Letters*, Simpkin, Marshall, Kent & Co., 1927, p. 155.
- ⁹³ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to Molly, 8.12.14, from Woollahra, M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 30.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73; p. 155; p. 213; pp. 121-122, p. 157; p. 29; p. 53.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53
- ⁹⁶ Redlands' policy of no newspapers did not altogether succeed in shielding Pixie from 'the horrors of war.' With Pat awaiting excitedly his eighteenth birthday to enlist, the theme and anxieties of war were part and parcel of family thoughts and talks. At one point, even O'Reilly himself contemplated joining up. See his letter to Molly of 20.4.16 in M. O'Reilly (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 15
- ⁹⁷ 'School that developed influential novelist,' in *North Shore Times*, 21.5.86, p. 5.
- ⁹⁸ Redlands School Reports for Quarter ending March 31, 1915 and June 17, 1915, ML MSS 4545 15(25), Part 1(2).
- ⁹⁹ Letter from 'Miss May' to Eleanor Dark, 14.7.53, ML MS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁰⁰ Redlands School Report for Quater ending December 17, 1919, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ¹⁰¹ Letter from Maiva Drummond, Potts Point, to Eleanor Dark, 16.8.42, ML MSS 4545 24(25) in which she confessed her feelings as a nine-year-old student at Redlands.
- ¹⁰² In Dorothy 'Teddy' Hudson (Edwards), typed manuscript, 'Eleanor Dark by Dorothy Hudson,' original held by John Dark. Mosman 1988. pp. 1-4. Mrs Hudson, a boarder at 'The Vines' at Redlands from 1914-1918, met Pixie in her first year at the school. Mrs Hudson set down her recollections at the age of eighty-six, not long before she died. Some of the information supplied in the manuscript, particularly in relation to dates, is not correct.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁴ Later to become Federal Attorney General and Minister for External Affairs.
- ¹⁰⁵ I owe this insight to Tim Goodwin.
- ¹⁰⁶ Letter from 'Miss May' to Eleanor Dark, 19.8.43, ML MSS 4545 24(25).

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- ¹⁰⁷ Letter from 'Miss May' to Eleanor Dark, 14.7.53, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁰⁸ Letter from 'Miss May' to Eleanor Dark, 17.11.37, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁰⁹ Eleanor Dark, 'Political Parties,' unpublished essay, (1949), 14 pages, ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ¹¹⁰ Dark later recalled that 'a number of girls went on to university and subsequent careers, mostly in medicine, but there was no particular emphasis either on this or on domesticity.' Quoted in Modjeska, 'Hammer at Destiny,' p. 18. Personal communication from Eleanor Dark to Drusilla Modjeska.
- ¹¹¹ Eleanor Dark, *Slow Dawning* (1932), pp. 90-91 in the McQueen Papers Box 14 NLA 4809 Folder 61. This is the only surviving copy of Dark's first published novel.
- ¹¹² 'Family History,' ML MSS 4545 15(25) Folder 1 1/175.
- ¹¹³ In addition to Mrs Hendon, there is also Millicent in *Return to Coolami*, Lady Hegarty in *Waterway*, Aunt Bee in *The Little Company* and Aunt Isabelle in *Lantana Lane*.
- ¹¹⁴ E. Dark, 'Pilgrimage,' pp. 107-108.
- ¹¹⁵ This comment suggests that it was ultimately O'Reilly's decision that his daughter not go on to do tertiary studies. Letter from Eleanor's teacher at Redlands to Dowell O'Reilly, 3.1.20, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 4/185. Eleanor Dark offered a different explanation in an interview in 1945, when she argued that: 'I would have liked to have gone to the University, but my mathematics were so deplorable I was unable to matriculate,' in J. Ryall, 'Women's Peacetime World,' *Australian Home Budget*, July 1945. It is true that mathematics was among her weaker subjects, but nowhere else is it suggested that this accounted for her inability to pursue her education.
- ¹¹⁶ The family's lack of financial resources appears ultimately to have been the critical factor. In 1916, O'Reilly had written to Molly that he had 'nothing to leave the children' although they had 'their own provision under their Mother's will.' What the amounts involved were is not known, and most likely Pixie would not have come to her share until she turned twenty-one. Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to Molly, 20.4.16, M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 115. The only substantial financial asset left her by her mother – a vacant lot in

Heathcote – though not very valuable was the sole basis of her future security, and she evidently chose not to dispose of it. Letter from Jas. Maxwell, Gynea Estate Agency to Eleanor Dark, 16.11.33. O'Reilly's lifestyle improved dramatically with his second marriage, but only thanks to his new wife's financial means. Upon his death only a few years later in 1923, his estate is reported to have amounted to £158. Dowell Philip O'Reilly, entry in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, p. 93, 1891-1939.

- ¹¹⁷ Modjeska, 'Hammer at Destiny,' p. 19.
- ¹¹⁸ The claim that O'Reilly's resistance to the idea of his daughter attending university may have been gender-based finds no support in the evidence available. Furthermore, the fact that neither of his sons attended university either, while it does not necessarily disprove the claim, certainly does not help to advance it.
- ¹¹⁹ Dark's later recollection of the business college she attended. Extract from notation of Eleanor Dark in note 4/189 attached to ML MSS 4545 15(25) 4/185.
- ¹²⁰ E. Dark, 'Pilgrimage,' Book Two. 152.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹²² Occasional echoes of this phase are found in her later literature.
- ¹²³ E. Dark, 'Pilgrimage,' Book Two, pp. 148-160.
- ¹²⁴ Eleanor Dark, *Slow Dawning*, p. 35.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.
- ¹²⁷ In time Eleanor Dark developed by her own admission into something of a rural recluse – 'very unaccustomed to people in the mass' (Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 14.10.41, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 6/331-633: 331) – confessing to Miles Franklin at the height of her literary success in 1941 that 'my secluded life in Katoomba has, I fear, quite unfitted me for "functions"' (Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 10.10.41, ML MSS 364/26: 447).
- ¹²⁸ McQueen, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.
- ¹²⁹ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to Molly Miles, 18.9.16, pp. 195-196 in M. O'Reilly (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 196
- ¹³⁰ In *Exiles at Home* and elsewhere, Modjeska emphasised this point in regard to Dark and female colleagues of the little company.
- ¹³¹ As her cousin Helen O'Reilly claimed. O'Reilly, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

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- ¹³² E. Dark, 'Pilgrimage,' Book Two, p.129.
- ¹³³ Joseph Dark had at one time been curate to Canon O'Reilly at St. Philip's Church in Sydney and shared with the old man – who was thought to be one of his 'heroes' – the same 'extremely strict' approach to religious matters.
- ¹³⁴ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to J. Le Gay Brereton, 3.11.11, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 3/173.
- ¹³⁵ Captain Eric Payten Dark was awarded the following: 1914/1915 Star, Military Cross, British War Medal, Victory Medal and Mentioned-in-Despatches for 'Distinguished and Gallant Service and Devotion to Duty in the field during the period February 26th and Midnight 20th/21st September 1917.' After the Second World War, he was issued with the War Medal and Australia Service Medal. In John Oliver Dark, Addenda etc. to Captain E. P. Dark's Military Memoires 1915-1919, in possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ¹³⁶ *British Medical Journal*, January 1918. Eric later argued that the work involved in that encounter had been 'a meat pie & a cup of tea' compared to his work at the Somme.
- ¹³⁷ Letter (incomplete) from Eric Dark to his four-month-old son, John Oliver Dark, and kept by Vince Raymond, brother of the dead 'Daidee' and typist of the letter, until October 1939 when he sent it to John Dark. p. 50 Original in the possession of John Dark, who kindly provided me with a copy.
- ¹³⁸ Personal conversation with Dr Eric Payten Dark, 1987, in 'Varuna,' Katoomba, N.S.W. Dr Dark was then very frail and died the following year.
- ¹³⁹ Interview by the author with Michael and his wife Jill Dark, at their home in Hazelbrook, N.S.W., 7.8.89.
- ¹⁴⁰ ML MSS 4545 15(25) 4/241. Among her ex-Redlands friends to congratulate her on her engagement was Mary Alice Sheffer, herself then engaged to be married to Herbert V. Evatt. 'There is nothing in the world like the comradeship of married life,' she remarked. 'It is adventuring in happiness with your best friend.' Letter from Mary Alice Sheffer to Eleanor Dark, c. late 1921-early 1922, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 4/233-235.
- ¹⁴¹ Giulia Giuffre, *A Writing Life: Interviews with Australian women writers*, Allen and Unwin Australia, Sydney, 1990, p. 109.

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- ¹⁴² Quote here from interview with Giulia Giuffre, 1984.
- ¹⁴³ The arrangement, he later claimed, would have ‘horrified’ O’Reilly. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.
- ¹⁴⁴ The fact that, after his death, all copyright fees from O’Reilly’s works went to ‘Bim’ suggests that her own financial future was deemed secure after her marriage. (In a letter to the publishers of *The Prose and Verse of Dowell O’Reilly* made clear this arrangement. Letter from Eleanor Dark to Beatrice Davis, Angus & Robertson Ltd., Sydney, 23.6.50.) A detailed listing in Eric Dark’s handwriting of their ‘Sundry Assets’ as of 1 January 1923 included real estate totalling £30,000, various shares to the value of £32,000, a motor car worth £400, and capital of some £L3,200. The list for ‘Sundry Liabilities’ included a private loan for £37,150, and ‘Sundry Debtors’ totalling £39,150. In ML MSS 4545 23(25).
- ¹⁴⁵ Eleanor Dark, typed notation, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 3/139-141.
- ¹⁴⁶ Eric Dark, unpublished sonnet, ‘A very bad little sonnet for a very good little wife,’ n.d. (c. 1920s), ML MSS 4545 15(25), Part 1(2).
- ¹⁴⁷ A ‘very delicate’ little runt when young, he had for a time been allowed to “run wild” around the family’s fifty-acre family property in Mittagong, becoming in the process what his wife later described as ‘almost aggressively fit.’ ML MSS 4545 15(25).
- ¹⁴⁸ Letter from Eric Payten Dark to Eleanor Dark, 8.8.22, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ¹⁴⁹ Letter from Eric Payten Dark to Eleanor O’Reilly, 28.12.21, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ¹⁵⁰ P. O’R, ‘Sonnet,’ in *Various Verse, Bulletin*, 20.12.23.
- ¹⁵¹ Dark, *Slow Dawning*, p. 66.
- ¹⁵² The earnestly religious families from which they had both stemmed prompted Dowell O’Reilly and Eric Dark eventually to respond to ‘this kind of parental godliness’ with a ‘swing away’ from religion. Both ‘ceased to be churchgoers as soon as they could.’ When her time came, ‘Pixie’ followed her father’s lead. ML MSS 4545 15(25) Pt. 2 1/188-190.
- ¹⁵³ J. Devanny, *op. cit.*, p. 254.
- ¹⁵⁴ Letter from Eric Payten Dark to Eleanor Dark, 8.8.22, ML MSS 4545 15(25), Part 1(2).

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- ¹⁵⁵ Jacqueline Boyd, 'The Dark Lady's Husband: The Forgotten Life of Dr. Eric Payten Dark,' Honours Thesis, University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, 1992, p. 29.
- ¹⁵⁶ The fact that another – a holiday house – 'Benison' had sprouted in nearby Leura not long before O'Reilly's death further facilitated their visits.
- ¹⁵⁷ Eric recollected half a century later boarding houses 'scattered through it' and 'everybody's house ... well back from the road with a pleasant garden around it.' Interview by Robert Darby with Eric Dark, in 'Varuna,' Katoomba, 25.11.80, p.1/11. TRC 896, Duplicate Transcript. Original held in the Oral History Section of the National Library of Australia.
- ¹⁵⁸ In the early period of the Communist Party of Australia, the town had one of its most active branches.
- ¹⁵⁹ Personal correspondence from Mrs (Osmar) Mollie White, 1.3.92.
- ¹⁶⁰ Dark, *Slow Dawning*, p. 196.
- ¹⁶¹ Letter from Eric Payten Dark to Eleanor Dark, 28.11.23, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ¹⁶² Letter from Eric Payten Dark to Dowell O'Reilly, 16.8.23, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 5/31-33.
- ¹⁶³ Giuffre, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- ¹⁶⁴ Letter from Eric Payten Dark to Eleanor Dark, 28.11.23, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁶ Osmar White, 'Pioneer Rock Climbs in Australia,' p. 2. Paper held at Blue Mountains City Library.
- ¹⁶⁷ The core of the group consisted of Eric and Nina Lowe, the Darks, Osmar White and Frank Walford.
- ¹⁶⁸ Extract from interview by Judith Clark and Barbara Brooks with Osmar White quoted in *Newsletter of the Eleanor Dark Foundation*, Feb. – April. 1992, Issue 10, p. 4
- ¹⁶⁹ Personal correspondence from Mrs (Osmar) Mollie White, 12.2.92.
- ¹⁷⁰ 'Leura Dramatic Players. Fine Charity Entertainment.,' in *Blue Mountains Times*, 20.11.31.
- ¹⁷¹ In an interview in 1987, Eric Dark reconstructed a conversation with his wife-to-be in which she expressed confidence in their

relationship, adding: “I think we’ll go very well and if we go well I shall want to have a child and if I want to have a child I shall want to be married. Will you marry me?” Interview with Eric Dark by Enid Schaffer at ‘Varuna,’ 7.4.87. Tapes held at Blue Mountains City Library.

- ¹⁷² Letter from Eric Dark to John Oliver Dark, 31.1.61, in the possession of John Oliver Dark. Copy courtesy of J.O. Dark.
- ¹⁷³ The first of an endless string of recorded comments reflecting the mother’s anxieties is dated September of that year, when the little boy was but a few months old. ‘Mike staying with me at Benison, Vaucluse; was quite ill for a week or so.’ Eleanor Dark, notation on page 1, letter from Eric Dark to Eleanor Dark, 12.9.29, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ¹⁷⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O’Reilly, 5.12.29, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 5/177.
- ¹⁷⁵ Giuffre, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
- ¹⁷⁶ Quote here from interview with Giuffre. The scarcity of ‘good help’ in the house, a perennial theme in the lives and diaries of well-to-do Australian women of the period; war-time restrictions of manpower resources through the early 1940s, and the like bedevilled the Dark household. Servants or ‘henchwenches’ (as they were commonly called by the Darks) or the matter of securing their help permeate Dark’s diaries and spilling over the correspondence enough to suggest that if full-time domestic help was not the norm in the house, the search for it was. Although there was ‘some kind of domestic help’ for most of the time when the children were growing up – and often such help included a part-time gardener, casual ironing-ladies and chimney sweepers – Eric continued to castigate himself for not having fulfilled his promise to his wife.
- ¹⁷⁷ Copy of letter from Eric Dark to John O. Dark, 31.1.61. Original letter lodged in the Mitchell Library by John Dark.
- ¹⁷⁸ Letter from Eric Payten Dark to Eleanor Dark, 29.11.23, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ¹⁷⁹ Urged to publish under her own name by both American and English publishers, she refused. The time was not yet ripe for stepping into the limelight. Confirmed by her own and others’ views of the worth of her novel, she did not need any persuasion to shed her pseudonym with the publication of *Prelude to Christopher*.
- ¹⁸⁰ P. O’R, ‘Sonnet,’ in Various Verse, *Bulletin*, 20.12.23.

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- ¹⁸¹ Patricia O’Rane, “‘To a Believer,’” in Some Current Poetry, *Stead’s Review*, 1.5.30.
- ¹⁸² John Docker, ‘Norman Lindsay’s Creative Effort: Manifesto for an Urban Intelligentsia,’ *Australian Literary Studies*, Volume 6, No. 1, May 1973, p. 25.
- ¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ¹⁸⁴ *Madman’s Island* (1927) launched Idriess’ remarkable career as one of Australia’s most prolific popular writers. In 1929, Richardson’s *Ultima Thule*, last volume of her trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, appeared to rave reviews. For example Nettie Palmer, ‘The Novel in Australia. A Sudden Flowering,’ *West Australian*, 14.6.30 who quoted remarks of a ‘particularly responsible London critic’ on *Ultima Thule*: “‘If there has been a masterpiece written in our time, here is that masterpiece!’”
- ¹⁸⁵ Letter from S.H. Prior, Editor, *The Bulletin*, to Eleanor Dark, 11.9.24, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ¹⁸⁶ P.O’R, short story, ‘Take Your Choice,’ in *Bulletin*, 7.6.23.
- ¹⁸⁷ Letter from Asta Kenney to Eleanor Dark, from Surrey, United Kingdom, 18.2.33, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁸⁸ Letter from H. Hilton, Head Reader of Curtis Brown Ltd., London, to Rowland Kenney Esq., Adelphi Club, London, 10.9.32, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁸⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Mr Rose, Farquharson, 3.3.36, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁹⁰ On the subject of ‘Pilgrimage,’ she explained that it had never been published adding that ‘I trust it never will be.’ Interview with Eleanor Dark by Mrs J. Moore, Broadcast in National, Women’s Session, 14.11.46, 2FC, ref. ST333 2/1 Box 1 (held AA). Copy courtesy of Geoff Harris, ABC Documents’ Archives. Soon after it was rejected in Britain, Dark tried to get P.R. Stephensen interested, but failed.
- ¹⁹¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to J. Farquharson, London, 17.8.33, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁹² Letter from J. Farquharson, London, to Eleanor Dark, 23.6.32, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁹³ Patricia O’Rane, ‘The Book, The Bishop and The Ban,’ a short story, the *Bulletin*, 2.7.25.

Chapter Three.

From toy to icon: the beginning of the public years, the early 1930s

Artists! The ruthless conceit of them! Painting as they felt, writing as they felt, making music; never caring whom they flayed and tortured, what unendurable agonies of human suffering, what hardly more endurable summits of human joy they captured and bound within the limits of their insatiable art.¹

Responsibility is what awaits outside the Eden of creativity. I should never have dreamt that this most solitary and deeply marvellous of secrets – the urge to make with words – would become a vocation for which the world, and that life-time lodger, a conscionable self-awareness, would claim the right to call me and all my kind to account. The creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it. The writer loses Eden, writes to be read, and comes to realise that he is answerable.²

Eleanor Dark's public years as a writer were crisis-driven. Spanning the Great Depression, the advent of international fascism, the Second World War and the early Cold War, they encompassed crises of ever more threatening proportions to Western capitalism, democracy, world peace, even the future of the planet. The global had come – with a vengeance – to the local.

To be a writer in Australia bore at once great promise and great threat. Each crisis constituted a distinct 'moment,' posed a distinct set of problems and challenges to would-be social reformers in the writing community as elsewhere. Each carried the burden of unresolved remains of earlier crises. It promised a public place and role. More than a spinner of yarns, a chronicler of society and its times, the writer was now challenged to help create and realise that society and join in the awesome task of nation-building. The element of social criticism inherent in the act of creative writing, however, was a double-edged sword for the writer of conscience. It could bring the Muse to the service of a better world, or make the Muse the servant of other masters.

The early 1930s brought the first 'moment.' For the writer, it was composed of part economic crisis, part literary revival.³ But while their

origins were separate and distinct, the two soon merged. The Depression experience burrowed itself into Australian literary life and enterprise: at individual and collective, artistic, commercial, professional and political levels. It may have been a coincidence that the Depression and the flagship of the modern writing profession were in a sense born together with the launching in 1929 in Sydney of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (F.A.W.). But the coincidence was critical in shaping the character and directions of the fledgling organisation and the profession whose interests it was established to articulate and advance within the broad community.

By 1935, the society-in-crisis and the writing profession were entering new phases of development. The Depression was passing and a new generation of writer, sobered as well as emboldened by the experience, seized control over the organisation and the future directions of Australian creative writing. Fate had already entrusted this generation of writers – born with Federation and the new century, its adolescence shadowed by the Great War – with special burdens of responsibility for nation- and peace-building. To those daunting mandates, the Depression contributed its own burdens, moral imperatives and visions of social justice, not all mutually reconcilable. Federation forged a union, the Depression threatened to dismantle it. One spoke the language of nationhood, the other of internationalism and the class struggle. The Great War had taught the virtues of pacifism, now the Depression suggested revolution. Wherein lay the ultimate goal: peace, economic equality or social justice?

The literary scene awaiting Eleanor Dark as she emerged in 1934 from the shelter of her pseudonyms was thus complex. Tension fostered expectation. It was, as Nettie Palmer claimed in 1931, a ‘trembling world’⁴, but it was also a fine time to be an Australian writer. Across generations and across the seas was emerging the contours of a new vision of Australia – ‘as a civilised nation, instead of a permanent “culture-colony”’⁵ – and new tools for expressing it – ‘our own – our very own language.’⁶ Expatriates of long-standing were making their way back to ‘that far, lone, siren land that enthral us.’⁷

It was not simply rhetoric. News in 1932 that *Ultimate Thule* (1929), the last volume of Henry Handel Richardson’s historical trilogy, had prompted her nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first time an Australian writer had been so honoured, caused a flurry. Richardson’s fame seemed a portent, as was the homecoming of cultural enthusiasts P.R. ‘Inky’ Stephensen in 1932 and Miles Franklin in 1933, new developments in the form and content of the novel, and the emergence of women writers as a force in public literary life. There was

the advent of best-seller writers, like Ion Idriess and F.J. Thwaites, whose adventure and travel stories were giving local publishing a much needed fillip. Increasingly, writers' individual achievements were wed to the broader fortunes of a national literature. In celebrating Dark's *Return to Coolami*, for example, the *Bulletin's* reviewer asserted that the book represented 'not only individual development' but 'development in our writing.'⁸

Some commentators linked the fortunes of a national literature to those of the nation itself, positing an alliance between art and country. In a 1935 essay on 'The Future of Australian Literature,' Vance Palmer saw the function of literature as constitutive and creative rather than merely expressing wider social context. The 'new literary impulse,' he foretold,

will have a tremendous effect in Australia in the next fifty years. It will quicken its imagination, stimulate its powers of introspection, and make it as interesting to itself as every country should be.⁹

Romantic heroic visions of a holy alliance between art and country, writer and society, bred the sense of mission to write a people's literature and *esprit de corps* around which 'the little company' crystallised. Each writer had come by a different route – class, region, politics, education – but soon would feel bound like the others. Others in the literary community (so ran the collective mentality) might be content to leave the literary enterprise within the safe old categories – as hobby, folklore, commodity, art. They, on the other hand, would wrestle with the new complexities and challenges their society-in-crisis was posing the Australian writer.

Dark was among those few who saw the 'moment' and seized it, showing herself an astute practitioner of the politics of the high literary society she meant to join, and which she saw as natural breeding ground of the leaders of that holy crusade. Even before the release of *Prelude to Christopher*, she was issuing certain signals. A bold one was her decision to refuse her manuscript to her British publishers, offering it instead to fellow Australian 'Inky' Stephensen. Herein lay her credentials as not simply an artist, but an Australian artist prepared to place community before personal interests.

Prelude to Christopher, a dashing piece, controversial in form and content¹⁰, was her principal means of relaying signals to her peers, readers, perhaps even to herself. In the way she told her tale and the tale itself, in the blurb on the dustcover and in her choice of publisher, Dark ensured she carried the emphatic signature of the serious writer; serious about art and country. The book's modernist techniques signalled

sensitivity to form, receptiveness to new methods, readiness to subvert convention. Subversion also informed the book's content. Among the first in Australia to focus on the subject of insanity, it raised awkward questions about the ethics and science of social engineering, while withholding final judgment on the rights and wrongs of eugenics. The book was Dark's first gesture towards the literature of social conscience. Its hero is Nigel Hendon – doctor turned social reformer and self-proclaimed practical idealist – whose 'fierce revulsion ... against things as they were' (even if prompted by vague fleeting images of 'Beggars at every street corner'¹¹) fired him with utopian dreams. In the original (Australian) edition, the dustcover reinforced the serious nature of the book by warning it was 'not a book for weaklings or sentimentalists'¹², 'the squeamish, nor the lollipop school of readers.'¹³

Dark issued another signal. Assured of her book's artistic merits by family, literary friends and publisher, she appealed with due humility to a key figure in the Australian literary society for guidance. 'I did try hard over this one,' she assured Nettie Palmer, by then an established force in Australian literary criticism with her own column and the self-appointed matriarch of the new breed of serious writers, 'so I hope you will tell me what you think of it--dealing harshly with me if necessary, for the good of my literary soul!'¹⁴ Palmer's solemn pronouncement that she was 'an artist and a steadfast one' was reassuring, but by the time it came it was largely superfluous. By then the debutante had become the darling of Australian high literary society.

The literary debut of 'Eleanor Dark' was the most successful of any Australian writer of her generation. *Prelude to Christopher* dazzled literary critics at home and abroad. Published first in Australia in 1934, the novel attracted superlatives – 'the most distinguished achievement by an Australian writer'¹⁵, 'the most mature piece of fiction yet written and published in this country.'¹⁶ It excited the local high *literati*. The other pillar of the 'house of Palmer'¹⁷ added his own blessings by proclaiming the book's publication 'an event,' assuring her she could be 'very proud of it.' On a visit to Sydney, Vance Palmer promised to spread the news widely. 'I'm telling everyone I meet here what a good book 'Prelude to Christopher' is.'¹⁸ Marjorie Barnard, co-author with Flora Eldershaw of the 1930 *Bulletin* novel prize winner *A House is Built* (1929) and herself courting the favour of the Palmers, disagreed vehemently.¹⁹ Her devastating views – 'A showing-off book, simply loaded with technique – some positively inspired carpentry and joinery' – were, however, heard only privately.²⁰ The book's domestic success culminated in late 1935 with the announcement that it had been awarded the Australian Literature Society's gold medal for best novel of 1934.²¹

The honour placed Dark beside Henry Handel Richardson, Vance Palmer, Frank Dalby Davison and Leonard Mann.

More honours followed. Published in England in 1936, the novel was selected as the Book-of-the-Month by the London *Evening Standard* which deemed it

a grave, a beautiful story that Miss Dark has to tell. She has given us a book that is exciting in the best sense of the word: that doesn't dope us but wakes us up.²²

The news soon filtered home where extracts from the paper's review appeared in the local press. Two years later the novel reached its pinnacle of artistic success. Tauchnitz, one of Europe's most prestigious publishing firms, selected it for publication in its series of English-speaking classics, *Collection of British Authors*.

The charm cast by *Prelude to Christopher* extended to her next novel, *Return to Coolami*, a dramatically different kind of book. Its own author so disliked it – 'a punk book'²³ – that she considered destroying it. The A.L.S. judges thought differently, awarding her a second gold medal and thus placing her in a class unique in Australian literary society. Dark retained the honour²⁴ until 1955 when Patrick White was awarded his second Society gold medal for *The Tree of Man*.

A symmetry of privilege – in her personal and professional worlds – now marked Dark's writing life. Financial independence, a network of emotional and intellectual support, public recognition of her work, factors cited by Modjeska and others as critical to the success of women writers, were hers. Yet Modjeska's vision was too short. Privilege, and the distance it granted Dark between herself and her society, conspired against her mission to write a people's literature. Dark had entered her public years as a writer already lacking the bonds, sympathy and understanding necessary to conceive, let alone write, such a literature. The *cordon sanitaire* that her personal and professional worlds threw around her only magnified the problem.

The first half of the 1930s were golden years in Dark's personal world. Past labours of establishing home and gardens, marriage and family, a social and community life yielded rich returns. By 1930, 'Varuna' bore the settled look and distinct feel of a country retreat. A photograph shows the mistress of the house sitting demurely amidst her expansive mature gardens at one with her serene and beautiful surroundings.²⁵

There had also been major changes to her Pygmalion-like relationship with her husband. She was a 'realist,' a relative later argued, 'when recognising the responsibilities of marriage.'²⁶ In place

of the deference and dependence of before, there was a sense of partnership, if not yet of a marriage of equals. Marriage, motherhood and a happy home had steadied and fulfilled Dark emotionally. The young flapper who had exacted from her eager suitor the promise of permanent house help had learned to compromise, acquiring a sense of shared priorities. In her place was the poised doctor's wife, the fulfilled new mother, attempting and largely succeeding in balancing domestic and literary ambitions, family and social commitments.

Eleanor Dark was now the mistress of her own Redlands – oasis of material comfort, home of educated professionals, part of a small organic community, bastion of intellectuals. With Eric's medical standing in Katoomba now well established, so also was the family's financial footing. By mid-1935, the Depression abating but far from over, the practice was 'going better than ever.'²⁷ The couple contemplated a trip to England in 1935, first postponed because of Eleanor's second kidney operation and later abandoned due to increasingly 'unsettled' conditions in Europe.²⁸

A measure and critical aspect of the privileged character of this world was the variety of distractions and escapes it offered. When life grew dull or hectic, when the city or the bush called, there stood Sydney and the Blue Mountains – the metropolis and the bushland – each with private niches marked especially for her. In the city, she had the choice of her club – the exclusive Women's Club conveniently located in the heart of the city – or staying with Molly and Bim in Vaucluse. The bush offered endless possibilities: from simply boiling the billy and having afternoon tea perched at a favourite spot in the mountains, to a bushwalk, a weekend camping trip or a climbing expedition. Even this range proved insufficient, and the search soon began for a secluded cave, a retreat-within-retreat from her crisis-driven society.

The Dark household reflected the delicately balanced polarities of its adults: a blend of the traditional and modern, conservative and radical. Reflecting a social background that preferred traditional forms of social intercourse, even close friends were addressed as 'Dr,' 'Mr,' 'Mrs.' Yet in flouting religious convention and form, the household was anything but traditional. Well aware of this, Eleanor relished its shock value. To Molly she feigned concern about her maid – 'my new broom' – who was 'a particularly strict Baptist' and thus likely to take offence at 'our ungodly ways,' like 'secular music on the Sabbath' and 'tennis when the time comes.'²⁹ The same curious blend applied to their domestic arrangements, where a traditional order of things governed roles and relationships at home, but not the system of priorities underpinning them. Eric was the head of family and breadwinner. Eleanor was

mistress of the house, responsible for the day-to-day running of family life, in charge of children and servants. Eric's domestic tasks usually lay outdoors, hers indoors. Occasions when the pattern changed – when he cooked a meal or did the laundry – were so rare that they usually merited a casual mention in his wife's diary. Beneath the apparently traditional family life, however, lay an implicit understanding of the supremacy of the artist's – even over the doctor's – needs and priorities.

The Darks were a tightly-knit family unit. At its fringes lay honorary relatives such as Old Redlanders 'Teddy' Hudson and Mary Alice Evatt, now married and themselves young mothers,³⁰ and a few fellow Katoombans, most notably son Mike's godfather Eric Lowe. Molly and Bim, frequent commuters between Sydney and the Blue Mountains, composed the inner circle. When a sentimental journey to trace O'Reilly ancestors in Ireland took her stepmother and brother out of Australia in 1931-32, the young mother was left to grope her way through her infant's early months and years without the comfort of family and female relatives. The result of throwing father, mother and son upon their own resources clearly had no detrimental effects on (and may even have helped foster and consolidate) the triangle of trust and support they composed from the early days. Mother, father and child were a 'trio' in the same sense that husband and wife were a 'couple': striking a delicate balance between privacy and intimacy, the needs of the individual and the family unit. To the end, husband and son remained the lifeblood of Eleanor Dark's personal world.

Time dimmed neither the protector's solicitousness nor the lover's passion in Eric Dark. Though with a calendar filled typically to overflowing with commitments – professional, political, leisure, social, cultural – he seemed never to lose sight of the family, a legacy perhaps of the loss of 'Daidee.' While work prevented him from accompanying Eleanor through the ordeal of her second kidney operation in the winter of 1935, he ensured that his presence was felt through regular letters and brief visits to her bedside in 'Benison' and in hospital. At one point, he offered to abandon his professional responsibilities for the duration of her convalescence in order to attend to her full-time. 'Darling,' he wrote,

I was so sorry that you had a rotten night: would it be any help if I stayed down in Sydney from now till you were on the mend from the operation? If you would like me to of course I would love to do so.³¹

His wife's good practical sense, it seems, prevailed, for his generous offer was not accepted. Some time later, anticipating her homecoming, he wrote excitedly: 'It is beautiful to be going to have you home again

next week, darling.’³² His wife’s letters of reply have not survived. Comments to a colleague on the eve of her departure from Sydney suggest she reciprocated his excitement: ‘we are going home to-morrow – a very thrilling event!’³³

Eric also lent practical assistance of various kinds. Beginning with her second novel in the mid-thirties, and perhaps earlier, he was her principal proofreader and critic. His wife valued his contributions, though she never lost sight of the pitfalls of such an arrangement. Eric had sworn his opinions were ‘*really* unbiased,’ she wrote to a colleague about her second novel, ‘but I can’t feel quite sure in my mind that Eleanor Dark is exactly the same writer to him that, say, Eleanor Jones might be.’³⁴ The would-be poet and disciple of Dowell O’Reilly was drawn naturally to his wife’s professional world. He gravitated towards writing circles, developing his own profile among Sydney writers. The names of Eleanor and Eric Dark are both listed as foundation shareholders of the *Australian Mercury*, one of Stephensen’s several ill-fated literary ventures of the mid-1930s period³⁵ but only Eric’s name appears among the sixteen signatories to establish a ‘Literary Guild of Australia.’³⁶ The trend became more marked with time.

By the early 1930s, the nature of that support deepened, as each began to penetrate the substance and consciousness of the other’s profession. Eric encouraged the trend, discussing with his wife the latest debates in his field, taking her interest for granted. Convalescing in Sydney after a kidney operation, Eleanor was kept abreast of such developments in letters. Mentioning on one occasion the release of a local medical colleague’s latest book, Eric undertook to ‘try to borrow it for you for next week-end – it should be as good as the neuro-phosphate.’³⁷

At opposite ends of the political spectrum before the Depression, neither the fact nor its implications seemed to matter. Between them was developing a close camaraderie of a higher order, a shared sense of wider purpose and destiny, a growing assumption that their respective callings were not simply compatible but carried the same social functions and responsibilities. Eric’s interpretation of his profession as bound to the mental and moral health of the community brought it in close sympathy with his writer-wife’s conception of her role. He nursed and tended one spectrum of community needs, she another. Ultimately, they saw themselves as comrades-in-arms. Referring to what he called his ‘bit of economic and political writing,’³⁸ he explained shortly before his death that his wife had

once said that her aim, that the effect of her books would

be exactly the same as the effect of my objective writing, because we both have the same outlook on society.³⁹

Eric's publications of the 1930s and 1940s chart the course of his political journey: beginning with an exploration of the social dimensions of the medical profession and settling eventually to loud persistent calls for the peaceful overthrow of the capitalist state by what he saw as the more humane egalitarian communist system of government. *Diathermy in General Practice* (1934), his first published book, signalled the start of his crusade to bring about a radical change in perceptions within and without his own profession of the moral agenda he saw as implicit in the role of the medical practitioner in capitalist society.

Beginning with *Prelude to Christopher* and its sensitive informed treatment of mental illness – its manifestations and complications, its personal and social implications – Dark's fiction increasingly bore the mark of her husband's professional expertise. Attending to a 'very neurotic' young woman, 'all in turmoil' about 'a sort of half-aborted love affair,' Eric had prescribed to his patient a pleasure trip to Melbourne – rather than 'bromide'- for her ailments. She had responded with apprehension of 'all the difficulties in the world' that might arise in the course of her journey. Eric recounted,

When I got home, Eleanor passed me a batch of manuscript and there was the doctor in *Sun Across the Sky*, Oliver Denning, having an interview with Helen, and it was nearly word for word the interview I had had. It was incredible. She'd just entered in imagination into that woman's mind.⁴⁰

Parenthood bound their futures ever closer. It set Eleanor's – and perhaps also Eric's – mind at ease about her ability to produce a healthy child. For Eleanor, motherhood was a profoundly intimate experience. Life had toughened Pixie: motherhood laid her open again. She relished and suffered the experience like no other. Eric's spartan streak which, one biographer argued, manifested itself in his and 'Daidee's decision to 'tend only to the vital necessities' of baby John,⁴¹ is nowhere in evidence here. Photos of father and son suggest a coolness, but perhaps they reveal the man rather than the father. Besides, the question of Eric's parenting is largely academic. Mike was and remained principally his mother's child. She tended his every need, found his antics charming and his tantrums amusing, recounting them in loving detail to Molly. Family photos of the period⁴² suggest a warm loving bond between mother and child from an early age. In Sydney for her operation in 1935, she received letters from both her 'restless creatures.' 'Dear mother,' six-year-old Mike wrote in big loopy handwriting

I was put out of the Desk but I am back in it again write a letter back to say that you are glad that I am back in the Desk. Thank you mother for the beautiful poscard album. it is lovely. love from Michael. xxxxxxxx⁴³



Mother and child, early thirties

Though it would be another twenty years before she wrote of her theories on such matters, Dark brought to parenthood set notions, some gender-based. One needs no particularly sensitive hearing to catch in these writings the voice, pain and confusion of young Pixie left to the mercy of her inept parents. The woman, Dark insisted in an unpublished piece of the late 'forties, was 'still the main guardian of the children,' and after 'centuries of child-minding' they understood

that the proper psychological climate for children ... is *adventure-within-stability*. A child must have its adventures, but they must be contained within the framework of a steady and utterly reliable home life.⁴⁴

Dark ensured her son ample supplies of both. She was if anything an over-indulgent mother but the cushioning did not extend to the physical world. From an early age, the little boy was introduced to the timeless land as his mother conceived it: beautiful but raw.⁴⁵ By the age of three,

Mike 'had carried his "pack", handkerchief and sandwich, over miles of tramping and scrambling.'⁴⁶

Motherhood changed Dark's perceptions of the world. As a woman, it seemed to grant her a special stake in, and claim to the political life of her society, vesting her with special interests peculiar to the role as she understood it: education, community welfare, war. Motherhood gave teeth to her feminism and strengthened her commitment to pacifism. It brought new experiences, themes and characters to her writing. Apace with Mike's own development, children also featured in her imagined lives. Her first portraits were of young Chloe and two young friends in *Waterway*. H.V. 'Bert' Evatt, a supportive but stern critic of her work, celebrated her 'masterly treatment of the children a most difficult & unusual feat.'⁴⁷

Fiction holds its own set of truths, if only one can find them. Evidence of the impact of motherhood on Dark, in particular the tensions and fears she brought to her new role, lie hidden beneath her imagined stories and characters. Her fiction had retained an element of self-analysis and, like Pixie before her, she continued to write to clarify ideas, dispel fears and exorcise demons. 'Victims. A Ten Minute Story' (1930), the first fictional piece to bear the mark of the mother's consciousness, treats the mother-child relationship as potentially lethal. The full weight of the story's sympathy lies with the son whose overbearing, insensitive mother prompts his 'inevitable' suicide. 'He was ... as his mother made him.'⁴⁸

While at first the mother cast aside other priorities, including the writer's, Dark overstated the matter when to colleagues and friends she made the two roles seem irreconcilable. A friend's note expressing delight at hearing she had 'begun writing again'⁴⁹ suggests no more than a year's pause between Mike's birth and the resumption of her work. Yet Nettie Palmer's comments two years later suggest otherwise. 'Yes, I understand your feeling you can't write until Michael goes to school,'

But when is that? My kiddies didn't go to school until Aileen (the elder) was ten. They brought each other up a good deal, but so long as they were home I felt responsible for them, tethered all day, even though I wrote odds and ends.⁵⁰

While the two mothers commiserated as fellow sufferers – explicitly about the pressures of domesticity, implicitly perhaps about the pressures to conform to the prevailing wisdom of what constituted a 'good mother' – a key difference between them was access to house help. Unlike Palmer, Dark was able to employ a maid-cum-nanny

during some of her child's early years,⁵¹ freeing her from the chores, if not the anxieties, of motherhood, and perhaps helping to explain why, rather than 'odds and ends,' Dark completed two novels and was well advanced on her third by the time Mike started school in 1935.

Dark's personal world set a vast distance between her and her society-in-crisis. As effective as Redlands' ban on newspapers during the Great War, so now was the ban imposed by her world of privilege on the Depression. There is no echo here of the 'unsteady world,' the feeling of 'the general liquefaction of our times,'⁵² which even Nettie Palmer could see was making people yearn 'for security, for some firm ground, something to lean on.' Such insulation proved both godsend and curse. Security and stability facilitated practical aspects of her writing, but undermined others. Ultimately, nothing could or did compensate for the increasingly distorted perspective of her society that her 'world-proof life' offered.

Katoomba did not escape the crisis. Though not among the worst-hit areas, similar factors and forces were at work there as elsewhere: the disparity in the impact between white- and blue-collar workers, the network of voluntary and other community support for local victims, the radicalising of intellectuals, the haunting images of the jobless drifting through town, public meetings called on 'Back to Work' matters; 'Unemployment Dances' raised funds for needy residents. The Katoomba council, now with Eric Dark among its more active members, led politically-focused campaigns opposing cuts to relief work and voting to reallocate moneys to construction work. Through the town also blew the winds of protest from unemployed elsewhere. In July 1930, a contingent of the Unemployed Workers Movement marching from Lithgow to Sydney to demand work, spent its first night at a local camping reserve.⁵³ Throughout the crisis, Roger Milliss recalls in *Serpent's Tooth*, 'the human wreckage' that drifted past his father's mercer's shop in Katoomba,

stamped his consciousness ... the streams of unemployed who trekked across the mountains to the hinterland in search of non-existent work in humpy outcrops at the edges of the town.⁵⁴

Yet the Depression enriched Dark's world. She and Eric enjoyed the advantages it offered those with capital for exploiting low prices and cheap labour. When some of their investments failed – in real estate and the uncertain domestic film industry, for example – the losses incurred were no more than a nuisance. A police decision to ban a film in which they had 'modestly invested' hoping 'it was going to make our

fortunes!,' she recounted flippantly, had doomed the venture, and they were 'feeling rather poor just now.'⁵⁵ But being 'rather poor' did not signify having to forego full-time house help.⁵⁶ Indeed, the economic crisis provided a steady supply of maids which, despite the tyranny of a doctor's phone and the demands of a young child, allowed Dark to write three novels during 1929-1935. She never achieved this rate again. House help also provided a hidden service to one whose insular lifestyle may have precluded personal encounters with the human face of the crisis, except for the maids, laundresses, gardeners and chimney-sweeps who regularly serviced her world. Even then, the impact was muffled and delayed. The first recorded instance of such an encounter with a maid – a 'broom,' 'homeless & penniless' – is found in a letter she wrote over a year after the official conclusion of the crisis.⁵⁷

Dark's was a life, a relative later recalled, 'lived vividly on several levels.'⁵⁸ The Depression also enriched her intellectually. Just as Redlands' rarefied world did not pre-empt the Misses Roseby's sense of close engagement with the politics of their society, neither did the Depression in the case of the Darks. Indeed, the crisis seemed to charge intellectual discussions at 'Varuna' with passion and purpose. Political consciousness was a new element in the household, introduced principally by Eric's moving from Right to Left.⁵⁹ Eric, his wife later recalled, had been 'completely *oblivious* to political issues' before the advent of the Depression when his social conscience was stirred by what he saw through his patients. Humanist and doctor both rebelled against 'a rotten economic system' that condemned them to 'penury.'

This development had been foreshadowed years before. Eric's so-called sudden conversion had in fact deep roots in the discipline and zeal of his Methodist upbringing, and in the man's natural sympathies with the workers and battlers of society. Already by 1922, he was describing himself as 'so happy' at being called to perform 'a nice little patching-up job for a man who got his arm crushed in the quarry.' Dealing with 'rheumatically old men' and prescribing medication 'to neurotic young women,' he had confessed to his new wife, made him feel 'a fraud.'⁶⁰ It was instincts of this kind that the Depression experience tapped and eventually led him to the path to socialism.

By 1929, when he joined the local A.L.P. branch, the once staunch Tory had begun a radicalising process that never ended. By 1935, he was increasingly associating himself (and being associated) with policies of the Communist Party of Australia (C.P.A.). Never a member of the Party, he remained loyal to socialism as he understood it. The discipline and zeal of his Methodist upbringing would henceforth be focused on secular gods.⁶¹

Though now in the same political camp, the Darks' respective approaches to socialism were dramatically different. Despite growing familiarity with the historical and theoretical aspects of socialism, Eric never outgrew its human aspects, while Eleanor typically and instinctively turned to the written word to experience and assimilate the crisis. Significantly, her account of her husband's conversion bears more her own than his intellectual stamp. Alerted by what he had witnessed through his medical practice, she told an interviewer in 1945, her husband began his search,

for reasons for a condition that allowed hundreds of thousands of people to suffer want in a country that was producing more than enough to feed, clothe and shelter them all.

The search had taken him, she added, from 'book to book' until 'he had completed the painful process of moving Right to Left.'⁶² No doubt well meant, the account did not nearly do justice to the man's basic humanism. Eric remained attached to the view that 'it takes life, not books, to form a true political philosophy.'⁶³

Some, including Michael Dark, have credited Eleanor with playing a major part in her husband's political conversion.⁶⁴ A biographer of Eric made a similar claim,⁶⁵ even arguing that Eleanor – 'the antithesis of his profit-orientated profession' – remained her husband's 'social conscience.'⁶⁶ Such claims appear to rely more on Eleanor's rhetoric than practice. This may have been the case in the early stages of Eric's 'painful process,' but in time the roles altered, and Eric's evangelical fervour drove his wife's philosophical attachment to socialism into insignificance. Eleanor was against the profit motive in principle; in practice, she was arguably a capitalist. She was certainly an adept astute businesswoman, fonder than her husband of the comforts that profits secured. Her approach to her husband's 'profit-oriented profession' bore less of the idealism implied in the above remarks than his. Resentful of what she saw as community expectations that doctors should be above the profit motive, she unburdened her feelings on the subject in a 1935 short story entitled 'The Urgent Call.' The central character is a doctor's wife who inveighs against those who seek to capitalise on such expectations. "'You call a doctor out in the middle of the night and expect not to pay him for it.'"⁶⁷ Eric's new political faith, on the other hand, held a considerable element of idealism, increasingly spilling into his professional life, including the question of fees. Tales of his 'concern, particularly of his tact during the depression years, in "forgetting" to bill poorer patients' are 'legion.'⁶⁸

Eric's conversion turned 'Varuna' into a focus of earnest political discussions, where radical intellectuals discussed the state of society or the moral bankruptcy of Western capitalism. The thrust of after-dinner conversations between the Darks and 'Bert' and Mary Alice Evatt, Eric Lowe, Frank Walford or Osmar White is not difficult to imagine. A sense of Eleanor Dark's own contribution to such discussions can be gauged through her occasional outbursts at the state of society in communications with Molly. A pet grievance in these years was what she dismissed as the 'ridiculous pageantry,' 'the childish fuss' over the opening of 'that confounded (Sydney Harbour) Bridge!'; 'a State in the financial mess we are in should not,' she wrote indignantly to Molly, 'spend thousands of pounds' on such things. Media and popular response to the event left her equally 'disgusted.'⁶⁹ Stern and wise, the intellectual shook her head in despair over governor and governed alike, neglecting to consider the role claimed for such projects as builders of national morale, not to mention the role of public expenditure in stimulating economic activity and employment.⁷⁰ Significantly, it took a side-issue like this to bring the Depression into rare focus in her personal papers.

There is nothing unusual in the tensions between the Darks' and their friends' affluent means and the socialist ideology they espoused, or in their apparent inability to recognise these tensions. Similar tensions underpin the story of Engels, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, indeed of most Western radical intellectuals. But they still need to be acknowledged and probed. In Eleanor's case, they point to the widening gap between rhetoric and fact, radical intellectual and artist; and underscore the role her Redlands-like world played in surrounding her with like-minded individuals and thus effectively ensuring that the fact and implications of these gaps were not raised from within it.

This cosy consensus was at least partly a result of Dark's personal world being a small compact community, enclosing a sense of its own 'natural order of things.'⁷¹ Unlike her gregarious husband, she preferred to keep to a tiny band of friends and colleagues with whom she shared interests and activities, including writing. Eric Lowe – neighbour, family accountant, Mike's godfather, rock- and mountain-climber, writer, regular guest at 'Varuna' for tennis parties, music evenings and other gatherings – epitomised this type.⁷² 'Katoomba at present,' she wrote to Nettie Palmer in mid-1935, 'is a veritable hive of literary industry.' She mentioned by name six fellow writers, and referred generally to 'at least three others with literary ambitions.'⁷³ The value of having her own little company of fellow Katoombans was incalculable. It kept her circle tight and small; it granted her considerable independence from the wider literary society. What was good for the

individual, however, was not always good for the writer. The more self-sufficient and self-contained her life in Katoomba, the fewer the links with the broader society. Eleanor's Katoomba was not a microcosm of Australian society, but a world apart.

Dark, the artist, crystallised and nestled within this 'world-proof life,' where she was guarded jealously from intruders, and insulated against criticism or challenge. The advent of her public years, marked symbolically by the shedding of her pseudonyms, paradoxically triggered the retreat of the writer into a fortress-like mentality from which she only re-emerged in the latter half of her private years. As the toy gave way to the icon, the writer to an artist, something like a rupture of consciousness – a split of identity – seemed to take place between the individual and that 'other' in Eleanor Dark. Two distinct *personae* emerged. One remained palpable and accessible, bearing the face of the 'intensely practical and hard-working woman, a keen gardener, a hiker and bushwalker,'⁷⁴ 'warm, humorous and an eager and attentive listener.'⁷⁵ The other receded into a world inhabited exclusively by herself and her Muse, a permanent exile from the society of mere mortals. Hers, a cousin remarked, was 'the distance and reserve of a woman whose mind was elsewhere, an abstraction characterised by remoteness and a craving for solitude.'⁷⁶ The essence of Eleanor Dark, the artist, is captured in a portrait by Max Dupain at the peak of her success: the face inscrutable, the eyes averted and fixed hypnotically on some indeterminate point away from the camera's intrusive gaze.⁷⁷

Dark fostered this sense of 'other,' holding in awe that unfathomable force within her who suddenly and unexpectedly would seize control over the writing, ride roughshod over carefully laid plots and strategies of work, market imperatives and publishers' word-limits to drive her stories and characters into unexpected directions. She was, she once declared, 'the most downtrodden, bullied humble puppet of my characters as ever was!.'⁷⁸ She had no 'method' of writing, and while she found it 'very harassing, going along blindly and not knowing what will happen next, or whether anything will happen,' she had grown resigned to it. It was, she said, 'the only logical way for me to write.'⁷⁹ Over the years, friends and colleagues remarked on this tendency to shroud her work in mystery. The artist stood in jealous guard over her work, surrounding the process of creation with mystery and awe. Dark, a relative wrote, 'never discussed her work.' Eric confirmed – and defended – the practice. 'Some writers do; some writers don't. She doesn't.'⁸⁰ Osmar White found Dark's 'firm refusal to show any unfinished work'⁸¹ intriguing.

Throughout her literary life Dark insisted that she only wrote 'what

comes.’

Method? I haven’t got any. I never know what I am going to write when I start. I never know how my story is going to evolve, what the characters are going to do. Some sort of an idea stirs me to write something. Perhaps a scene, an incident, a song, and the book grows out of it. In the case of *Prelude to Christopher*, it was Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony ... The book grew out of that. I couldn’t possibly tell you how. I follow my characters along and see what they do.⁸²

The language of uncertainty and spirit of submission with which she cloaked her remarks evokes the sense of the author’s helpless wonder at the mysterious forces moving within her: the vague idea that ‘stirs.’ Dark’s American biographer remained unconvinced by such claims, labelling them ‘disingenuous.’ She was, Grove Day argued, ‘too good an analyst of the minds of others to be self-deluded into thinking that plots which click along section by section can be the result of uncontrolled “evolution.”’⁸³

Dark’s romantic conception of herself as an artist – and all that flowed from it – defied reason and argument. From an early age, she felt herself in touch with “the occult” (as distinct from the ‘ridiculous and self-contradictory’ ‘supernatural’). At three, she had seen ‘the devil’ quite distinctly at her ‘infant bedside.’ In her ‘late “teens”’ she had a “spooky” experience” sitting alone at a harbour wharf awaiting a ferry at midday.

I heard footsteps coming down the ramp behind me, and immediately had a startlingly clear mental picture of a man. I did not “see” him in the sense that I saw the devil. I simply had a mental picture of him.

Before turning, she ‘made a conscious mental inventory’ of the man:

middle aged, stoutish, blue suit, rather florid complexion, bowler hat, brown shoes, carrying a newspaper. Then I looked round, and there he was, exactly according to inventory. I had never seen him before, and I have never seen him since. There were no mirrors in front of me, or anything which could have served as a reflector.⁸⁴

Dark reached no explicit conclusions on the implications of these and other odd experiences. But it is clear that she felt she possessed, if not ‘supernatural’, then ‘extra-natural’ powers that allowed her to perceive the world around her in mysterious ways. An echo perhaps of the interest in theosophy and spiritualism that her mother is thought to

have shared with Christopher Brennan?⁸⁵ Dark had no time for those ‘apostles of “pure reason”‘ who refused even to allow the possibility of such powers, or what she called the ‘faculty for “seeing things.”’

There were not two Eleanor Darks, but two dimensions of the same individual. The peculiarly isolated and rarefied character of her personal life facilitated the work and the illusion of ‘the artist’ by providing her with space and time to indulge her art, and by reinforcing her in the image of the artist.

No drafts of her ‘twenties novels – *Slow Dawning* and ‘Pilgrimage’ – have survived with which to compare the writing practices of the apprentice and the artist. Draft manuscripts – from rough pencilled to finished typed drafts – of *Prelude to Christopher* and *Return to Coolami* do not, however, suggest a mad genius driven by the Muse to write ‘what comes,’ but an already consummate professional. Dark’s insistence that she only wrote ‘what comes’ and could plan neither length, approach nor even direction of her writing is not supported by the evidence. Highly disciplined, she worked to specific patterns and rhythms, setting herself specific word or page targets per day or week. Her systematic approach included keeping a word-count after every chapter, sometimes pencilling in the date she had commenced or ended a chapter or portions of it. She planned carefully before committing herself to paper, making occasional neat scissors-and-paste corrections and additions. Draft versions, even early ones, were neat. Typically, she wrote two-to-three drafts per novel, improving with each one on both matters of style and substance. Questions calling for particular expertise were researched and relevant details and references – in the case of *Prelude to Christopher*, for example, ‘Sanity & Insanity. Charles Mercier 1890’⁸⁶ – annotated on the draft manuscript.

Dark’s personal circumstances carried dire implications for her hopes of writing a ‘people’s literature.’ It is from the stuff of real lives that artists fashion imagined ones, however altered or distorted. In Dark’s case, it was almost exclusively her personal world which encased – and narrowed – her field of vision as an artist. Her personal world was her entire world. She seemed to neither need nor want to enlarge or transgress it. It is this uncanny correspondence typically found between her life and fiction that tempts researchers to pilfer the latter for material on the former. Real and imagined individuals, relationships, communities, perspectives parallel each other in her writing: Mike and her children-characters, Eric and doctor-cum-social reformer characters, Dowell and older-men characters, Molly and older-women characters, Dark and sharp-witted, sharp-tongued heroines, Katoomba and imagined small communities, the Blue Mountains and

the physical and metaphysical timeless land. Occasionally, a special transient figure makes the journey from her real to imagined lives, as did 'Inky' Stephensen in the character of Roger Blair in *Waterway*.⁸⁷ *Lantana Lane* constitutes the apogee of the autobiographical element in her work. After forty years, real-life models from which its characters were drawn still introduced themselves by their fictional names in interviews I conducted.

At its best, the stranglehold which Dark's personal world exercised on her creative life lent a haunting quality of honesty and immediacy to her writings. Such was the case with *Prelude to Christopher*. Driving the tragic story of Linda Hendon's journey from

a stormy haunted childhood with her uncle's gently-spoken promise of ultimate lunacy peering at her from every shadow.⁸⁸

to the sound of 'the oncoming thunder of wheels' and the decision to step in the path of an oncoming train⁸⁹ were pent-up tensions and hurts of early homelife; unresolved feelings of the little girl for her strange, disturbing mother; the child's mourning of her parents' marriage. Also packed into the story were Dark's painful yearnings through the 'twenties for a child. The book bore with honesty and dignity the scars of its author's most intimate experiences. Raw in places, this quality works because it is the rawness of the fresh wound, the fragility of the woman's condition that it evokes.

Prelude to Christopher, for all its artistry, did little to advance Dark's image as a people's writer. How was the general reading public to identify with the stylised and sanitised landscapes of contemporary Australia drawn, for example, in her two novels of this period? Neither reflects on the Depression experience except for the occasional veiled paragraph and faint allusion. It was a problem of consciousness and ultimately of values. A throw-away line to a colleague regarding the sorts of characters peopling her third novel makes this point. Dark described as 'ordinary people' Millicent and Tom Drew in *Return to Coolami*: a retired couple 'owning the best house' in town, on a leisurely motor tour of the New South Wales countryside in their 'latest model Madison,' able to buy their son 'a country property'⁹⁰ and themselves contemplating options of moving to a country home or remaining in their suburban homescape.

Dark did not wait for public recognition to begin shaping herself after the Brennan-model of the artist. Unprepared to heed her publisher's advice in 1932 to shed her pseudonym for *Slow Dawning*,⁹¹ she did so now unprompted. Indeed, the critical break between apprentice and artist was one of consciousness and it preceded the

publication in 1934 of *Prelude to Christopher*. It came with her decision to write a novel that broke dramatically with her past literature in form, content, tone, and audience. Henceforth, writing became a self-consciously serious enterprise. Even when, as in 1936 in the case of *Return to Coolami*, she chose to step aside from her responsibilities as an artist to write a romantic novel for commercial purposes, she did so with misgivings.⁹² What Nadine Gordimer termed 'that life-time lodger, a conscionable self-awareness' settled heavily on Dark's shoulders.

Going public signalled the retreat – instead of the emergence – of the artist from her society. The writer of romantic verse and light prose yielded to 'Eleanor Dark,' novelist of social conscience and celebrated pioneer in her country of the modernist techniques of writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. With the shedding of the pseudonyms – 'Patricia O'Rane' and 'P.O'R' – that had guarded her privacy and her literary name,⁹³ Dark also shed basic aspects of her work. The change of genre and orientation sealed certain outlets and readerships, and opened others. The new form and content were implicitly moving her away from the wide and mixed audience of popular and literary journals – Australian and British – to the narrow, select and largely foreign market of the serious novel. *Prelude to Christopher*, her first and only novel of the 'thirties to be published in Australia, was soon remaindered. The would-be writer of her people's literature increasingly took her work off-shore.

There were other paradoxes. The apprentice seemed to be taking with her the size and kind of audience required by the serious writer in her mission for art-and-country. The more serious the literature, the narrower and smaller the readership. The wit, eccentricities and excesses of Dark's 'twenties literature were now supplanted by the concerns of the artist who, at a time when a Depression-stricken public begged for fictional relief, was bent on feeding it tragedy and gloom. Dark was determined to feed her readers nutritious literature for their own good. The artist emerges here in the role of a benevolent dictator of reading tastes and cultural values.

The two main components of Dark's self-image as a writer – the Australian and the artist – were in conflict: one pulling her in the direction of a national literature, the other in the direction of art for art's sake. Dark's model of the (Australian) artist held certain irreconcilable tensions within it. To the Australian, the 'Public' – in the form of 'society,' the 'community,' the 'people' – stood central to its mandate and success; while to the artist, the 'Public' stood for the amorphous dumb masses. Rhetoric was one thing, practice another. Lurking behind the artist was the word merchant, prepared on occasion to cater to the

'Public' for financial gain. In principle they need not have been irreconcilable, but Dark's uncompromising 'artist' made it so. The daughter of Dowell O'Reilly, no stranger to the sense of responsibility and duty of accountability of the writer to society, was locked in mortal combat with the understudy to Christopher Brennan's model of the artist.⁹⁴

Prelude to Christopher deals with a small group of educated middle-class individuals living in a small country town on the fringes of urban Australia in the early 'thirties. The action takes place within four days, but time compression, flashback and stream of consciousness, allow events of the previous twenty years to be re-lived, re-assessed and to influence the story by each of the three main characters: Nigel Hendon, his wife Linda (Hamlin) Hendon, and his mother.

The novel begins seconds before Nigel, a middle-aged local doctor from Moondoona in New South Wales, is seriously injured in a car accident. Pain and shock induce a state of semi-deliriousness through which images of his past flicker through his mind. Stress at news of the accident prompts a similar response in his wife and mother. The story that unfolds through these recollections is at once poignant and tragic, inspiring and triumphant. Husband and wife struggle against conventions and biases of modern society; the tragic defeat of their visions of a better world is transcended by moral victory achieved through the struggle itself.

Nigel, a paragon of physical, intellectual and moral virtues, is the first doctor-cum-social reformer character in Dark's literature. 'Always unrelenting in the pursuit of any truth' and 'in the analysing of his obscurer moods and impulses, brutally ruthless.'⁹⁵ By the time he emerged 'from the stormy cynicism of his precocious adolescence,' he had realised 'that some standard, some faith, was a necessity to the human animal.'⁹⁶ His medical profession introduced him to a world of suffering and inequality from which his happy, comfortable upbringing had sheltered him. Being a doctor became 'just incidental'⁹⁷ to his life, his true calling lying in the field of social reform. Nigel's approach to life became searching – for 'some scheme to which one could harness the power of one's richly stored mind, and drive it tirelessly to some magnificent fulfilment' – and militant against existing conditions which bred 'Beggars at every street corner – pale-faced women holding pale-faced babies, little boys with anxious eyes.'⁹⁸ To his mother's anxious question of 'What are you going to do?,' his reply was 'I don't know – but only let it be *hard!*'⁹⁹

Nigel soon finds the answer to this question in 'Hy-Brazil' – 'a possibly quite legendary island ... a little world most exquisitely

alone'¹⁰⁰ which sets his mind 'afame'¹⁰¹ with thoughts of creating a eugenist colony of 'picked human beings.'¹⁰² Its 'very root and foundation'¹⁰³ is to be the 'Mentally and physically fit.'¹⁰⁴ His natural tendency to think globally and his enthusiasm for the project lead him to speculate about the future of his colony as 'More than a community--a country. More ... than a country --a civilization.'¹⁰⁵

Nigel's story shares centre stage with, and is enriched by, Linda's, whose tragic life ends in suicide. Linda's is the more compelling story: a brilliant young woman driven to madness and suicide by rumour, scandal and half-truths about her family's genetic disposition to insanity. Haunted by her evil Uncle Hamlin since early childhood with whispered innuendoes that she constituted 'the final blossoming of all the Hamlins'¹⁰⁶, Linda half-internalises his tauntings. On their wedding night, she shares her anxieties with her idealist-cum-eugenicist husband who sees no other sensible or honourable course but to refuse to father her child. Despite the pressures this decision puts on the relationship, the twenty-year-old marriage survives. Indeed, the Hendons emerge morally victorious from their trials. Nigel confronts the face of failure – caution, apathy and inertia – and realises that his victory lies in refusing to yield to life-negating instincts. 'Live Dangerously' was his motto.¹⁰⁷ Linda's 'self-inflicted death'¹⁰⁸ is also portrayed positively: in seizing control over her life and as a final act of love for her husband, she opens the way for 'Christopher,' his would-be healthy child by another woman.

Prelude to Christopher holds rich material for a host of different readings: eugenics, sexual mores and conventions, human dimensions of war, social aspects of medicine, power of the media, feminism, motherhood, country town politics, Eleanor Dark's psychological journey across the first thirty years of life. Its cast of minor characters includes memorable cameos, most notably those of 'Pan,' a Ghandi-like heroic figure leading the journey to 'Hy-Brazil,' and Dr Marlow, medical doctor and similar to Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, who acts as a civilising force bridging the worlds of chaos and order, madness and sanity inhabited by Linda Hendon in her last days.

A striking feature of the novel is its satisfying integrity of form, content and theme, all three elements of which operate and are sustained at a similar level of intensity. Its compacted timeframe creates a sense of urgency and immediacy reinforced by the succession and magnitude of the crises of Nigel's accident, Linda's accelerating mental decline and her eventual suicide. The use of stream of consciousness allows for a privileged and intimate insight into the events and the characters' most private thoughts and feelings. Dark had mastered such techniques. They

allowed her natural psychoanalytic bent wide scope, facilitating delicate complex portrayals of landscapes of the mind and heart.

The theme of the artist through the characters of Nigel Hendon and d'Aubert, the novel's artist-hero, is worth pursuing here. Described by Linda as 'a genius,'¹⁰⁹ d'Aubert is the only character other than Nigel to earn this superlative. His impact on the story is far greater than the few brief lines relating to him suggest. Posed as a higher force even to Nigel and his carefully developed set of moral and social values, d'Aubert subverts the conceptual and moral base of the story. In so doing, he confuses what is otherwise a consistently developed celebration of moral integrity and courage in the face of adversity.

The character of d'Aubert is thrice significant: in the particular characterisation of the artist, in relationship to his art, and in relationship to others in society. The character is drawn in blunt impressionistic lines. As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, the novelist endows him with a superior capacity to perceive and communicate the most profound emotions. This capacity is premised by a particular temperament described as 'ruthless conceit.'¹¹⁰

A critical aspect of the characterisation of d'Aubert is that the focus is not on the artist but on his art, recalling Dark's own impatience with 'this habit of going beyond the book,' her firm insistence that 'the book is what matters.'¹¹¹ D'Aubert himself is never seen. Thus, his disturbing 'Portrait of Linda,' which he calls 'his masterpiece'¹¹², provides the sole focus of the novel's exploration of the nature and role of the artist in society. The fact that the painting is 'revoltingly indecent'¹¹³ with its 'abandonment of psychological nakedness' is emphasised and celebrated. Art must first disturb and shock before its raw exposition of truth penetrates the complacent public. Art, the suggestion is made, transcends aesthetics. It must also present to society, in the same way that d'Aubert's painting presented to Linda, 'that unmerciful mirror of herself.'¹¹⁴ The universal response to the portrait is one of unmitigated shock. Dr Marlow, a man of educated tastes and sympathetic disposition, who feels 'shocked to the very roots of his being' at the sight, urges Linda that 'she ought to burn it.'¹¹⁵ Suddenly struck by the inextricability of art and life, Marlow feels 'a ridiculous doubt, a doubt that made him feel light-headed and absurd and irritated' as he puzzles over the riddle: "'One of these is real and one is illusion – but which?'"¹¹⁶

Prelude to Christopher itself, it could be said, set out to shock the reader and subvert the system of values of a society that would condemn a Linda Hendon to such a life and death. It too performed a similarly disturbing role, portraying and exploring a 'kind of moral cannibalism'

of modern society.¹¹⁷ However, the conception of the nature and function of art as it emerges from within the novel transcends that of the radicalism embodied in Nigel and Linda's respective challenges to society. This point is underscored by the fact that Nigel Hendon is himself shocked by the portrait. The inescapable suggestion is that d'Aubert and his art belong not only to a different realm of experience and expression, but also to a different and higher moral order than any other individual in the story, the Hendons included.

These judgments, however, are made for, not prompted in the reader: the portrait itself remains shrouded in mystery, and the artist – neither placed within the action nor granted a direct voice – remains an all-consuming force in the consciousness of those who experience his art. The reader learns about d'Aubert either through Linda's memories of the island and passing references to Marlow, or in several lengthy passages ascribed to no particular character, thus transforming him in a sense into the omniscient voice. One such passage describes d'Aubert as a

genius drunk with beauty, half-mad with beauty, taking,
for the first time, his fill of it, painting it, watching it,
living it, adoring it, and painting it again.¹¹⁸

In his inaccessibility, d'Aubert becomes inscrutable and thus unanswerable.

In a novel of such intense ethical preoccupations, Dark's portrayal of this artist-character raises serious problems. By the time d'Aubert enters the story, Nigel and Linda Hendon, and to a lesser extent Marlow, have been firmly established as the novel's moral compasses. In time, all three express definite objections to the artist's moral standards. Nigel's assessment of his wife's affair with d'Aubert is that to him 'obviously, she had been just so much more beauty to be savoured.'¹¹⁹ Linda thought the raw naked qualities of her portrait suggested he had gained 'his artistic fulfilment from the degradation of another human being.'¹²⁰ Marlow's initial response to the portrait was to realise that

Never in his life had anything given him so strong a
conception of evil, not as an active malevolence but as an
outcast uncleanness.¹²¹

From these examples emerges a character whose selfishness, sadistic tendencies and power to evoke evil run counter to the novel's painstakingly established code of ethics embodied in young Nigel's 'dream of order and sanity' and his enduring personal motto 'that the business of human life should be decently ordered.'¹²²

The character of d'Aubert undermines the system of values of his

society and the novel itself by challenging notions of human decency and compassion embodied in Nigel and Linda Hendon. Artist-characters in Dark's later novels possess a dimension of social conscience wholly absent here. Like d'Aubert, Nicholas Kavanagh in *Sun Across the Sky* is endowed with an artistic genius that makes him 'a being apart'¹²³ from the rest of society. But Kavanagh is also endowed with a social conscience. D'Aubert, on the other hand, represents creativity before it meets and is subdued by responsibility.

Conceptually, d'Aubert not only disturbs the balance between good and evil in the story, but also challenges the basic premises underlying these categories. Nigel's 'twin flames of energy and idealism' on which so much of the novel's sense of triumph and tragedy rely are ultimately qualified and diminished by d'Aubert's special license to override the system of values developed around the 'twin flames' and the heroic vision of a better world to which they give rise.

Ethically, the defence of the notion that artists create their own peculiar moral system, separate from that of the rest of society, has wide and profound implications. If writers, as artists, constitute a separate moral group, wherein lies their accountability and accessibility to the public? If they do not speak the same moral language as their readers, how are their experiences and their interpretations of those experiences to assume an ethical meaning?

D'Aubert's creator did not altogether share his conception of the artist, or if she did she had altered her views dramatically by the time of negotiating the book's publication. The main difference lay in the fact that he was an artist, and she an Australian artist, keen to advance the alliance of art-and-country even if in her own misguided way.

With the writing and publication of *Prelude to Christopher*, the artist had struck one blow, and the Australian another. The Brisbane *Courier Mail* predicted it was the "prelude" to another great Australian novelist.¹²⁴ The Melbourne *Herald* critic congratulated the book's Australian publisher on 'a real discovery,' celebrating its 'undeniable' power.¹²⁵ The *Sydney Morning Herald* called it 'a very striking novel,' celebrating the 'author's mastery over her material, and her capacity for making every phrase tell.'¹²⁶

For all the praise, a critical element in the alliance of art-and-country was missing. The novel's great literary acclaim at home and abroad bore little relation to its fate in the marketplace, at home and in England, where it was published in 1936. Collins, Dark's new British publishers after Farquharson, misjudged the novel's popular appeal, predicting it would be 'one of the biggest sellers of the season.'¹²⁷ The book's admirers were loud but few, almost all from 'serious' sources and

journals. Reviewers of the *Bulletin*, *Australian Woman's Mirror* and other popular outlets expressed considerable reservations. Many acknowledged Dark's 'undoubted talents,' while criticising the book's form and content, remarking on her 'style of breathless half-coherence,' its 'very morbid topic,' its 'vivid picture of a soul in agony, of a brain slowly decomposing.' In short, the content made it 'not a pleasant book' and the form 'somewhat hard to read.' 'One could have wished,' a reviewer commented, 'that the themes were not quite so divorced from everyday life and experience,' expressing the hope that her next would have 'more recognisable characters and events.'¹²⁸

The setbacks of her book seemed to endear Dark more not less to it. Three years before her death in 1985, she was still seeking the American publication that had eluded it for half a century. *Prelude to Christopher* – proof of her artistry, victim of popular biases, sacrificial lamb at the altar of Australian literature – remained her favourite creation. In 1942, with the chorus of Australian, American and British acclaim of *The Timeless Land* still ringing in her ears, Dark wrote to her American publishers that 'my feeling is that "Prelude" had a quality which has never got into any of my other books, and I'm not likely to recapture – a sort of spontaneity.'¹²⁹

While remaining – in rhetoric at least – contemptuous of critics, whom she regarded as 'the curse of literature,' in her next book Dark did heed their warnings. After all, money too was 'such a curse' – even if only in the memory of the young Pixie and the financial struggles of that earlier life.

Return to Coolami seemed tailor-made to the specifications set out by the *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer quoted above: in theme 'not quite so divorced from everyday life and experience,' and with 'more recognisable characters and events.'¹³⁰ But here too Dark was acting on her own impulses and, as she had done in the case of *Slow Dawning*, she chose to write a novel specifically for commercial gain. The word merchant's priorities – not the artist's – lay behind it, which may explain why there were no agonies of artistic paralysis, no lengthy period of incubation or hibernation. *Return to Coolami* was a business venture and as such was produced promptly and painlessly to specifications. Thus, while the second novel took some three-and-a-half years to write, the third absorbed just over a year. The same author who flinched at the thought that the British cover of her second novel might feature a romantic couple, readily agreed with those reviewers who felt her third novel suited 'the porch-and-hammock trade.' It was, she admitted, 'a punk book.'¹³¹ 'Anything less highbrow would hardly be imagined!'¹³²

The artist must keep the respect of those who mattered in the literary community. Again Dark pilgrimaged to Nettie Palmer, high priestess of Australian literature, in a suitably humble tone, confessing her transgression and appealing for reassurance. By now, she knew the language and culture well. Palmer herself had tutored her only a few years before on the duality of the morality of the artist. Then, the contrite young writer of *Slow Dawning* had confessed her transgression of writing “just a book” – ‘a book quite coldly and commercially,’ and Palmer had assured her the problem lay not in the act itself but in refusing to acknowledge it. One had to be ‘frank about it’ and not confuse it with ‘a masterpiece’ or turn it into ‘a splendid failure ... judged on the highest grounds.’ As long as a writer could tell which work ‘is written “for food” ... and which is written, all out, for its own sake,’ Palmer explained, all was well. In short, artists could stray beyond the confines of artistic integrity as long as they were prepared to confront the fact of their transgressions.¹³³ In a letter recounting the progress of *Return to Coolami*, Dark followed closely upon the formula given to her by Palmer herself:

I don't like it much & perhaps I'll just put it aside & write another instead of trying to get it published. But money is such a curse--& it might sell! A love story with a Happy Ending!¹³⁴

Money was not ‘a curse’ in any real sense, and the suggestion that she might ‘put it aside & write another instead’ is uncorroborated in her papers. Indeed, comments to Molly a couple months later suggest she had offered the manuscript of *Return to Coolami* to a local publisher some time before her communication with Palmer. But ultimately, it was the gesture that mattered, and it achieved its aim. Palmer’s response, as before, was swift and reassuring. While the artist continued her *mea culpas*, the word merchant was well rewarded for her labours. Tensions between the lofty idealism of the former and the prosaic designs of the latter – art versus commodity – contributed a second major knot to the fabric of Dark’s conception of the artist. Meanwhile, the novel proved among Dark’s more commercially successful and enduring books.

Return to Coolami is significant also as palpable evidence of her potential to write a book deemed both a commercial and, as the A.L.S. gold medal indicated, an artistic success. ‘Good’ and ‘popular’ need not be, the reception of the novel seemed to suggest, mutually contradictory terms. *The Timeless Land* later prompted a similar message that went similarly unheard.

The story of *Return to Coolami* takes place within a span of two days. Its main characters are Susan McLean, her husband Brett, and

Susan's parents, Tom and Millicent Drew. The setting evolves, as does the two-day 300-mile car journey that drives the story, from the town of Ballool on the outskirts of Sydney to Coolami, Brett's ancestral home set deep in the bushland of New South Wales.

Before the novel begins, much of what the story is about has already transpired. As a young flapper, Susan had conceived the child of Jim whose love she did not reciprocate. She loved Brett, Jim's older brother and fifteen years her senior. Upon hearing of her pregnancy Jim proposes marriage, but she postpones a decision until the following day. Fate intervenes, for the next day Jim is fatally injured in a car accident. From his deathbed, he pleads with Brett to marry Susan for the sake of the unborn child. Brett, who holds nothing but contempt for the girl he blames for his brother's past unhappiness and imminent death, reluctantly agrees. They marry in name only. The child dies at birth, leaving the unhappy couple to contemplate a future now devoid of any apparent bond between them. Susan and Brett are both individuals of admirable qualities, caught in a spiralling mini-drama mostly of their own making. Brett's 'efforts at decency and forbearance' and Susan's 'fierce and determined honesty'¹³⁵ have yielded no resolution to their problem-marriage. As Susan remarks to Brett on one occasion, 'It's pathetic how well-intentioned we are!'¹³⁶ Susan moves in with her parents after the tragedy to convalesce as well as wrestle with her future prospects.

Return to Coolami begins at this juncture. Brett arrives from Coolami to bring his wife home. Together with her parents, Millicent and Tom Drew, they set out on the two-day car journey which becomes a physical and spiritual pilgrimage to 'the promised land.'¹³⁷ As the city recedes and the bush surrounds them, all four characters individually experience a heightened awareness of themselves and their most intimate longings. Brett and Susan are reconciled, to live happily ever after in Coolami. Tom finally confronts 'his unsparing self-imposed slavery!'¹³⁸ to materialism and grants Millicent a long cherished dream to return to her ancestral home in Wandabyne deep in the Australian bush to live out their retirement years. The catalyst of these resolutions and relationships and by far the most compelling and complex character in the novel is the bush itself. Under its spell, Brett's resistance yields to Susan's charms, and Tom 'began to feel benevolent; he began to feel expansive and kindly and tolerant.'¹³⁹

Return to Coolami is both light romantic fiction and realistic writing, of both commercial and artistic qualities. This dual character makes it disjointed and generally unsatisfying. Its characterisation is weak. Engrossed in their own private worlds, all four major characters are

insufferably introspective and self-centred. Only the timeless land emerges as a memorable haunting character, brooding, welcoming and forbidding. Herein lies Dark's dress rehearsal for the novel that only a few years later made her name and a small fortune.

Analysed as light romantic fiction, the novel is a simple yarn stitched together by an interminable number of clichés. Love is a subject often discussed and pondered during the car journey. It is central to the young couple's problematic relationship and, in a more tempered mellow way, to the Drews' marriage. Its treatment here – as a fickle and utterly unpredictable force – pre-empts the possibility of a sustained exploration or analysis of its nature. It either happens or not to these individuals; its ways are mysterious and thus inexplicable.

Like passive vessels, Susan and Brett lie in wait for the moment when it might strike. Early in the novel she recognised that 'she couldn't force her love for him-- And she couldn't. No one could. Love happened to you or it didn't.'¹⁴⁰ Deluding herself later that 'she'd begun, by that time, to know something about love,' she soon realised that 'it was still as mysterious, as unreasonable an emotion as ever.'¹⁴¹ Brett is also confounded over 'This love business,' wondering 'What was it? Surely if he hadn't it already he had the ingredients! Liking, respect, admiration, physical desire. Was there anything else?'¹⁴² Long years of marriage had not brought the Drews any closer to understanding love. To Millicent, love was 'the essence of their long life together'; the common bond which 'beautifully and mysteriously united'¹⁴³ hers and Tom's past. The apogee of this 'love business' comes towards the journey's end as the young couple suddenly find themselves unaccountably overtaken by a dramatic mood change. Sparked by Susan's expressed urge for chocolates, Brett plunges into a shopping frenzy at a corner shop which includes 'Twelve mammoth slabs of chocolate in orange-coloured wrappings.' The one he offers her is 'a "conversation lolly" – heart-shaped and biliously pink, with "I love you" in crazy red lettering.' Susan is so moved by the gesture that she had 'to run ahead of him because her eyes were hot with tears.'¹⁴⁴ This scene is the climax of the story.

It is as realistic writing that the novel assumes artistic as well as cultural meaning. Debate on ways of conceiving and expressing the land through the literary medium was growing among this Federation generation of writers. Christopher Brennan's argument in 'Some Makers of Australia' that for Australian art to 'take on a "national" tinge'¹⁴⁵ it had to do so unselfconsciously was still being articulated.¹⁴⁶ On the other side were those castigating writers who deliberately went elsewhere for their material.¹⁴⁷ These crude positions set the terms of

the debate. 'To be worthy of the name of the race from which it comes,' Frank Dalby Davison preached to the converted in a letter to Nettie Palmer in 1933, writing 'should express the spirit of that race.'¹⁴⁸ Questions of craftsmanship preoccupied writers who like Marjorie Barnard felt themselves part of the alliance of art-and-country. Concerned with conceptual and technical difficulties involved in conveying what she termed the 'essential quality of atmosphere' through the written word, she considered the special problems posed by 'physical atmosphere.'

Mental and emotional flavours can be captured in words more easily because they have something in common with words. But physical atmosphere – the feeling of a place ... must be translated whole into an entirely different medium.¹⁴⁹

Stephensen's three-part essay series 'The Foundations of Australian Culture,' articulating a bold new approach to the realisation of an indigenous Australian culture and posing the spirit of place – *genius loci* – as the key defining force of that culture, coincided with the publication of *Return to Coolami*, lending it particular relevance as a contribution in its own right to the debate.

Dark refused to concede any redeeming qualities in her novel, gold medal notwithstanding. Like *Slow Dawning*, she preferred to leave it behind. Indeed, had it not been for the medal, it is quite possible that this novel – like her first – may have quietly disappeared from her list of literary credits in subsequent books. Eleanor Dark may have compromised here and there her artistic integrity, but her artistic conscience never let her forget that she had done so.

Recurring key terms in reviews of the novel point to the basic factors that contributed to its commercial success: 'certain to be widely read,'¹⁵⁰ 'Reading for pleasure,'¹⁵¹ 'Accessible tale.'¹⁵² The *Bulletin*, which had castigated her for *Prelude to Christopher*, now led the cheers, describing it as 'brilliant' 'sharp, tense, dramatic piece of fiction,' celebrating particularly its 'authentic depiction of Australian character and the Australian scene.'¹⁵³ For all its essential Australianness, as many reviewers remarked, the book travelled well to foreign parts. While *Prelude to Christopher* never found an American publisher, *Return to Coolami* was warmly received. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* commented, 'If this is a fair sample of what Australian writers have to offer, it might be well to encourage more imports from "Down Under."'¹⁵⁴

Some reviews reflected a broader grasp of Dark's development as a

writer, approaching the book as work-in-progress and thus offering a kind of developing profile of the writer herself. A Melbourne *Herald* piece entitled 'A Force in our Literature' described Dark as 'an unusual talent, individual, original, quite unconventional,' paying tribute to 'the subtlety and understanding' of her characterisations, and her skill in evoking a 'distinctly Australian background.'¹⁵⁵

Through this spectrum of responses to her two novels, one thing was clear. She had secured a unique place in her country's high literary society: media profiles, the rush of invitations to join or speak to various literary groups, the Fellowship of Australian Writers' Christmas Party where as guest of honour she was presented with her first medal. Yet to Dark, it was the approval and recognition of those she recognised as kindred spirits – artist to artist – that mattered.

The precise timing of Dark's move into the little company of serious writers, led by Nettie and Vance Palmer, and including Katharine Susannah Prichard, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw, Frank Dalby Davison, Miles Franklin and to a lesser extent Jean Devanny, is hard to pinpoint. Nor is it particularly important. The move involved a web of perceptions and readings of signals. Transactions-in-code between Dark and Nettie Palmer – each signalling interest in the other – predated the emergence of the debutante.

Even before she had secured her first A.L.S. gold medal, Dark had received the blessings of the Palmers. Vance Palmer celebrated her second novel, and soon after received and accepted an invitation to stay at 'Varuna.'¹⁵⁶ He declared himself 'disgusted' at 'the space allotted to it on (the *Bulletin's*) The Red Page,' maintaining the book's publication was 'an event' and '*Bulletin* readers ought to have been told so.' The artist huffed and puffed at this appalling state of affairs. His concluding remarks bear the trademark: 'the scale of values here,' he despaired, 'is extraordinary.'¹⁵⁷ Franklin also welcomed her warmly.¹⁵⁸

These gestures of welcome constituted a rite of passage. Dowell O'Reilly's daughter had been invited into the inner sanctum of Australian literary society in her own right. This little company was now her professional home in Australian literary society. Dark fitted uneasily into the group, yet more than any other member, she embodied its essence: for her conception of the artist remained the purest. Vehemently opposed to any criticisms of the artist, Dark refused to engage in any form of literary criticism: reviews, literary competitions, even friendly advice to initiates. Resentful of those she regarded as parasites on the artist, she refused to discuss her work. She alone was a born-and-bred artist and now boasted the unique honour of being twice-winner of the A.L.S. gold medals. The 'group genius' (as Barnard acidly

described her) possessed a unique blend of advantages – home and collegial support, financial independence, professional standing, artistic recognition – with which to indulge the cult of the artist.

Dark certainly needed no coaxing from Nettie Palmer on the ways of the artist. Already by the mid-1920s, she was articulating the essence of Nettie's own views on the question of serious versus popular culture. In 'Pilgrimage,' she treated the matter in the context of the family's financial pressures. Through her painting, Anne's mother had been the one to keep 'things going' in the house precisely because she was not very talented. 'She was not so good an artist as her husband was a writer, I think, but (or perhaps therefore) her work found a readier market.'¹⁵⁹

The role played by this little company of writers as Dark's home in literary society was not straightforward. More than most, Dark kept her distance from it, preferring the company of Katoomban kindred spirits, like Eric Lowe and Osmar White. Yet its role in providing a cosy forum for members to massage each others' egos, and for Dark in particular, another exclusive club of kindred spirits, is critical in appreciating just how 'world-proof' Dark's writing life was through the public years.

Over time, what they sometimes referred to as 'the gang'¹⁶⁰ or 'our tight little society'¹⁶¹ or 'the little group around the family fireside,'¹⁶² retained a distinct character and a coherence and integrity that marked it as a force in its own right in Australian literary life. The profile and contours of the group altered considerably through the 'thirties and 'forties, but its core members and core values remained intact.

The little company's members were not necessarily friends, and were circumspect in their dealings with one another. Theirs was not a culture of excesses – of passions and outbursts of temper, public accusations and retractions – that left clear imprints for posterity to trace. Their interactions were typically formal and *soto voce*, held at amiable but professional levels. Even if they had been so inclined, the fact that its members were scattered across the continent – in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Katoomba – pre-empted the kind and frequency of social interaction (in pubs, cafes and at home) that served to bond other literary groups. The little company was a sober, even sombre, company of serious writers. Its heart lies hidden beneath the mountain of correspondence that stands as vital and irrefutable proof of its existence. That it was in large part a paper group, formed and fed through the written word, is useful in providing palpable evidence of its formation and evolution but robs it of a sense of life.

The early 'thirties were a period of transition in Australian literary

life. Departures and homecomings, spiritual-cum-ideological journeys to Russia, return visits to England and the Continent all contributed to the kind of group and its ethos that began to crystallise by the end of this period. The return home of Stephensen and Franklin, Richardson's decision to remain overseas after the death of her husband in 1933, visits to Russia by Devanny and 'destiny-driven' Prichard, Barnard-Eldershaw's and later the Palmers' trip to Europe: all contributed to the sense of mission and crisis that marks the little company and its literature of conscience of the 'thirties and 'forties. There was a sense of 'moment' and those who did not share it were resented; Richardson, in particular. Her wish, Barnard explained in a lecture many years later, was 'to live retired & inviolate.'¹⁶³

The emerging group of committed writers stood both for important continuities and ruptures with the past. Sometimes described as a second wave of the radical nationalism of Lawson and Furphy of the 1890s, theirs was a new brand of literary nationalism, borrowing from the radical nationalist school of the 1890s preoccupations with the development of a national identity and celebration of the Common Man, while distancing itself from aspects of it. New meanings and implications were grafted to the old themes of mateship and egalitarianism, so that these not only embraced the context and conditions of the working man, but also of indigenous people. No longer were unionism and working class solidarity privileged as principal answers to society's evils; literature and the artist were now also offered as possible resolutions to these problems. The city claimed a more prominent place, while the bush was re-interpreted, depicted and explored in its raw and virgin environment as the ultimate symbol of the Australian spirit of place. This was a different Australia – pre-white settlement, long before out-stations, jackeroos or their masters disturbed the natural harmony between the land and its original inhabitants – to that found in Lawson's or Paterson's outback.

Generally, writers of the little company perceived the question of a nationalist literature differently from the earlier radical nationalist school. Borrowing rather from Brennan and others who saw the development of a national literature as mediated by and dependent upon a broader cultural perspective, Dark and her fellow writers drew in their writings on a considerable familiarity with great European literatures. 'Nationalist' was to them an outward, not inward-looking concept.

The group's most dramatic departure from what preceded lay in its particular culture and cult of the artist. A complex image of the Australian writer – of and above the people, cultured and serious, with an artistic and social conscience – was being born with it. The group

bore no trace of the bohemian world of O'Reilly and Brennan, or the chauvinism of the *Bulletin* school of writers of the 1890s, and little of the aggressive male ethos that marked both. It was the essence of middle-class respectability and in vogue at least of middle-class morality as well. Women were no longer fringe-dwellers or sexual beings in that culture, but occupied prominent places in its pecking order.

That the group was established and nurtured through correspondence gave relations within it a formal and distant character. Invitations were 'often issued for personal meetings' but these 'rarely' occurred.¹⁶⁴ Davison and the Palmers had exchanged lengthy and polite letters for over two years before meeting personally; in the case of Barnard and the Palmers it was even longer. When a business trip to Melbourne made possible their meeting Barnard hesitated, asking Nettie politely if she would prefer that she 'remained on paper.'¹⁶⁵ Palmer and Franklin corresponded for at least five or six years before meeting. When in mid-1934 the opportunity finally arose, Franklin warned Palmer she was (of all things!) 'dull.'¹⁶⁶ The physical distance between them, the feeling emerges, did not so much impose but facilitate a paper relationship. This blend of camaraderie and solitude remained a major characteristic of the group.

What then held the little company together? 'Artist' was the principal binding force in the group: determining its composition, defining its ethos and *esprit de corps*. All were prominent writers, most were recipients of major local literary awards. Not all award winners, however, belonged to the group. Some though actively courted (like Xavier Herbert) stood apart from it, others (like Ernestine Hill and Henrietta Drake-Brockman) were not encouraged to join. Nettie Palmer's role was critical in selecting from the crop those whose work and approach to their work suited her exacting, elitist standards of good literature. Her *modus operandi* emerges through the correspondence. Those she deemed unsuitable to join her circle were quietly ignored, and in some cases their reputations were undermined through private comments. Nettie chose her targets and *confidantes* well. Her devastating comments were typically cloaked in the language of good cheer and light chatter. G.B. Lancaster, whose novel *Pageant* (1937) later earned an A.L.S. gold medal, is a case in point. To Davison – 'Dear Friend' – whom Nettie was grooming in the ways of the artist, she remarked casually: 'Yes, I met her once, it was Katharine Susannah Prichard's London flat in summer 1915.' Lancaster, she said, had struck her as a 'quiet little woman in grey' of 'nervous attitudes to ideas & persons.'¹⁶⁷

Nettie guarded her position fiercely. Those who ambled into her territory, presuming to make their own assessments of the state of Australian literary writing or, like Stephensen, seeking to advance the debate itself, were unwelcome. Encouraging of American journalist and freelance writer¹⁶⁸ Hartley Grattan's interest in Australian literature in some ways, in private she sought to undercut his influence. To Davison for example she dismissed him as 'more of a psychologist or historian than a critic.'¹⁶⁹

Nettie (and to a lesser extent Vance) played a central role in fixing the little company to the banner of elitist art. As a literary critic she may have been 'an onlooker,' as she once described herself, in the world of creative writing,¹⁷⁰ but she ensured that her trenchant views on 'good' and 'popular' literature predominated. She made Ion Idriess the embodiment of the forces of darkness conspiring to corrupt Australian literature. The fact that Australian publishers, such as Angus & Robertson, were 'dazzled' by his success, only confirmed this point.¹⁷¹ She used his mode and rate of work – an average of one novel per year – as illustrations of how real artists did not operate.

Australian literary society of the 1930s was sorting itself roughly into three main cultural streams: the expatriates, the populars, and the little company as writers of conscience. Around each, a cluster of associations, values and expectations was forming. Though particularly between the expatriates and the little company there were shared sympathies¹⁷² and experiences,¹⁷³ each stream stood for a distinctive impulse and force in Australian creative writing. The expatriates, most notably Richardson, were attracting considerable artistic acclaim. The populars, such as Idriess and Thwaites, were cornering the commercial market with their travel and adventure stories. Where if anywhere, then lay the claims of the little company?

The key is the alliance of art-and-country they forged. Although they enjoyed neither the artistic reputation of Richardson nor the popular appeal of Idriess, it was they nonetheless who claimed the right to establish a national literature. The little company's was in a sense leadership by default. Their ability to seize and retain control over the different aspects of Australian creative writing – literary criticism, organisational, government and industry links, cultural initiatives – relied to a considerable extent on the power vacuum created by the other major forces in Australian creative writing of the period, neither of whom showed much inclination to assume or share control over the directions of the literature. The little company's was not a secure position within the literary community they led, a fact which may help explain its defensive posturings, politics of exclusion, and culture of

grievance and alienation.

It was as *Australian* artists that the little company distinguished themselves from others. They saw themselves as a kind of secular ministry whose principal duty and responsibility was to transform fellow Australians from cultural heathens to enlightened readers and citizens. Their sense of mission had the fervour of a moral crusade. They were ‘the corroboree-makers’ of modern Australian society, entrusted by the Muse with writing the ‘people’s literature.’¹⁷⁴

It was ‘the artist’ that lent the group’s mission its moral dimensions. News of the suicide of a student whom Barnard had recently reported for stealing books from the library horrified her. But it was the artist’s guilt more than the human being’s sympathy that consumed her. ‘I am a writer,’ she wrote to Nettie Palmer, ‘I describe emotions & make them into patterns & yet I hadn’t enough understanding & human generosity to stop this.’¹⁷⁵

There were wide regional and other divergences. The majority originated from metropolitan centres while others, like Franklin, Eldershaw and Davison, came from country areas. In terms of class, social and educational background, the spectrum was similarly wide. A few were university graduates, like Eldershaw, Barnard¹⁷⁶, Nettie and Vance Palmer. Some, like Franklin, had had little formal education. Their professional backgrounds were also diverse: Prichard was a journalist, Barnard a librarian, Eldershaw a schoolteacher, the Palmers freelance writers. Though most complained of lack of funds, house help and overseas trips were not unusual. Neither Devanny nor Franklin was financially comfortable, but through spouses or parents – as in the case of Dark and Barnard – a few had access to considerable means. Except for sharing a moral rejection of capitalism and an equally moral embrace of the principles of socialism, their politics also differed widely. Committed members of the C.P.A., Prichard and Devanny were at the far Left of the political spectrum, while Dark and Barnard (at heart both nineteenth-century liberals) were at the other. Although their politics and the rhetoric that accompanied it changed over time, few were prepared to go beyond the moral outrage and angry posturings. ‘Artist’ was ultimately the sole binding force in the group.

There were sharp differences even in relation to their work and approach to their work. Though all (except for Devanny) assumed the mantle of artist, only Xavier Herbert was widely recognised (within and outside the group and others) as such, even if ironically he was never more than a fringe-dweller in the life of the little company.¹⁷⁷ Not everyone in the group agreed with Palmer’s definition of *good*

Australian literature; Franklin, for one. A passionate devotee of Joseph Furphy and *Such is Life*, Franklin's approach was coloured by her affection and loyalty to the man and to his work, as well as by her own bush-childhood and lack of formal education. Artistic considerations were to her but one aspect of the question of merit. While admitting to their artistic limitations, she celebrated the contributions of popular writers to the national literature. Idriess' writings, she affirmed to Palmer, were 'rich Australiana.'¹⁷⁸ In approach, Nettie's was the half-empty, Franklin's the half-full reading of the state of Australian literature.

As a group the little company lacked coherence, direction and purpose. It resided in no particular place, assumed no particular shape, and identified itself only with a conception – 'Australian artist.' Its contours emerged clearly in some issues and blurred in others. Historians have drawn lines around certain sectors of its membership – women, the Palmers, the two communist writers, the utopianists, the vitalists, the romantics, the social realists. Ultimately, its principal value lies not in its details but its essentials.

Dark's story is enriched by, and belongs to, the story of the little company because she found in this cluster of fellow writers confirmation and reinforcement of values and expectations central to her understanding of the nature and role of art in society. With these kindred spirits, she negotiated difficult currents and undercurrents of the 'thirties and 'forties. Her writing life, her thinking, her writing were charted, and partly sunk, by that association. At a time when her society-in-crisis demanded closer engagement, Dark's professional home offered – and she accepted – refuge from that society.

In the little company, Eleanor Dark encountered the Eustaces of the Australian literary community. Rather than mock them, she now joined forces, leaving it to others to remind these writers that the stuff of art and the people's literature lay outside the confines of literary society. 'I like an author who can sometimes forget his application,' the poet William Baylebridge remarked to Nettie Palmer in 1933:

the best bread for a literary worker in Australia might easily, under present conditions, be the bread earned at something beyond literature.¹⁷⁹

¹ Eleanor Dark, *Prelude to Christopher*, P.R. Stephensen & Co. Ltd., 1934, p. 184.

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- ² Nadine Gordimer, 'The Essential Gesture' (1984), pp. 285-286, in Stephen Clingman (ed. and intro.), *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, Penguin Books, 1989, pp. 285-300.
 - ³ Marjorie Barnard Papers, S29. Get ref.
 - ⁴ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Kate Baker, 26.11.31, NLA MS 1174/1/3849-54.
 - ⁵ Letter from P.R. Stephensen to Nettie Palmer, 20.7.32, NLA MS 1174/1/4022-24.
 - ⁶ Letter from Mary Gilmore to Frank Dalby Davison, 13.7.29, NLA MS 1945/1/3-6.
 - ⁷ Letter from 'Brent of Bin Bin' (Miles Franklin) to Nettie Palmer, 'Oct.' 1931, NLA MS 1174/1/3769.
 - ⁸ Untitled and unsigned review of *Return to Coolami*, *Bulletin*, 22.4.36. In ML MSS 4545 10(25).
 - ⁹ 'Australian Authors' Week,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4.3.35.
 - ¹⁰ The subject of insanity was thought to be 'unique in Australian literature,' review of book by unnamed critic, *The Opinion*, 15.7.35, ML MSS 4545 10(25). Phyllis Bottome's *Private Worlds*, another critic pointed out, had insanity as its central theme. F.S. Burnell, 'Some Books, *The Home*, 1.3.35, ML MSS 4545 10(25).
 - ¹¹ Eleanor Dark, *Prelude to Christopher*, P.R. Stephensen & Co. Ltd., 1934, p. 38.
 - ¹² Unnamed critic, 'Fiction,' *Chronicle Wanganuid* (New Zealand), 28.7.34, ML MSS 4545 10(25). Confirm name.
 - ¹³ 'Gossip of Books and Writers,' *Sydney Morning Herald: Women's Supplement*, 4.4.35, ML MSS 4545 10(25).
 - ¹⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 1.5.34, NLA MS 1174/1/4429.
 - ¹⁵ F.S. Burnell, 'Some Books,' *Home*, 1.3.35, in ML MSS 4545 10(25).
 - ¹⁶ Unnamed critic, 'Prelude to Christopher,' *Desiderata*, 1.8.34, in ML MSS 4545 10(25).
 - ¹⁷ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 23.7.34, NLA MS 1174/1/4475-76.

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- ¹⁸ Letter from Vance Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 10.6.33 (by contents of letter, i.e. reference to Dark's second novel, year appears to be incorrect, should read 10.6.34), NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁹ Vance Palmer and Marjorie Barnard dined together during his visit to Sydney, and thus it is almost certain that he discussed the matter of Dark and her new novel with the young writer then. Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 8.6.34, NLA MS 1174/1/4451.
- ²⁰ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 27.9.34, NLA MS 1174/1/4497-98.
- ²¹ The medal had been given annually since 1923. Recent winners were Martin Mills in 1928 for *The Montforts*, Henry Handel Richardson in 1929 for *Ultima Thule*, Vance Palmer in 1930 for *The Passage*, Frank Dalby Davison in 1931 for *Man Shy*, Leonard Mann in 1932 for *Flesh in Armour*, G.B. Lancaster in 1933 for *Pageant*. Between Dark's two gold medals, Winifred Birkett was awarded her gold medal for *Earth's Quality* in 1935.
- ²² Unsigned, 'A Eugenic Tragedy,' "Evening Standard" Book of the Month, London *Evening Standard*, 5.11.36, in ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ²³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 19.9.(36), ML MSS 364/26: 427.
- ²⁴ Patrick White later set a new record as thrice-winner of the A.L.S. medal in 1965.
- ²⁵ G.M.M. (G.Mackness), 'A Novelist at Home,' 23.5.35, *Sydney Morning Herald*.
- ²⁶ Helen O'Reilly, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- ²⁷ Letter from Eric Dark to Eleanor Dark, 23.5.35, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ²⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ²⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, date?, ML MSS 4545 GET REF.
- ³⁰ 'Teddy' and her expanding brood paid regular visits to 'Varuna' from Sydney, while the Evatts' visits to their cottage in the Blue Mountains brought the two families into regular contact.
- ³¹ Letter from Eric Dark to Eleanor Dark in Sydney, 21.5.35, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).

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- ³² Letter from Eric Dark to Eleanor Dark in Sydney, 4.6.35, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ³³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen, n.d. probably late June 1935. (Date noted on letter of 'c. 1938' is incorrect.) PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ³⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 16.5.(34), NLA MS 1174/1/4438.
- ³⁵ List of shareholders attached to circular letter from P.R. Stephensen promoting *The Australian Mercury*, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ³⁶ List of signatories, 1.2.35, in 1(2) boxes relating to *The Australian Mercury*, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ³⁷ Letter from Eric Dark to Eleanor Dark, 4.6.35, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ³⁸ These included *Medicine and the Social Order*, Sydney, F.H. Booth and Son Pty. Ltd., 1943; *Social Duties of Medicine*, Sydney, Christian Social Order Movement, 1945; *Who Are the Reds?*, Sydney, F.H. Publishing Co., 1946 (Foreword by Eleanor Dark); *The World Against Russia*, Sydney, Pinchgut Press, 1948; and *The Press Against the People*, Sydney, Pinnacle Press, 1949. Eric Dark also wrote 'Political bias of the press,' *Meanjin*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, Autumn 1949.
- ³⁹ Giulia Giuffre, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
- ⁴⁰ Giulia Giuffre, *ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Eric 'agreed with the Spartans that a baby who cried for no apparent reason should not be catered to or comforted as this would promote weakness.' Although no hints of this are to be found elsewhere in the record, it sounds feasible given his strict religious upbringing, his respect for discipline and authority. Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 41. Footnote 110, quoting from interview she held with John and Ann Dark, Greenwich, 13.10.92.
- ⁴² Numbering about fifteen, these photo albums are at present in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁴³ Letter from Michael Dark to Eleanor Dark, undated, c. 1935, ML MSS 4545 15(25).
- ⁴⁴ Eleanor Dark, unpublished essay, refuting conventional views of adventurousness as mainly a male domain, n.d. (between March

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- 1947 – April 1949), pp. 111-114, little black book, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ⁴⁵ Joyce Lambert, 'Great American Honor for Australian Novelist,' *Woman*, 8.12.41, p. 4.
- ⁴⁶ Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, p. 247.
- ⁴⁷ Letter from H.V. 'Bert' Evatt to Eleanor Dark, 8.7.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁴⁸ Patricia O'Rane, 'Victims. A Ten-Minute Story,' *The Home*, 1.11.30, p. 26, 57 & 59.
- ⁴⁹ Letter from R.A. Bronowski, The Senate in Canberra, to Eleanor Dark, 21.2.30, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ⁵⁰ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 3.9.32, in Vivian Smith (sel. and ed.), *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1915-1963*, NLA, 1977, pp. 75-76.
- ⁵¹ In a letter from Eric to Eleanor he mentions a 'Thelma' in reference to the care of Mike. Letter from Eric Dark to Eleanor Dark, 23.5.35, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁵² Letter from Nettie Palmer to Kate Baker, 26.11.31, NLA MS 1174/1/3849-54:52.
- ⁵³ Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- ⁵⁴ Roger Milliss, *The Serpent's Tooth: An Autobiographical Novel*, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 9.
- ⁵⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 16.5.(34), NLA MS 1174/1/4438.
- ⁵⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen, 25.10.35, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ⁵⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. (summer of 1936), in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁵⁸ Helen O'Reilly, *op. citop. cit.*, p. 44.
- ⁵⁹ Jean Devanny, 'Writers at Home,' *Bird of Paradise*, Frank Johnson 1945, pp. 245-256.
- ⁶⁰ Letter from Eric Dark to Eleanor Dark, 10.8.22, ML MSS 4545 15(25) Part 1(2).
- ⁶¹ I owe this suggestion to Tim Goodwin.
- ⁶² Jean Devanny, 'Writers at Home,' *Bird of Paradise*, Frank Johnson 1945, pp. 245-256.

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- ⁶³ Lenore Baxter, 'Fires in the Fall. The Story of a Rational Reformer. D.R.S.'s First Life Member – Dr Eric Dark,' *New Doctor*, (Journal of the Doctors' Reform Society_, Issue 32, June 1984.
- ⁶⁴ Fenella Souter, 'After Dark,' The Arts Section, *Panorama* (in-flight magazine of Ansett Australia), November 1991, pp. 33-38.
- ⁶⁵ Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ⁶⁷ Eleanor Dark, 'The Urgent Call,' *The Home*, 1.8.35, pp. 42-45, 58, 60.
- ⁶⁸ Alan Gill, 'Dark Family Secret No Longer,' *Heritage Conservation News*, Dec. 1990, pp. 10- 11. Though no supporting evidence is offered, the claim fits both the man's generosity of spirit and practical approach to his commitment to socialism.
- ⁶⁹ Last portion only of a letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. (early 1932), in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁷⁰ I owe this suggestion to Tim Goodwin.
- ⁷¹ 'Teddy' Hudson, *op. cit.*,
- ⁷² By way of a character reference on him to her British publisher, Dark explained that she, Eric and Lowe had 'all done our reading, writing, climbing, camping and tennis-playing together for many years.' Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 26.11.37, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁷³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 1.5.34, NLA MS 1174/1/4429.
- ⁷⁴ Unsigned article, 'Shedding light on the Darks,' 25.11.87, *Blue Mountains Gazette*.
- ⁷⁵ O'Reilly, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ Family and friends, no less so than mere acquaintances and public commentators seemed to sense this cleavage. Comments – private and public – made of her over a span of half century reinforce this duality. She had a 'plain, utilitarian outlook on life,' a colleague affirmed in 1945, that was 'overlaid with the mystery and glamour of the imaginative writer.' There was a marked contrast, she went on, between her 'general conversation,' which was 'spontaneously invigorating and rich,' and discussion of 'serious ideas,' which was

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- 'laboured.' 'One feels that she needs a pen in her hand for that purpose.' Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, p. 251.
- ⁷⁸ A. Grove Day, *Eleanor Dark*, Twayne Publishers, 1976, footnote 4, Chapter 3, p. 144. Originally in Eric Lowe, *Book News* 1, September 1946, 81.
- ⁷⁹ Jean Devanny, 'Eleanor and Eric Dark. Writers at Home,' in *Bird of Paradise*, Frank Johnson, 1945, pp. 251-52.
- ⁸⁰ O'Reilly, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- ⁸¹ Personal communication from 'Mollie' White to me. 12.2.92.
- ⁸² 'Writers at Home: Eleanor and Eric Dark,' in Jean Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, Frank Johnson, 1945, pp. 251-252.
- ⁸³ Eric's testimony that her work was 'not built to a preconceived pattern' but was 'an evolution, an organic growth' failed to sway him. ('Writers at Home: Eleanor and Eric Dark,' in Jean Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, Frank Johnson, 1945, p. 254.) Neither *Prelude to Christopher* nor the other 'psychological novels' that followed, he maintained, were 'the work of a writer who is in danger at any time of painting herself into a corner.' The creation of a character like Linda Hendon in *Prelude to Christopher* 'is more likely to have resulted from wide reading in abnormal psychology textbooks than from listening to Tchaikovsky, although a musical memory could quite believably trigger the act of starting to plot a novel.' (Day, pp. 42-43) In his search of a rational explanation for what his subject preferred to leave in the realm of the mystical, Day seemed to miss a critical aspect of Dark's position: the why and persistence of the artist's claims. In seeking to demystify the act of creation by going to the text itself to find evidence of planning and forethought Day was wrestling with one aspect – the how – of the question. Grove Day, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
- ⁸⁴ Eleanor Dark, private notebook, pp. 2-8, (c.1941), ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ⁸⁵ I owe this suggestion to Tim Goodwin.
- ⁸⁶ Eleanor Dark, first draft of manuscript of *Prelude to Christopher*, page one of Chapter One, ML MSS 4545 2(25).
- ⁸⁷ In an interview of 1984, Eric Dark revealed his own admiration for Stephensen. 'He was a delightful fellow, with a really honest concern for Australian culture and writing.' 'Do you remember Roger Blair in *Waterway?*,' he asked his interviewer. 'That was

“Inky” Stephensen absolutely to the last syllable.’ Giuffre, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

⁸⁸ Dark, *Prelude to Christopher*, p. 53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 316-317.

⁹⁰ Dark, *Return to Coolami*, p. 20.

⁹¹ See letter from John Farquharson to Eleanor Dark, 5.11.31, ML MSS 4545 24(25).

⁹² In a letter recounting, among other things, progress on her third novel, Dark remarked to Nettie Palmer, ‘I don’t like it much ... & perhaps I’ll just put it aside & write another instead of trying to get it published. But money is such a curse – & it might sell! A love story with a Happy Ending!’ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 16.5.(34), NLA MS 1174-1-4438.

⁹³ A few critics described the author of *Prelude to Christopher* as ‘a new Australian writer.’ Her future work, argued the writer of *All About Books*, was ‘well worth watching.’ (Unsigned and untitled, brief notes on the novel, Melbourne, *All About Books*, 12.7.34). The reviewer of the Brisbane *Courier Mail* remarked on the book’s ‘maturity of style and a ripened technique not usually found in first novels.’ (Unsigned and untitled, review of the novel, Brisbane *Courier Mail*, 14.7.34.)

⁹⁴ It was precisely on this matter that O’Reilly’s and Brennan’s most publicised conflict turned. O’Reilly fired the first public shot with the poem “The Symbolist”, published in 1900 on the Red Page of the *Bulletin*. Here, he struck against what he regarded as Brennan’s obscurity: ‘The Poet pale of Sydney Town’ – ‘this wrinkling Symbolist!’ – whose ‘mind is sure--his purpose planned,/ To purge and purify the land/ Of poetry we understand.’ Though not explicitly revealed, the identity of the subject as well as of the writer of these verses, Heseltine argued, would have been known to many in the literary community. H.P. Heseltine, “‘Cyrus Brown of Sydney Town,’” in Leon Cantrell (ed.), *Bards, Bohemians and Bookmen. Essays in Australian Literature*, University of Queensland Press, 1976, pp. 136-152, pp. 136-137. O’Reilly attacked his colleague’s ‘elitist attitude towards art,’ while Brennan, resentful of the charge – ‘(says he) I write but for the bloated ‘few’ – in turn scorned O’Reilly’s ‘democratic mind’ which ‘of course abhors my supercilious hermitry.’

The feud subsided but later re-emerged. Whatever the merits of O'Reilly's case, Brennan's model of the artist at least reflected the man and his approach to his work in his insistence on 'Art for Art's Sake' and 'The form makes the idea, (Chris Brennan, 'Philosophy and Art,' Extracts from an unpublished Presidential Address to the Sydney University Philosophical Society in 1903. Reprinted in *Southerly*, 4, 1977, pp. 203-206.) and his scorn of any conscious (least of all self-conscious) alliance between art-and-country – 'such literary and artistic patriotism.' (C.J. Brennan, 'Some Makers of Australia,' *Cerise and Blue Saint* (Saint Joseph's College Old Boys Manual), 1927. Reprinted in *Southerly*, 4. 1977, pp. 382-388.)

⁹⁵ Eleanor Dark, *Prelude to Christopher*, P.R. Stephensen & Co. Ltd., 1934, p. 17.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38. This is the book's only passage on the Great Depression.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹¹¹ Dark, 'Boooks and Their Critics,' unpublished manuscript (c. 1940s), ML MSS 4545 10(25).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

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- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 248.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 248.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ¹²³ Eleanor Dark, *Sun Across the Sky*, 1936, p. 40.
- ¹²⁴ Unnamed critic, untitled, Brisbane *Courier Mail*, 4.8.34, ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ¹²⁵ Unnamed critic, untitled, Melbourne *Herald*, 19.5.34, ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ¹²⁶ Unnamed critic, 'A Modern Ophelia,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25.5.34, ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ¹²⁷ Letter from William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., London, to Moore's Bookshop in Sydney, 4.11.36, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹²⁸ Unnamed reviewer, *Woman's Budget*, 16.5.34; unnamed reviewer, *Australian Woman's Mirror*, 29.5.34; unnamed reviewer, *Woman's Budget*, 16.5.34; 'Tid'apa,' 'Weak Link. Eugenics Astray. Mad Marriage. Doctor's Dilemma,' *The Sun*, 10.5.34; unnamed reviewer, Brisbane *Courier Mail*, 14.7.34; unnamed reviewer, *Bulletin*, 30.5.34; unnamed reviewer, 'A Modern Ophelia,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25.5.34.
- ¹²⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, Macmillan Co. of New York, 7.9.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25). In 1962, her literary career now behind her, she recalled wistfully the book's 'quality that has never got into any of my literature since.' Her many – and futile – exertions throughout her life to find an American publisher for the novel also point to her special abiding attachment to her second novel.
- ¹³⁰ Unnamed reviewer, 'A Modern Ophelia,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25.5.34.
- ¹³¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 19.9.(36), ML MSS 364/26: 427.
- ¹³² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 19.9.(36), ML MSS 364/26: 427.

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- ¹³³ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 21.5.32, in Vivian Smith (sel. and ed.), *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1915-1963*, NLA, 1977, pp. 69-70.
- ¹³⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 16.5.(34), NLA MS 1174/1/4438.
- ¹³⁵ Eleanor Dark, *Return to Coolami*.
- ¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- ¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
- ¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.
- ¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
- ¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- ¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 287-88.
- ¹⁴⁵ C.J. Brennan, 'Some Makers of Australia,' *op. cit.*, p. 382.
- ¹⁴⁶ Mainly by those warning against littering the literature with what one literary commentator called 'bushrangers, buckjumpers and bandicoots,' and urging Australian novelists to 'tell our stories for their own sake.' Isobel T. Hassall, 'Let's Grow Up,' *Sydney Bulletin*, 2.8.33, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ¹⁴⁷ Such as 'in ancient Rome, in the Highlands of Scotland, in the West Indies, or in other exotic places.' T. Dunabin, 'Subjects for our Writers. Excellent material close at hand,' *Daily Telegraph*, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ¹⁴⁸ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Nettie Palmer, 21.1.33, NLA MS 1174/1/4185-86.
- ¹⁴⁹ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 15.2.32, NLA MS 1174/1/3924-5.
- ¹⁵⁰ Unnamed reviewer, 'A Force in our Literature,' *Melbourne Herald*, 5.3.36.
- ¹⁵¹ Unnamed reviewer, 'Reading for Pleasure,' *Melbourne Leader*, 21.3.36.
- ¹⁵² Unnamed reviewer, *Hobart Mercury*, 14.3.36.
- ¹⁵³ Unnamed reviewer, 'A Satchel of Books,' *Bulletin*, 22.4.36.

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- ¹⁵⁴ Unnamed reviewer, 'Two-Day Journey Changes Destiny of Four People,' Cleveland Ohio *Plain Dealer*, 5.7.36.
- ¹⁵⁵ Unnamed reviewer, 'A Force in Our Literature,' Melbourne *Herald*, 5.3.36.
- ¹⁵⁶ Letter from Vance Palmer to Nettie Palmer, 'Tuesday,' 1934 (c. June), NLA MS 1174/1/4454-55.
- ¹⁵⁷ Letter from Vance Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 10.6.33 (by contents of letter, i.e. reference to Dark's second novel, date incorrect, should read 10.6.34), NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁵⁸ Letter from Miles Franklin to Eleanor Dark, 21.5.34, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁵⁹ Eleanor Dark, 'Pilgrimage,' Chapter 2, p. 25.
- ¹⁶⁰ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 12.10.40, 210PP. and Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, get date, 50F.
- ¹⁶¹ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 18.10.40, 210PP.
- ¹⁶² Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to D.C. Meacham, 5.9.42, NLA MS 1945/1/227-230.
- ¹⁶³ Marjorie Barnard Papers, S18. Get ref.
- ¹⁶⁴ C. Ferrier, *As Good as a Yarn with You*, Introduction, p. 3.
- ¹⁶⁵ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 13.2.33, NLA MS 1174/1/4201-02.
- ¹⁶⁶ Letter from Miles Franklin to Nettie Palmer, (end) June 1934, NLA MS 1174/1/4464.
- ¹⁶⁷ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 26.12.33, NLA MS 1945/1/53-54.
- ¹⁶⁸ Grattan, who first visited Australia in 1927, followed what Nettie Palmer described as 'our literary and journalistic deserts' and published the pamphlet *Literature Australian* (1929), a survey study of what he mourned was 'so sparse a literature.' (Letter from C. Hartley Grattan to Nettie Palmer, 25.2.(31?), NLA MS 1174/1/3917-19.) Nettie wrote the foreword. Grattan's plans for a second visit in 1933 prompted excitement in literary circles. Franklin thought his influence and interest good 'to awaken Australia.' (Letter from Miles Franklin to Nettie Palmer, 14.6.33, NLA MS 1174/1/4254-56.) Nettie had her reservations. His approach was 'more sociological than literary' (Letter from Nettie Palmer to J.K. Ewers, 3.1.32, in Vivian Smith, pp. 66-68).

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- ¹⁶⁹ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 9.3.33, NLA MS 1945/1/36-37.
- ¹⁷⁰ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 3.9.32, in Vivian Smith, pp. 75-76.
- ¹⁷¹ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Miles Franklin, 22.2.33, in Vivian Smith, pp. 90.
- ¹⁷² For example, Nettie Palmer's enthusiastic promotion of Richardson's work from the mid-twenties onwards.
- ¹⁷³ Miles Franklin's long-term expatriate status before returning permanently to Australia is the prime example.
- ¹⁷⁴ Eleanor Dark used this phrase in a letter to Miles Franklin as a way of boosting her spirits during one of the darkest periods of the Second World War in late 1941. 'Heaven forbid,' she wrote, 'that the corroboree-makers should be the ones to turn their faces to the wall & die! There are times when one just has to go limp and preserve a bare existence for a while, Lord knows.' Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 10.10.41, ML MSS 364/26 421-85: 447-449.
- ¹⁷⁵ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 12.9.34, NLA MS 11714/1/4489.
- ¹⁷⁶ Barnard was a University Medallist in History at the University of Sydney.
- ¹⁷⁷ Herbert's reputation rested almost wholly on his novel *Capricornia* (1938). In the making for many years, the novel finally found its midwife-publisher in P.R. Stephensen. It attracted the most coveted Australian literary award of this generation of writers, the Sesquicentenary Literary Award judged by three colleagues of the group: Davison, Barnard and Eldershaw. An eccentric in virtually every respect, he resisted being drawn in as a comrade-in-arms for the cause of art-and-country. In time, he chose his own cause. In the meantime he remained convinced he could 'do far more good – & certainly will do less harm – by lying on my bloody back beside a bloody billabong, & getting to know the land.' Letter from Xavier Herbert from Darwin to P.R. Stephensen, 3.10.37, ML MSS 1284.
- ¹⁷⁸ Letter from Miles Franklin to Nettie Palmer, 31.3.33, NLA MS 1174/1/4229-30.
- ¹⁷⁹ Letter from William Baylebridge to Nettie Palmer, 8.3.33, NLA MS 1174/1/4214-15.

Chapter Four.

'Feeling a bit Leftish': the post-Depression years

I was selling out to the Left, if you like to look at it that way; but then what with my memories of the Depression, of the New Guard, and the situation that was then developing in Europe, I was feeling a bit Leftish myself. (Who wasn't in those years?)¹

the Thirties myth goes something like this: some writers of the time – some of the best writers of the time – were induced by its unfamiliar political pressures to write against their own bents. Uneasily allured by Communism, they professed a fatal interest in unemployment, the Spanish Civil War, the death throes of capitalism, the imminence of revolution and of world conflict ... To some of them it appeared that to stand aside and carry on as if nothing in the world concerned them except their own work, narrowly considered, would cause an injury not only to conscience but to such gifts as they felt they had²



'E, M & I' on a visit to Sydney during the Great Depression

It was not the Depression itself but the period immediately following that brought the economic crisis and its legacy of ‘unfamiliar political pressures’ into Eleanor Dark’s world-proof life. Apart from second-hand tales from maids and others in her domestic service, the first time the human face of the Great Depression confronted her, it seems, was eight years after its start and halfway across the world from home in an elegant hotel in California. It was one of many ambushes of conscience awaiting her in the period and it came – as it almost had to – from within her own privileged life.

Events in Europe and Asia were moving swiftly. The West barely had time to recover from the worst of the Depression when, from embers of the crisis, arose a yet more daunting threat. The fascist powers made ever-increasing bids for territory – the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, the German re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936, the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, the *Anschluss* in 1938 – while the Western democracies watched stupefied. The Spanish Civil War – for the Left generally the quintessential symbol of the struggle between the forces of good and evil – dragged on through the period and beyond.

Left intellectuals in Australia responded with horror and exhilaration to the unfolding crisis, sharing in spirit – and a few in the flesh – the responsibility assumed by their comrades-in-arms in the International Brigades in Spain. Jean Devanny was among the emotional casualties, suffering ‘a complete breakdown’ at the news of Barcelona’s bombing. She determined since to pursue ‘a policy of detachment. I must or go mad with it all.’³ The crisis swept aside antagonisms between Sydney and Melbourne, artists and journalists, serious and popular writers. The urgent aim now was to centralise and collectivise resources. With socialism assuming, with Moscow’s blessings, an all-inclusive quality, communists and fellow travellers, political activists and thinkers from a wide spectrum of views and levels of commitment to the struggle made common cause under the banner of anti-fascism.

Restrictions on freedom of speech and expression often lit the spark. Protests against censorship provided a rallying point. The struggle was often located and waged, identified and expressed in intellectual terms.

Isn’t it thinking that the world wants to get it out of its mess and doesn’t violence make thinking more and more difficult?⁴

Marjorie Barnard asked rhetorically in April 1938. Lesley Channon and Roger Blair (principal radical intellectual figures in Dark’s Depression fiction) concurred. ‘When enough intelligent people begin to examine it without bias as an academic problem,’ one reassured the other, ‘it will be solved.’⁵ Words and ideas were to be their principal

weapons, and the challenge lay in choosing the best means and battlefronts in which to deploy them.

While, as some argued, it was a 'complex interplay of professional and political concerns that led many Australian writers to an increased political awareness,'⁶ fascism threatened and bonded them mainly as intellectuals. An unusual sense of camaraderie grew in intellectual circles, its character increasingly that of a sacred crusade to reclaim the soul of Western society. Already by late 1935 Vance Palmer was proclaiming from England that 'a new order has to come, and very quickly, if civilization is not going to crash in a series of fruitless fascist wars.'⁷ In these circles at least, the option (in Kermode's words) 'to stand aside and carry on as if nothing in the world concerned them except their own work, narrowly considered' was not really a viable one. Pressures to be '*on the side* of history'⁸ were vast and diverse.

But whose history? 'The Situation' in Europe, as Dark sometimes called the escalating tensions, soon assumed extra-national dimensions. For those with pretensions to write a people's literature, the shift demanded considerable adjustments to the conceptions of an Australian national literature that had crystallised in the early 'thirties. How Australian was that literature to be when, once again but for different reasons, its centrifugal force was situated in the Old World rather than within its own *genius loci*? How autonomous could its development be, when those dictating terms were Bolshevik leaders in Moscow?

The nature of the literary enterprise was changing. There was an increasing tendency in radical circles to explore and exploit the relationship between literature and politics, and to link the cutting edge of literary development with 'the ferment on the Left'⁹. The partnership presented itself as mutually fruitful and advantageous, but was laden with traps for the conscientious artist. There was nothing new in assigning a political dimension to creative writing. It was, after all, their assumption of the inherently political nature of their work that underpinned the little company's claim to a major role in the affairs of their society. The difference now – and the rub for many writers – lay in the explicit role they felt pressed to assign to the political in their work.

Few would have disagreed with Vance Palmer's claim that this was no time for 'inventing little fairy tales'¹⁰, but the gap between escapist literature and propaganda was vast. Moscow-ordained social realism offered one set of guidelines for creative writers feeling 'a bit Leftish,' but it also raised serious problems. Was art to become a means rather than an end? Could art retain its integrity while following external directives? Was the creative writer's principal responsibility literary or

political? Once, tidy definitions had helped distinguish one category from the other, but no longer. A major challenge of these post-Depression years to writers like Dark lay in negotiating their way through labyrinths where once clear signposts marked 'literature' and 'politics' now lay obscured at every turn.

More than at any other time in her writing life, Dark found herself disorientated and lost as an artist, alone even among kindred spirits. The cultural mission to which she felt herself committed had suddenly changed in character and direction, the kind of literature she wanted to make her contribution to it dismissed as escapist and irrelevant to the class struggle. Yet 'to stand aside' was for her not an option: not with Eric and her colleagues moving increasingly to the Left; not with her socialist conscience, albeit highly qualified and idiosyncratic. The stakes were high, whether she linked arms with kindred spirits and lent herself and her art to the struggle, or left them to the struggle. The artist resisted the first option, but loyalty, moral principle and instinct for survival pulled her in. To 'stand aside' at such a time would have isolated and alienated her from the very people who until now had stood between her and her society-in-crisis, the sentinels guarding her world-proof life.

There were also matters of conscience at stake, issues she herself had recently raised in her own writing. *Prelude to Christopher* derives much of its moral force from Nigel Hendon's passionate struggles against apathy and complacency in his society. He embodies the individual of moral courage and vision prepared to stand up to Life – to take it in the face like a breaker that would probably dump you and rub your nose along the sand.¹¹

Dark returned to the theme in a piece on Caroline Chisholm, setting the social reformer's visionary and heroic qualities against the common habit of mankind to compromise at least here and there with the times in which he lives and making her a symbol of the forces of change pressing mankind to his occasional refusals to conform, his determination to alter such aspects of them as anger or revolt him.¹²

What was Dark to do? The 'moment' demanded what she did not have to give. By temperament and preference an alien in her wider society, how was she to lend weight to the class struggle, make the workers' cause her own? Nothing about her past – from the Redlands years, to the torments of office work, to her charmed if rarefied personal world in Katoomba – recommended her as a comrade-in-arms. She could never be more than a reluctant conscript to the socialist struggle.

The three-year span 1936-1939 shook Dark's intellectual and writing life. A three-month journey in 1937 with Eric on an investigation of North American electrotherapies granted her a first glimpse of her

native land in relation to other lands and cultures. Ironically, it also brought home with greater impact than her sheltered life in Katoomba ever could the human experience of the Depression. At either side of the trip lay the artist's principal offerings to her society-in-crisis: *Sun Across the Sky* (1937) and *Waterway* (1938). Social realist more in intention than execution, these gestures of solidarity with colleagues-in-arms proved misguided. She was out of her depth and out of sympathy with its ideology and technique. The late 1930s saw the artist plunge, not only in others' estimation of her work but in her own.

Dark's personal world remained impervious to the mounting tensions. A material oasis before the economic crisis, it emerged in its aftermath like Drew Cottle's general profile of 'The Sydney Rich in the Great Depression,' a world so privileged that 'wealth was assumed, not pretentiously displayed.'¹³ In 1936, she began a diary which she kept up in her methodical way for several decades. Characteristically clipped in style and flat-toned, lacking introspection, the diaries do not make absorbing reading. Yet through tedious accounts of weather and domestic chores emerges the rich mellow quality of a world in which full-time, often live-in, house help was now the norm; plans for major construction work on 'Varuna' were well in progress; and family annual holidays were carefully planned and always special treats. If some holidays were taken in the bush, it was out of choice rather than economic necessity.

In 1936, the couple went on a cruise to the Whitsunday Passage¹⁴ in order 'to escape some of the mountain winter and help 'steady' her 'jittering nerves after three months of maidlessness!'¹⁵ The following year she accompanied Eric on a tour of North American electrotherapies, a field of keen professional interest to him. The schedule proved gruelling but there were compensations: camping at Yosemite National Park,¹⁶ visiting friends in Chicago,¹⁷ a motoring tour of the Californian coast, an opportunity for Eleanor to confer personally with agents in New York, a fur coat from 'Russels, 5th Av.'¹⁸

For all its highlights and material riches, it is in the routine, simple things that the essential richness of this world is found. Golf and tennis matches, visits to the hairdressers, afternoon teas and music evenings, chats by the campfire, dinners and weekends with friends at 'Varuna' were regular features; as were trips to Sydney on shopping expeditions, visits to family and friends, ballet and other cultural events. Even in the little happenings, there is an idyllic feel to this world: in Eleanor's delight at catching sight of 'my four Kookaburras in the garden,' sitting idly in her now mature gardens enthralled by the new growth, playing

her gramophone, picnics and bushwalking.¹⁹

Motherhood and the bush enriched and expanded the boundaries of that world. With stepson John now boarding at a Sydney school,²⁰ Dark luxuriated in the company of her own child. Mother and son attended a performance of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,²¹ and made the zoo a regular feature of their visits to Sydney.²² Consulted from an early age in the planning of family holidays, Mike and his parents held 'long & serious conferences,' negotiating compromise decisions when necessary.²³ Dark began 'building up an Australian library' for him 'to inherit'²⁴, enriching the collection with rare autographed copies of 'Australian boys literature [sic].'²⁵ Davison's *Man-Shy* (1931) was 'a favourite,' the approving mother told a colleague, 'read at least twenty times!'²⁶

The mother's investment in the relationship exacted its toll on her otherwise even disposition. For months before the North American trip, she agonised over their impending separation.²⁷ Once abroad, the mere sight of a 'children's playground' near their camping site at Yosemite National Park triggered a bout of homesickness for Mike.²⁸ Motherhood opened Dark emotionally as nothing else did, and it was through that opening that she first glimpsed the human face, and the scale of the human dimensions of the Depression. The face belonged to a 'little boy not a day over five & looking so like Mike did at that age' who 'wandered into the (Los Angeles) hotel dining room' one night as they sat having dinner, 'with a big bundle of magazines slung over his shoulder selling them.'²⁹



'Jerrikellimi,' the majestic family cave in the Blue Mountains.

Discovered in 1937.

The Darks' search for a physical-cum-spiritual retreat in nearby mountain country was finally rewarded in 1937 with the discovery of a 'nice sheltered cave with permanent water handy and a fine outlook.'³⁰ Christened 'Jerrikellimi' (a composite name of John, Eric, Eleanor and Mike), it soon assumed the feel of a home-away-from-home, equipped with cooking utilities and other basic necessities for weekend and longer visits.³¹ It was here, that preceded by a lyrebird 'concert' the previous night,³² the couple (accompanied by Bim and Mike) spent their fifteenth wedding anniversary. Dark's diary evokes the serenity of the day:

Up 5:30. Breakfast. E, B & M down to creek, I potted about cave for a while & then joined them. Mike & E had a swim. Another perfect day. After lunch we tidied up camp & packed up.³³

Motherhood made her forsake risky pursuits like rock- and mountain-climbing, but the bush continued to beckon.

Again up early & left for mountain about 9:15 a.m. Climbing all day. Met 15 ft. python – sluggish & un-intimidating. Got into rain & dense mist at about 2000 ft. Reached camp 4000 ft. at about 1/4 to 4. Spent next 4 hrs. trying to get fire going. Succeeded at last, boiled billy & had some food. Leeches abound. Kept quite dry & warm inside tent & sleeping bags.³⁴

She now had the best of both worlds: 'Varuna,' gracious site of her civilised life, and 'Jerrikellimi,' physical and spiritual escape from the stresses of the darkening world around her. Not long after its discovery, Dark was issuing invitations to friends. 'You must come there with us some day --,' she urged Stephensen,

we have our own private waterfall, assorted swimming holes, and all mod-convs, in the cave, including beds!³⁵

Eric Dark was a vital part of this world-proof life of material and emotional riches. Increasingly he was also becoming its most disturbing force. Now, while it was principally Eric and the high levels of comfort and security he provided that shielded his wife from society, it was largely he (mainly through example) who shattered the peace of her world by bringing home to her, as a fellow socialist, 'The Situation' and its implications.

In principle, Eric's political conversion should have lent another dimension of solidarity to their partnership. But his Tory sympathies had never threatened his Labor-voting wife as did his fervent embrace

of socialism. It confronted her with the collective militant consciousness gaining ascendancy in radical intellectual circles, and provided her with an embodiment of that consciousness whose blend of passion and integrity even she, cynical of all things political, had to respect.

Eric's evangelical fervour for his new political creed assumed several forms: offers of financial assistance to worthy causes, publications in medical and other journals, and active membership in community and professional organisations. At the height of the 1938 Port Kembla 'pig iron' crisis, he made a 'formal promise' of five pounds 'when you need it' to the Waterside Workers Federation: a union, issue and cause wholly outside his personal and professional ambitions.³⁶ Eleanor, who increasingly followed her husband's lead in these matters, promised the wharfies a similar amount.³⁷ Like her husband, her intervention brought her to the attention of the security forces, and individual Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB) files were started. It was one thing to explore progressive notions in her fiction, but quite another to be lending financial support and intellectual succour to organised radical movements, particularly with the growing radicalisation of the political debate in the 1930s.³⁸

From the basis of a now firmly established medical reputation – through his successful practice and well-received publications in the fields of medical and surgical diathermy and later also electrotherapy³⁹ – Eric launched an assault on his profession's conscience. Insisting on the links between physical and mental health, the individual's and society's well-being, he sought to broaden the political and moral mandate of the doctor. His professional writings also assumed more explicit political overtones. 'Medicine and the Social Order,' first published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in 1937 'for doctors only,' had been, he later explained, his first 'attempt to examine what should be the attitude of the medical profession to the present social order.'⁴⁰

Eric's embrace of his wife's political philosophy led him also to her professional world, where he soon established himself as a champion of free speech, and a generous financial and moral supporter of new cultural initiatives. Here too he outshone his wife, whose most fervent wish as a writer was to be left alone to write. It is mainly Eric's not Eleanor's name that recurs in lists of memberships, donations and other gestures of support of budding initiatives of the period. He even joined the Fellowship of Australian Writers before her, despite several attempts over the years by the organisation's executive to secure her patronage.⁴¹

Eric's principal threat, however, was to the socialist rather than the writer in Eleanor. His ability to disturb her social conscience hinged on

the fact that she shared his convictions. Dowell O'Reilly's daughter was no stranger to socialism or politics. Since childhood, she later recalled, she had taken 'the political scene for granted equally with the literary atmosphere.'⁴² By her mid-teens, she had already felt the early stirrings of a socialist conscience when, chancing upon a discussion of 'something about a coal strike,' it had dawned on her that coal was privately owned. The fact had instinctively struck her as 'obviously absurd': 'the things the earth produced belonged to everyone in common.'⁴³

Stripped of its rhetoric, what Dark called her 'socialism' was little more than an instinctive sense of fair play. It rejected theoretical underpinnings, and had no association with others' socialisms, including Eric's. Admitting later with tongue-in-cheek that hers had been 'an untidy way to become a Socialist,'⁴⁴ Dark relished the thought of having reached independently as a child what only much later the adult had discovered was part and parcel of involved theory. Her sense of a personal route to socialism granted her a certain distinctiveness and superiority from fellow socialists who had arrived 'at the same conclusion via more orthodox routes.' Books she had since read on the subject, she insisted, had 'not "converted" me, because upon that particular point I was already satisfied, and stood in no need of conversion.'⁴⁵ In insisting on these matters, Dark was not so much claiming intellectual precociousness as, typically, privileging the moral conscience as the individual's ultimate compass for navigating through life. It might appear unmitigated cheek for a schoolgirl to arrive at the core of an economic problem without ever having heard of the dictatorship of the proletariat or the theory of dialectical materialism she argued, but the reason for it was that fundamentally the coal-strike crisis posed 'not an economic problem at all, but a moral one.'⁴⁶

While Eric challenged the socialist in Dark, the other pillar of her life – also moving 'from Right to Left' – challenged the artist. A minute particle of the writing community, the little company and those few others it attracted to its ambit in these years, composed in a sense Dark's professional home. It was these Eric Darks of Australian literary society – Frank Dalby Davison, Bartlett Adamson,⁴⁷ Flora Eldershaw, the Palmers, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny and a few others – whose commitment challenged her to do likewise. Dark's need of the little company may have been of a different kind to others' – not personal or even social but principally psychological and symbolic – but it existed nonetheless. She needed the little company as a shield, to stand between her and literary society; also as a public stamp of approval, to legitimise her position as an artist within the broader

community. She could not afford to be cast out of her professional home, yet her roots in it were few and shallow. Never quite one of 'the gang,' Dark was never less so than now. As in the case of her husband, it was a combination of loyalty, moral principle and an instinct for survival that made Dark hesitate before distancing herself from what was her professional family in an otherwise diffused writing community.

The process from 'Right to Left' was far from universal in what was essentially an apolitical writing community. Stuart Macintyre's description of its collective consciousness as an 'acute sense of the shallowness of capitalist civilization in Australia'⁴⁸ seems overstated. Though little concrete information is available on the community in these early years of crystallising as a discrete professional grouping, some understanding of its contours, character and composition can be gleaned through the activities of the Sydney branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Unlike the Melbourne branch, founded in 1938 by a tiny band of self-conscious serious writers including the Palmers and Leonard Mann, the Sydney Fellowship was conceived as all-inclusive and remained so through the 'thirties and 'forties. Its large, amorphous character and democratic internal politics lent it an untidy, sometimes chaotic, feel. There were clashes between factions wrestling for control over 'the soul of the organisation,' and between its conservative, complacent rank-and-file and an increasingly politically focused executive.

It was not simply the rank-and-file that resisted involvement with the socialist struggle. The lines between the politically committed and others were more complex. Among those opting 'to stand aside' were major contemporary figures of Australian literary society. Ion Idriess, for one, remained at his desk, churning out stories⁴⁹ at an average of a book a year through the 'thirties and 'forties. From Sussex, where she had been working on the soon-to-be-released *The Young Cosima* (1939), Henry Handel Richardson made no bones to Nettie Palmer of her views on the question of the writer's principal responsibility to society. In reference to Palmer's 'continued Spanish interests,' she hinted gently at mistaken priorities and misguided energies.

There are *so* many who can do work of this kind & so few who have your critical ability. Do ponder this word.⁵⁰

Xavier Herbert was another, although in his case it was a matter of competing political loyalties. The 'menace to the freedom of White Australians,' he argued then, is 'not nearly so urgent as is that of the task I have in hand, namely the Defence of the Australian Aborigines.'⁵¹

As a group, the little company stood alone in the writing community

as a focus of political commitment in the unfolding crisis. Whether engaged in party politics, the politics of their profession or their art, the same names recur: organising protests against censorship and other infringements on freedom of speech, lobbying government and industry on syndication,⁵² co-ordinating and preparing submissions to the Tariff Board Inquiry into the literary industry, negotiating mergers between literary groups. The new politics of inclusion drew writers of the little company to other circles. Priorities other than the literary defined notions of kindred spirits. Writers, Vance Palmer noted, finding himself progressively less involved in literary and more 'in science & political movements,'⁵³ 'don't seem to have many common interests.'⁵⁴ Prichard and Devanny's work for the Communist Party of Australia drew them increasingly away from their writing and writing colleagues.

Although only rarely and nominally involved in these movements, Dark reflected this broadening of the vision of kindred spirits and rightful domains of the artist across the span of her contemporary writings. Even this staunchest of champions of 'the artist' bowed to the inevitable, remodelling earlier definitions and positions, and most significantly, broadening the domain of moral leadership. In addition to 'great artists,' her list of 'true leaders of mankind' now included 'scientists, preachers, philosophers, statesmen, or any other kind of illustrious person whose voice and influence reaches out over the world.'⁵⁵ Significantly, Dark did not include 'political workers' in her list: a leap she would never make even if party politics was luring a growing number of creative writers.

Some, like Prichard and Devanny, needed no luring. Their commitment to the Communist Party long predated this period, a fact with which their friends and colleagues (no less so than the security services) were by now well acquainted. The little company's resident revolutionary artists, the two communist writers occupied an ambivalent position within the group.

The communist writers aside, the spectrum of 'leftish' shades was wide and far from static in the little company. Here as elsewhere, socialism was an elastic term, embracing everything from communism to liberalism. For some, the cause remained vague and ill-defined; for others, it crystallised into an all-consuming issue like the Spanish Civil War or censorship. Ultimately, the question was not the brand of socialism writers subscribed to, but what they were prepared to do about it.

Some felt the pull of the Communist Party, only to recoil from making the crossing from fellow traveller to card-carrier. The Party's

overbearing image was an obstacle, and the fanaticism of some members disturbed writers unreconciled to political expediency. Czech writer Egon Kisch's alleged response to a fellow intellectual's protest against the Bolshevik Party's 'suppression of truth' and the 'corruption of Communist intellectuals' fuelled their fears:

when you hear of a Fascist bombing of a school you have to defend everything that has been done on our side, *even the trials!*⁵⁶

For all its flaws, the Party continued to exercise a magnetic pull on many writers, some of whom had not thought earlier or would again of joining its ranks. Leonard Mann and Frank Dalby Davison both flirted with the idea of joining. While in the end they baulked, it is clear the pull to join had been compelling.⁵⁷ Even Marjorie Barnard – 'inescapably, a nineteenth century liberal'⁵⁸ – began to feel benevolent towards communism which, she argued, was 'no longer the bug bear it was, it is almost respectable.'⁵⁹

There was no lack of rhetoric or self-righteousness in the way writers of the little company articulated their collective role. With the same indignant tone that he had earlier derided the 'people' for plebeian tastes and materialist values, Vance Palmer now chastised them for apathy and complacency. Though 'things really seem heading for a first-rate smash,' he complained in mid-1937, 'most people are intent on shutting their eyes to it.'⁶⁰ Nettie, too, felt impatient with the political ignorance of the 'people.' 'People are still talking as if fascism had never shown its form.'⁶¹

There were opportunities to reach 'the people.' An obvious avenue was the expanding media of popular culture, in particular the Australian Broadcasting Commission (A.B.C.).⁶² But often these opportunities were squandered. Fuming at being asked to talk about 'lighter books' during the Christmas season – 'More books and lighter' – in his radio programmes, Vance Palmer looked elsewhere, to a 'new review, anti-fascist in tone, but creative, with plenty of space for literature and the arts,' to make his contribution to the cause.⁶³

A more focused and explicit means of stirring the public mind was pamphleteering, its advantages and disadvantages the subject of considerable debate within the group. Those who ventured a contribution,⁶⁴ as Dalby Davison did with *While Freedom Lives* (1938), were rewarded by their colleagues with grave expressions of gratitude and admiration for their courage.⁶⁵

The nature and scale of the struggle prompted many to turn to collective action – party politics, issue-driven movements, organisational work, campaigns and lobby groups. It was a time for

‘being in things together,’ as Barnard put it. ‘Being out of things together isn’t the same thing.’⁶⁶

Sometimes personal matters brought writers to the struggle. Nettie Palmer’s visits to Spain in 1935-1936⁶⁷ and now with daughter Aileen stationed as volunteer with a British medical unit⁶⁸ near the front endowed her Spanish Civil War with intimate significance.⁶⁹ As ‘The Situation’ evolved, she complained of finding herself swept by the momentum of crisis into political directions and causes not of her own choosing.

I’ve got caught up in things I haven’t been able to refuse:
I’ve let myself be exploited as a specimen whose values
will very soon pass off with the effluxion of time. I
couldn’t refuse the Council for Civil Liberties & such
groups.⁷⁰

The crisis-mentality pervading literary society found its reflection in the personal lives of many in the little company. By early 1937 Nettie was showing the strain, confessing ‘this Spanish climax hurts day *and* night.’⁷¹ A year later, Vance Palmer was feeling

desperately concerned, inwardly, at what’s happening
abroad: particularly in that corner of a foreign field where
my own personal affections are so deeply involved that
some vital part of me would die if the worst were to
happen.⁷²

Their marriage was under severe strain.⁷³

Torn between the daughter’s duties and the woman’s needs, Marjorie Barnard devised unorthodox strategies to cope with her untenable situation: ‘my life is now,’ she proclaimed in 1937, ‘I’ll not be cheated. I’ll have *now*.’⁷⁴ Henceforth she juggled three separate lives and roles: at home, she remained the model of the dutiful spinster daughter; in a small Sydney flat she and Flora Eldershaw (‘Teenie’) rented as a focus of their social life, she was a garrulous hostess aiming for ‘weekly parties’ with literary friends; and in a Kings Cross room she rented for the purpose for many years, she established a secret love nest with Dalby Davison. Pressed at home to play the role of the eternal child-virgin, Barnard encouraged Davison’s friendship, himself in need of an emotional anchor after his recent painful separation from his wife.

In turn, Prichard was still reeling from the shock of her husband’s suicide in 1933. ‘Grief,’ her son later wrote, ‘dried up the joy of life which had been so much part of her and her work.’⁷⁵ Miles Franklin,

though buoyed at one level by her homecoming, was increasingly feeling the stigma of the spinster and the burden of responsibility of the unmarried daughter. This burden was replaced by guilt and grief when her mother died in 1938.⁷⁶

Increasingly, writers of the little company felt bound – by conscience, personal ties, group loyalty, peer pressure – to contribute to the fact and feeling of ‘being in things together.’⁷⁷ At the very least and mainly through the Fellowship, they joined in the politics of their profession.

Davison – ‘at war for the soul of the F.A.W.’⁷⁸ – played a major role in transforming the Sydney branch of the Fellowship from a genteel ‘literary society’ into a ‘more militant’ professional organisation, prepared to debate difficult issues like censorship and syndication, and present government and industry with relevant recommendations and demands. A main instigator of the 1934 purges of the Old Guard from the executive – ‘too stuffy, respectable and high and mighty’⁷⁹ – he was elected president the following year, adopting an aggressively critical approach in dealings with officialdom, and utilising ‘trade union techniques like organisation and publicity devices’ to promote the various causes.⁸⁰ In May 1935, he caused the Fellowship to pass its first resolution – dealing with ‘unfair economic competition from overseas’ – sent to government and industry.⁸¹ Others followed. In 1938, he negotiated with Bartlett Adamson, president of the more politically-focused Writers’ Association, to achieve the amalgamation of their organisations. Later that year, the reconstituted Fellowship of Australian Writers began expanding.⁸²

Flora Eldershaw’s name is also prominent in major developments of the organisation. She was its first woman president and later part of ‘The Triumvirate’ (with Davison and Barnard) who led the (Sydney) Fellowship through the immediate post-Depression years. She edited and organised the publication of *The Peaceful Army* (1938),⁸³ and spearheaded negotiations with the Federal Government to raise its financial commitment to Australian literature through the Commonwealth Literary Fund. In 1939, the government agreed to raise its budget by a factor of four: from 1250 to 5000 pounds.⁸⁴

The little company’s virtual control over the executives of the two principal branches of the Fellowship – Sydney and Melbourne – gave the group virtual *carte blanche* to initiate and direct major projects on its behalf. Yet they were unable to exploit their power.

As the threat of fascism grew, so did the perception among leading members of the Fellowship of the need to address fellow Australians directly on the matter. ‘Australian Writers in the Defence of Freedom’

was the little company's – and the Fellowship's – last project of an explicit political kind before the outbreak of war. Born of anxieties about 'The Situation' in Europe, the publication was intended as a warning of the spread of fascism into Western democracies, Australia included. In 1938, an editorial board of the Sydney branch of the Fellowship, composed of Devanny, Eldershaw and Davison, sent a circular to members of both Sydney and Melbourne branches, asking for contributions to the book, due for publication by Angus & Robertson early the following year. This was to be the Australian writer's opportunity to, in the rhetoric of the little company, 'stir the public mind,' and to get 'into the national bloodstream.'⁸⁵ Topics suggested by the editorial board covered a fair range of subjects: 'Freedom of Thought and Speech,' 'Freedom and Economics,' 'Decline of Party Government,' 'Freedom and the Arts,' and 'Art vs Public Opinion.'

Initially, the project met with wide support, including from a number of respected figures in the Australian literary and intellectual scene. These included Kenneth Slessor, poet, journalist and soon to be appointed official war correspondent with the Australian army; Isaac Isaacs, first Australian-born Governor General; the artist, Norman Lindsay; historian and general secretary of the Council for Civil Liberties, Brian Fitzpatrick; H.V. Evatt, poised at this time between his legal and political careers (and in three years' time to be appointed to the portfolios of Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs); playwright Louis Esson; novelist and journalist, Brian Penton; and over a dozen others. Rich pickings indeed.

But 'Australian Writers in Defence of Freedom' was not to be. Political internal bickering, bullying and personality clashes got in the way. Devanny insisted that contributors sign a prefatory statement which, even after several savage revisions, many still resisted. Abrasive in tone and almost inviting official censure,⁸⁶ the statement eroded support for the project. And there was more. Irked at not having been consulted by the Sydney branch before its launching, the Melbourne branch also seemed bent on sabotaging the project,⁸⁷ insisting that the prefatory statement be 'more simple and direct.'⁸⁸ Later it objected to the 'quality of writing' and content of the revised version.⁸⁹ In what ultimately became the project's *coup de grace*, it demanded the book contain 'no reference to F.A.W. but should appear simply as a symposium of individuals.'⁹⁰ It was an unreasonable demand which, as the editorial board retorted, would signal not only an 'official retreat' on the Fellowship's part, but undermine the publisher's confidence in the viability of the project.⁹¹

The project was overtaken by events in Europe and abandoned with

the outbreak of war in 1939. The curtain of censorship descended on it as on all explicitly political publications. Nothing came of the dozens of contributions made to the project, eventually consigned to a cardboard file and to oblivion.

In the saga of 'Australian Writers in Defence of Freedom' lies the promise and waste of the little company as a social force. The forces that led to the defeat of the project were those that undermined its larger mission for Australian literary and cultural life. 'Australian Writers in Defence of Freedom' suggests the limitations that from within the group militated against the success of their enterprise. It was not the government censor that defeated the project, but the conceit, procrastinations and political incompetence of the writers themselves.

Dark's contribution to 'Australian Writers in Defence of Freedom,' on the incompatibility of women's interests with back-to-the-kitchen directives in Nazi Germany, was her sole gesture of these years to the politics of her profession. That it never reached the public is symbolic – more so than in the case of the others – of her general impotence in the face of the crisis. Unlike Richardson or Herbert, Dark did not (and could not while remaining in the group) explicitly choose 'to stand aside' from the collective struggle. By pursuing a consistent policy of passive resistance to real involvement in collective action – either with party politics or the politics of her profession – that is what in effect she did.

Increasingly averse to publicity, speeches, crowds and city-life, she craved privacy and solitude, retreating ever further into her Katoomba world. That the issue of the Spanish Civil War is virtually nonexistent in her writings speaks of her psychological isolation. Yet to join the Fellowship, she even refused invitations every year to attend the Authors' Weeks.⁹² The artist had her ways of contributing to her society-in-crisis, and these did not include organisational, representational or promotional work for her profession.

So what then? 'The Situation' was throwing up issues and challenges to which the earlier rhetoric of the artist – either the d'Aubert or Kavanagh model – was even less appropriate than before. Her choices were unenviable: to betray her own instincts and join in collective action, or to embrace the solitary option and suffer the fate of the outcast.

Art remained, as it had been since childhood, Dark's natural element. Her recent successes encouraged her to trust her own instincts, and conception of the artist's role in society. Like Brennan, she shared an affinity with the politics in the art of William Blake, whose 'mind forg'd manacles' flicker across the span of her own politics and art. She made his struggle to bring enlightenment to questions of race and class

oppression her own, as she did the peculiarly Blakean moral outrage with which his political poetry is imbued. Besides, there were practical reasons for engaging with the politics of her art, instead of those of her profession. By definition, it involved individual rather than collective action, and it situated her struggle from within the familiar world that was her art. For Dark, engaging in the politics of her art was largely a struggle with the personal, political and – ultimately – artistic significance of realism.

Debate over the moral value and implications of realism had its beginnings in Australia in the early 1880s.⁹³ By the next decade, literature of protest or literature of commitment (as realist writing is sometimes described) had begun putting down roots. Since then, it has been closely identified with the work of radical nationalists of the 1890s, especially Lawson and Furphy: writers who wrote ‘of the people, for the people, and from the people.’⁹⁴ Communist writers appropriated the tradition for their own purposes, linking it with ‘a hatred of economic injustices, and a desire for social progress.’⁹⁵ and interpreting the work of the radical nationalists as ‘instinctive, pre-revolutionary attempts at social realism.’⁹⁶ Furphy’s emphasis on aggressive democracy and Lawson’s raw evocations of the terror of the bush and the plight of the slum dweller had shaped ultimately a social rather than a political democratic literature lacking, if not political consciousness, then certainly political self-consciousness. It was the apparent lack of a set ‘idea of a fixed message he had to “get across”’, which made Lawson’s literature of protest particularly effective.⁹⁷ More than a literature from below, it was a literature from within working-class culture.

Social realism, as defined and institutionalised by Bolshevik Party directives of the early ‘thirties, bore instead a distinct and deliberate political complexion. The notion that art was to ‘have a proletarian ideology and be understandable to the masses’ was first promulgated by the Kharkov Conference of November 1931.⁹⁸ It culminated in August 1934 when at the First All-Soviet Congress of Writers, A.A. Zhdanov, Stalin’s cultural spokeswoman, elaborated it into what she called the ‘method of socialist realism.’ Distinct from ‘objective reality,’ this brand of realism was to be permeated with a revolutionary consciousness.⁹⁹

For many writers, the directives and premises on which social realism was based carried obvious appeal. It was an international scheme aimed at consolidating and unifying the efforts of radical writers across Western society. It was also an effort to construct a legitimate role for the artist, both in the efforts to build a revolutionary movement

and in a future communist society.¹⁰⁰ In Australia, where the image of the writer as a neglected, misunderstood outcast of society traditionally held great currency, the emphasis on the crucial role of the writer and Stalin's description of writers as 'the engineers of human souls' flattered writers' sense of importance within their society.

But these directives also raised large ethical, methodological and conceptual problems. Attempts to dictate a particular consciousness and impose a certain uniformity on art negated the essential spontaneity (as well as compromised the integrity) of the creative act. Moscow attempted to turn literature into 'the tool of the revolution, rather than an expression of it'¹⁰¹ and the writer into a follower of Party rulings.

Social realism Bolshevik-style proved far from an ideal cultural import. Ironically, a major factor militating against its growth in Australian cultural soil was the robust democratic literary tradition already in place. Ideals (albeit largely patriarchal) of social justice and democracy had over time assumed highly culture-specific forms and meanings. Mateship occupied a pre-eminent position within the Australian system of socialist values. It was the 'key-word of the Australian democratic spirit.'¹⁰² Though also premised on basic socialist tenets of egalitarianism, the Australian democratic tradition, as Marjorie Barnard maintained, stemmed from and reflected an essentially social rather than political creed. Its springs and manifestations had been politically innocent and unselfconscious: the outgrowth of personal conviction rather than ideological prescription. In this tradition, democracy appears as

in solution, as natural and unconscious as the blood in our veins ... a matter of attitude and subject matter, not of precept and example.¹⁰³

Australian social realism can be as slippery a term as the political radicalism that underpins it. Various descriptions as 'Depression literature,' 'proletariat literature,' 'reportage'¹⁰⁴ and 'socialist realism,' writers of the little company most closely associated with it have been, predictably, Prichard and Devanny. Few have argued with the view that Devanny's *Sugar Heaven* (1936), set in the Queensland canefields and centering around a strike, constitutes the first really proletarian novel in Australia. In its close adherence to Zhdanov's directives and what Sharyn Pearce argued was 'its unabashedly propagandistic story line,'¹⁰⁵ it remains a centrepiece in the canon of Australian social realist writing.

The significance of social realism in the work of Dark lies, first, in the fact that she attempted to write in the tradition (the evidence is unclear as to how much she read in the tradition) and, secondly, in the implications of those attempts for the quality and integrity of her work.

'Ordinary people,' in Dark's notion, were neither the 'flotsam and jetsam'¹⁰⁶ of Xavier Herbert's Darwin society nor the aggrieved semi-literate canecutters of Devanny but the Millicent and Tom Drews of 1930's upper middle-class Australia: owners of flashy cars, contemplating options for retirement in town or country with no thought of financial implications. In Dark's hands, social realism was never more than a blunt tool for hacking a working-class revolutionary consciousness into a literature permeated with educated middle-class values and perspectives. It neither approximated a transition from pure to 'red aesthetics' nor penetrated beyond the surface of her stories. Related images, symbols, characters and themes found in her late 'thirties novels were crude and predictable. It remained a graft.

Nadine Gordimer once declared: 'I remain a writer, not a public speaker: nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction.'¹⁰⁷ Dark might have made a similar claim. The truth of which Gordimer speaks – the truth held within a work of fiction – lies not on the surface but permeates the text itself. It cannot be removed from its context or it loses its meaning and form. Dark's creative literature of the late 'thirties holds within it similar tensions to those confronting her elsewhere, and holds a similar set of responses. Politics and the challenges it issues to the artist in capitalist society is a central theme in her four creative pieces: two short stories and two contemporary novels. Her treatment of that theme here is riddled with similar contradictions to those found in the two other major sites of her writing life: personal and professional. At the level of writer and text, as well as inside the stories themselves, a gladiatorial battle is taking place between the two elements of Eleanor Dark herself: the artist and the socialist. This is the major 'truth' which her fiction of the late 1930s yields, often more clearly and palpably than the sum total of her personal papers.

Dark wrote her short stories at the start and middle of this period: 'The Biffer Rising'¹⁰⁸ foregrounds the theme of politics; in 'Publicity' politics is the subtext of the story. Subtitled 'A Colourful Account of a Bloodless Revolution,' the earlier piece locates the political in a circus-like context. A plot is afoot to harass 'Premier Joe Jobson' with 'punches and dye bowls' in order to secure 'Better and Brighter Politics.' It is a hilarious story with a happy ending. A 'dye' campaign of intimidation of the Premier succeeds. 'Revolutionary demonstrations died out – a nation half-hysterical with laughter is in no mood for revolt.' Magically, all tensions subside – 'the noise of conflict, without electioneering, without civil disturbance' – as 'to the sound of merry laughter, the Jobson party faded into oblivion.' 'They are remembered kindly' as 'great clowns – great funmakers.'¹⁰⁹ Dark's contempt for

politics is obvious.

In 'Publicity' she reverses the formula, investing a simple story with more political meaning and consciousness than it can bear. 'Class' permeates the language, imagery and value system, and starkly defines the forces of good and evil. Capitalism – dressed as materialism and mass culture as embodied in the symbol of the wireless ('that depressing desert of synthetic "entertainment"'¹¹⁰) – confronts the working-classes, personified in quaint dignified old Mrs Jones, speaking on the wireless of 'her experiences in those pioneering days.' Her 'uneducated voice' and 'crudities of speech' underscore her working-class background, while 'her matter-of-fact veracity' link her class with strong solid values. Dark's attempts at sympathising with the working-classes were often unsubtle, producing a bathos that robbed life and credibility from her characters and their plight.

Mrs Jones' fineness of character is revealed through images of exploitation: 'her knotted hands lying in her lap with the rather dreadful inertness of hands too long and hardly worked, of hands resting doggedly while they might rest.' Her spirit, however, overrides her plight. Hers is a 'hardly-won wisdom' and 'hardly-saved integrity' which 'sustained her.' 'Publicity's political earnestness, condescending treatment of working-class characters and crude distinctions of good and evil along class lines recall the two novels of the period.

Sun Across the Sky (1936) and *Waterway* (1937) embrace and develop a cluster of themes that were by then stock-in-trade of Dark's fiction: gender, the land, sexuality, the individual in the community and war. The focus here is their unique role as Dark's twin attempts of the post-Depression years to engage with the politics of her art, and the uneasy partnerships between literature and politics, artist and society-in-crisis. In both novels, it is artist-characters who reveal the profound ambivalence in Dark's position at this time: demanding a central role yet adopting a marginal one in the socialist struggle, gesturing solidarity with a class of individual she neither knew nor wanted to know, and claiming an intimate rapport while maintaining a vast gulf between artist and society.

As an allegory, *Sun Across the Sky* operates at two distinct levels: the contemporary socio-political and the universal moral. Its setting is Thalassa, a small coastal town on the outskirts of Sydney. In its slums live the working-classes – the 'fisherfolk' – and on its cliffside, the educated professional middle-classes. Two men rule over the town, symbols respectively of evil and good. Sir Frederick Gormley is a tycoon whose monopoly over the town's land and capital was achieved at the expense of the physical and human resources of that land. The

poet Patrick Nicholas Kavanagh is the benevolent landowner and a resident of the dilapidated slum dwellings of the 'fisherfolk.'¹¹¹ Gormley derives his power from money, Kavanagh from his genius and integrity. The contrast between the two characters is obvious in their respective relationships with 'the fisherfolk': Gormley their arch-enemy, Kavanagh their protector. The 'fisherfolk,' the novel's major symbol of the oppressed working classes, remain fixed in the role of victim.

As in *Prelude to Christopher*, where the extremes of good and evil (embodied respectively in Pan and Uncle Hamlyn) are set in perspective by the sensible, humane doctor Nigel Hendon, here it is Oliver Denning, doctor of reformist instincts, who signals the enlightened reader's response. Gormley 'made money, and did evil, and lived opulently,' and his life is 'trivial and ugly,' while Kavanagh inspires in Denning a 'joy which has its roots in vigour, in gusto, in an enormous and passionate appreciation of life.' His life is 'the most valuable, the most infinitely precious' with which as a doctor he has ever been entrusted.¹¹²

The story occurs in a single day in which key issues are resolved. Denning confronts his marriage to Helen, beautiful and frigid. Theirs were 'differing values and conceptions.' The antithesis of Helen is the artist Lois Marshall, a widow with one teenage daughter. Absent-minded, impractical and erratic, Oliver finds 'her endearing absurdity' liberating after his sterile, meaningless existence at home. Spontaneous and unconventional, Lois marches to her own drums. To her, 'the only proper time to sleep is when you feel sleepy, and the only proper time to eat is when you feel hungry.' Like fellow artist Kavanagh, Lois is shrouded with mystery and awe. By the end of the story, Oliver resolves to divorce Helen and marry her.¹¹³

This day also witnesses the resolution of Thalassa's future. Exasperated by Kavanagh's refusal to sell him the slum lands, Gormley employs someone to set fire to the area. Kavanagh dies of a heart attack while helping fellow villagers rescue their possessions, and Gormley, panicked and remorseful, flees and dies in a head-on-collision. Thalassa is liberated from Gormley's evil but robbed of Kavanagh's benevolent powers. The plot suggests that – as Marx predicted – the contradictions inherent in capitalism's greed will indeed destroy it, but this telling of events also shows the artist ultimately powerless to help people in the resultant chaos of its collapse. Is *Dark* also suggesting that the fate of Kavanagh is also the fate of the artist who attempts to engage too closely with the daily struggles of the workers?¹¹⁴

The sun, as a physical and metaphysical presence in the lives of Thalassa's residents, operates as a unifying force. Its light suggests

reason; its warmth, emotion. It reconciles human tendencies towards the cerebral and the sensuous. This metaphor is broadened further, with the sun posed as the embodiment of the extremes of human existence: life and death. Thus the image of 'Youth, with its hunger and its eager zest, opening to life as a flower opens to the sun which is ultimately to wither it.'¹¹⁵

To those attuned to its virtues, the sun offers infinite riches. The work- and world-weary Denning responds to 'the seductive call of the sun to idleness' by abandoning 'himself to it deliciously.' Lois thinks it 'Dreadful, dreadful to be shut away from the sun.' The sun operates also as a signifying force, distinguishing between those who reflect and deflect warmth and light, and in so doing, marking protagonists from antagonists. Protagonists are coloured by its rays, like Oliver's 'sunburned face ... so dark that it seemed hardly visible except for the bright, light-coloured eyes.' Blind to class distinctions, the sun also graces Old George Minns, one of the 'fisherfolk,' by 'finding out the furrows in his brown, seamed face.' Antagonists, on the other hand, actively shun the sun. Helen's habit of 'pulling down the blind' because 'she liked the rooms kept darkened on summer days' underscores her 'Vitaphobia.' Gormley attributes his physical discomforts to having got a 'touch of the sun.'¹¹⁶

Finally, the sun serves as symbol and proof of the essential goodness – defined here as the primitive – in human beings. To Denning, the sun's 'seductive call' holds a compelling message: a challenge to modern society to cast aside the security and comfort of so-called civilisation for a life of 'enterprise and the zest which alone can make a life worth living.'¹¹⁷ Denning himself has no need to heed this call, as already the sun is 'his friend.'¹¹⁸

While this system of meanings and interpretations of the sun – as a symbol of wisdom and sensuousness, life and death, the primordial force – partly redeems an otherwise pedestrian novel, a problem arises here similar to that in *Prelude to Christopher* and its characterisation of the artist d'Aubert. D'Aubert disturbs the system of values in that novel in a similar way that Kavanagh disturbs the system of signification around the image of the sun. Other characters and themes fit snugly into this system, while Kavanagh, the quintessential artist, does not. A 'strange nocturnal being,' he has either no need or no appreciation of the sun, yet more than a protagonist, he is the novel's undisputed hero. Testaments to his boundless compassion, moral integrity and creative genius sometimes overwhelm the narrative. Personally devastated by his death, Denning is stricken further by the thought that

all over a continent people go on toiling and grubbing like

gnomes in the underground caverns of their own unlighted spirits, never knowing that a little warmth has gone out of that lovely radiance which they cannot value because it is not to be possessed.¹¹⁹

This last reference in its particular imagery of Kavanagh – like the sun, possessed of his own ‘warmth’ and ‘lovely radiance’ – suggests a possible resolution to the problem. He has no need of the sun, as the novel has developed this concept, for he constitutes his own sun. Art and the artist, the novel seems to suggest, belong in a world of their own. Their integrity and system of values are things not only separate and unique, but unfathomable to mere mortals.

In a novel like *Sun Across the Sky*, where the moral voice is, as in *Prelude to Christopher*, persistent and loud, and where the investment in the moral message has been at considerable expense to basic elements of characterisation and plot, this collapse of the novel’s moral order cannot be dismissed simply as an aberration or oversight. Kavanagh and d’Aubert bear close resemblances. They share a similar deferential treatment by the author that distinguishes them from other characters. Did Dark consciously seek to create this sense of otherness – in intellectual, creative and moral terms – in the character of Kavanagh? Or were these tensions the product of subterranean feelings about submitting her art to a *force majeure*?

Waterway shares and extends key elements of *Sun Across the Sky*. In terms of literary technique, it makes wide use of flashback, internal monologue and time compression. The span of the story is also one day. It picks up the story of *Sun Across the Sky* about a year later, conveniently providing Oliver Denning, who remains the main protagonist, sufficient time to divorce Helen and establish a blissful new household by Sydney Harbour with his artist-wife Lois and her teenage daughter Chloe. They, and the memory of Kavanagh that haunts them and others who knew him, constitute the only character links between the two novels.

The story begins as Denning contemplates the harbour at sunrise on his way to work. Through his medical rounds, casual encounters and exchanges, emerge the character and contours of the small tightly-knit community of affluent harbour-side dwellers of which he and his new family are now a part. Prominent among these are Arthur Sellman, a more polished but no less unscrupulous businessman than Sir Frederick Gormley; Roger Blair, a principled and idealistic young radical intellectual; old Professor Channon and his two adult daughters, Lesley and Winifred; and Lady Hegarty, an aristocrat by marriage and radical

by social instinct. Affairs of the heart, mind and social conscience involve and link them together. By sunset, massive changes overcome them as a ferry disaster claims or dramatically alters their lives.

Lois Denning is aloof from the whirlwind of personal, social and political entanglements, indeed fast asleep through the ferry disaster which might have claimed her life had she not nodded off at the station just before boarding. Like d'Aubert and Kavanagh, Lois is portrayed as a creature above and apart from her community. But there are important differences between her and the other two. D'Aubert is wholly artist, but Kavanagh is something more. In addition to his 'divine spark,' he possesses a vast intellect and profound social conscience. He is also in the heroic tradition; there is nobility in his selfless attitude towards 'the fisherfolk.' Lois is a lesser version of both. Artistically, she is a dim version of d'Aubert. Intellectually and morally she is not even in the shadow of Kavanagh. She is so focused on her art that she is consistently (and sympathetically) portrayed as oblivious to domestic and social responsibilities.

The character of Lois introduces tensions. Dark celebrates the moral integrity and vision of individuals like Denning, Professor and Lesley Channon and Roger Blair, impelled by their sense of social justice to step into the public arena to wrestle with issues of vital concern to their community. Yet she grants Lois moral license to forsake social obligations for the sake of pursuing her art, in her own time and terms. Kavanagh's compelling sense of social obligation towards his poor 'fisherfolk' tenants finds no echo at all in the character of Lois.

The year 1937 – the time of the writing of *Waterway* – was a curious moment for such a shift from one extreme of political consciousness to another. How should the timing and nature of this shift be interpreted? What kind of statement, if any, was Dark issuing in creating and celebrating the character of Lois: introspective, escapist, oblivious to her wider society, the antithesis of the Left model of the revolutionary artist? Answers to these questions are not clear, and further confused by the fact that entangled with these gestures of defiance in her two novels were also gestures of solidarity with the Left.

Dark's novels of the late 'thirties were socialist realist only in intention. She never claimed to write in the tradition and no claims have been made on her behalf. Thus it is with the attempt and what it reveals that this discussion is concerned. Certain features of these novels suggest that Dark attempted to write in this tradition. For the first time, the focus is broadened beyond the educated professional middle classes to include the working classes in their own right, i.e. beyond domestic servants. A new set of 'class' tools and features also appear:

colloquialisms, images such as a strike and a political demonstration. But the effect remained of a grafted consciousness.

On the surface, *Sun Across the Sky* fits this argument more than *Waterway*. Kavanagh overwhelms the stage; the 'fisherfolk' are lost behind his vast figure; indeed, they seem almost to exist for his benefit. The relationship is a caricature of that of the radical intellectual leader and the unthinking masses. The setting, namely a resort area, particularly when both working- and middle-class types partake of the idleness and leisure of beach-culture, also blunts the sharpness of class distinctions. The problem might have been solved by examining some working-class individuals, but very few appear and they remain in the same unthinking mould as 'that poor simpleton Herb Sayers'¹²⁰ portrayed (like Mrs Jones of 'Publicity') drenched in pathos: 'His face, grey with illness and pain.'¹²¹ Their bodies become a kind of text – again a passive image bearing silent testimony – from which to read the collective exploitation of the poor by the rich. A far more pleasant but equally disempowering approach is the pastoral. The equivalent of Mrs Jones' imagined home-sweet-home in 'Publicity' in *Sun Across the Sky* is Old George Minns' nostalgia for home from his hospital bed. His was

a longing, a fierce, physical longing for Fishermen's Flat and its comfortable, haphazard streets where coarse grass grew through the sandy soil, and you walked barefooted with your trousers rolled above your knees, and children greeted you from every fence and corner.¹²²

Only a thin line separates the interpretation of this celebration of 'fisherfolk' culture from a state of innocence to a state of acceptance of their plight, and thus robbing it of anger and incentive for revolution. Indeed, by elevating the rampant ignorance and irresponsibility of the 'Feckless, thriftless, brainless!'¹²³ but happy 'fisherfolk' to a philosophy of life, Dark was entrenching them in the image of a hopeless helpless class:

down in the fishing village they had learned that philosophy of the poor which the rich so freely condemn- to vanquish troubles by ignoring them; to defeat fate simply by continuing to live, by leaping perilously like some one crossing a river on stepping stones, from one day to the next.¹²⁴

In defence of the 'fisherfolk,' Denning argues to Gormley they were neither 'insanitary' nor 'unhealthy.'¹²⁵

Those people live half their time in the water and the other half on the beach. They use their houses to sleep

and eat in and that's all. And the houses can't be ill-ventilated because half their doors are off their hinges and all the floors have cracks in them. They're drenched in sun from morning till night and there's no dirt near them – only clean sea sand.

Some have argued in favour of exploring the 'positive culture of poverty' through the 'themes of resilience and happiness' that emerge from personal memories of the Depression. But this is valid only when posed against the 'negative' culture of poverty,¹²⁶ and such is not the case here. Though almost certainly meant to suggest the triumph of spirit over matter, the uplifting portrait of poverty Dark presents in *Sun Across the Sky* subverts the socialist case for the revolutionary role of the working-classes. Dark's aim may have been to underscore and celebrate, in Potts' words, 'a working class message' of 'resilience and self-affirmation'¹²⁷ but in so doing she appears to have lost track of the principal role of the 'fisherfolk' in her story.

Waterway takes the story from town to city. The city – Sydney – is more than its setting, however. It is the conceit (like the sun in *Sun Across the Sky*) around which the story and its system of meanings revolve. The urbanscape yields a wide diversity of symbols, images, range of characters with which to explore elements and consciousness of class, as well as the sheer numbers with which implicitly to invest images of a strike or demonstration with political meaning and force. The city breeds a culture of poverty of a kind and scale of its own, as well as a culture of radical intellectuals – different from Kavanagh's do-it-yourself variety of radicalism – to agonise over social evils and their cures. Unlike the conceit of the sun, above and apart from human society, the city – product and home of that society – is posed as holding the seed of both problem and solution.

Waterway is unique in Dark's fiction in two main ways. It was her first city-novel and the only one with a major working-class character. It accommodated the world of Sim Hegarty – debonair society boy, son of a knighted Sydney businessman – and the world of Jack Saunders, unemployed angry labourer, 'son of Bert Saunders, fisherman and bottle-oh.'¹²⁸ Sim and Jack are stereotypes for the wealthy (thus) undeserving and the poor (thus) deserving classes, respectively. Each carries the burden of his class bluntly and consistently. Neither is allowed to deviate beyond the set socialist script. While in 'that only true democracy of childhood,'¹²⁹ they had thought of themselves as twins – born on the same day of the same year – this coincidence of birth was not reflected in their birthrights. From the cradle, each followed his class-prescribed paths, arriving at the juncture where the

story begins – now full-blooded twenty-year old men on the cusp of adulthood – in predictably class-prescribed moods and mentalities. Contrasts between them are pressed throughout. Jack received a ‘cheap pocket-knife’ for his twelfth birthday, and Sim ‘boxing gloves and punching ball’;¹³⁰ Jack dreamed of flying an aeroplane, while Sim looked forward to having ‘an aeroplane of my own.’¹³¹ In time, Jack develops a sense of grievance against the socio-economic system underpinning those differences. ‘Christ, a man don’t ask to be spoonfed,’ Jack protests, ‘but he can’t compete with blokes that have twenty thousand pounds start of him.’¹³² Jack’s restless muscular energy is potentially threatening, as the ambivalent image of him rising from the breakfast table with ‘the knife besmeared with blood-red jam still held in one hand’ suggests.¹³³

Dark’s painstakingly developed system of contrasts between the two men which grants Saunders the undisputed high moral ground as well as the potentially revolutionary consciousness collapses at the level of agency. For all his grievances and angers, Jack is impotent in society because he lacks the ability to conceptualise and articulate (and thus address) the root-causes of his victim condition:

As his vocabulary would have been too limited to describe, so his mind was too shackled by his environment to understand the increasing blackness of his mood. He was only aware of its results.¹³⁴

His causes may be just – “What are we for, anyhow? Just to stick around till we’re needed for another of their wars?” – but he remains the captive of his feelings – ‘some wild fury of destruction’ – and the victim of his ‘shackled understanding.’¹³⁵

Herein lies the critical role of the radical intellectual in the story, able to lend the working classes the benefit of a trained mind, understanding of the complexities of politics and power relationships, vision and impartiality. It is symptomatic of basic tensions within this most working-class of Dark’s novels (as well as ironic) that the intellectual elements should be so prominent, almost in an effort to compensate.

To be fair, Dark seemed to appreciate the dilemma confronting her as a radical intellectual in the socialist struggle, especially in this novel. The dilemma troubles Lesley Channon who discusses her anxieties with fellow intellectual Roger Blair. She feels ‘a fraud.’

I want to help--understand--but you can’t really--from the outside. You can’t if you’ve never actually *been* there. You feel that they resent you because you’ve never been

hungry or without a bed to sleep in.¹³⁶

Just when she appears to concede the limitations of her mission, however:

It's all just a sort of academic problem. And you can't *get* there, because even if you were utterly destitute you'd still have--resources--in yourself--oh, I'm not saying it properly.¹³⁷

Roger helps her realise that the intellectual approach – rational thinking – is indeed a good and necessary weapon in the struggle on behalf of the working classes.

It's no good sentimentalising it. When enough intelligent people begin to examine it without bias as an academic problem it will be solved.¹³⁸

The progression from *Prelude to Christopher* to *Sun Across the Sky* to *Waterway* as pieces of social critique is more apparent than real. Whether as a gallery of pathetic images, little icons of virtue and fortitude, or embodied in the dumb force of Jack Saunders, all of Dark's working-class characters remain victims of their own inadequacies and the capitalist system that fosters and reinforces them.

Much more adventurous in form than content in her fiction, Dark welcomed and experimented widely with new techniques and approaches throughout her literary career. She had done so early with good results in the case of modernism. She would do so again and with equally positive results in the case of historical fiction. But social realism defeated her: partly because it demanded not only mastery of form but the ability to wed it to content and to political consciousness; and partly because her heart was not in it. She lacked the necessary perspective, experience and commitment for the task. In short, she was both out of her depth in and out of sympathy with this tradition of writing.

Unable to reconcile her socialist with her artistic conscience, Dark's two novels of the late thirties succeeded neither as political nor literary pieces, while their self-conscious serious messages hardly recommended them as light popular reading. These factors contributed to the novels' muted reception.

Waterway fared better than *Sun Across the Sky*. Critics noted and many celebrated Dark's pioneering attempt to evoke 'the essential quality of Sydney.'¹³⁹ A few emphasised the fine balance between the Australia-specific setting of *Waterway* and the universal relevance of its theme. The Hobart *Mercury* celebrated Dark's

sense of beauty, beauty of thought, of diction, of

character, and of the world. She is that rare thing, a novelist who writes with her eyes fixed on ideals and dreams, not to please but to create.¹⁴⁰

For one to whom literary recognition had come so early and so suddenly, the failure of her novels to attract serious recognition was a considerable blow. Hopeful that *Sun Across the Sky* might be chosen by the (U.S.) Book Society, she received disappointing news on that count from her publishers in mid-1937. Surprisingly, the decision by Tauchnitz publishers later that year to issue an edition of *Sun Across the Sky* left her unmoved. By then, it seems, the two novels had joined *Slow Dawning* and *Return to Coolami* in their author's mental scrapheap.

Tauchnitz's was a rare but not the only positive response. Though the vast majority of her colleagues fell into awkward silence, a few veritably raved about them, particularly *Waterway*. The novel seemed to appeal particularly to fellow intellectuals as opposed to fellow artists. Stephensen thought it 'undoubtedly a chef d'oeuvre,' declaring it 'much better, a million times better' than *Prelude*.¹⁴¹ An Old Redlander, herself a creative writer, Shirley Meynell called it 'the best of any you have done.'¹⁴² Eric Lowe called it 'a damned fine book'¹⁴³ 'Bert' Evatt pronounced the books 'your two best'; *Waterway* in particular 'a masterpiece.'¹⁴⁴

Responses of fellow artists pointed to very different expectations and opinions of *Waterway*. Typically, Herbert's – 'devoured it'; 'the most remarkable novel I've ever read' – an 'Exquisite banquet!'¹⁴⁵ – was the exception. But from the colleagues of the little company, normally the first to congratulate and celebrate each other's latest releases, mostly silence. Dark was left to draw her own conclusions. Barnard could not resist a few barbed comments, privately describing the novels to Nettie as 'bloody awful.'¹⁴⁶ Characteristically caustic and tinged with envy, such comments often reveal more about Barnard's inadequacies as an individual than Dark's as a writer, and cannot be taken as the norm in the group.¹⁴⁷ Franklin's response is a more useful guide to the general response in the group. Yet, while typically the encourager with Dark, she too was silent. It was some six years after the original publication of *Waterway*, before she ventured a soft and veiled criticism of it, suggesting to Dark that

you rather let your reader down by assembling a tremendous gallery of human problems and got out of solving them by scattering them in the catastrophe.¹⁴⁸

Though she adopted a cheerful impervious air in response to these criticisms, Dark was not pleased with the reception accorded her two

novels. Typically, she hid behind the artist's contempt for those who would presume to criticise her work. Her pointedly defensive comments to Stephensen that she was 'not in the least' discouraged by criticisms of *Sun Across the Sky*

& shall continue to write what I like, & how I like, & thank heaven for what's really "my essential strength as a novelist" – a thick skin, absolutely impervious to outside criticism!¹⁴⁹

exposed by their very vehemence raw sensitivity to 'outside criticism.'

As political writing, the novels hardly rated then or since, in reviews of the literature of the period. Barnard's argument that Dark's literature did not fit 'directly in the democratic tradition' seems fair in this context. Kylie Tennant 'writes from the life,' Barnard argued, and Dark was 'the antithesis of Kylie.'¹⁵⁰ Indeed, if a prerequisite for writing social realism was, as Zhdanov specified, 'to know life,'¹⁵¹ then Dark's ability to write in that tradition was undermined from the outset.¹⁵²

Dark herself did not think much of her creative efforts of the late 'thirties. When she heard that publishers' readers considered *Waterway* 'my best so far' she 'disagreed violently' though 'quite pleased that they should be so mistaken in their judgment!!'¹⁵³ She finished the novel in February 1938. The proofs read, she felt ready to start a new project but found her ideas had 'disappeared.'¹⁵⁴ A few months later, they had not reappeared. She was, she wrote to Stephensen, 'suffering from Paralysis of the Creative Faculty--I hope only temporary, but it feels darned permanent.'¹⁵⁵

As if seeking to exorcise from her conscience the artistic transgressions of these years, Dark drew attention in a later work to what she called 'that insistent propaganda, that rabid agitation, that ranting bitterness which made so much fiction of the late 'thirties awkward and embarrassing.'¹⁵⁶ Did she really believe this kind of writing lay outside the ambit of her own fiction? Or was this the closest the artist was prepared to go to admitting past sins?

Whatever her understanding of the impact of the period on her work, one thing seemed clear. The time had come for major changes in approach and direction. In pursuing these, Dark did what she could not do with the Depression experience. She buried herself in historical material of a safe and distant past, a period far enough from contemporary reality to allow her natural bent towards philosophy and 'long-term problems' full and honest scope.

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- ¹ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Dymphna Cusack, 1968, in the possession of Len Fox, official historian of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, Sydney. Len Fox, *Dream at a Graveside*, The Fellowship of Australian Writers, 1988, p. 76.
 - ² Frank Kermode, *History and Value*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, pp. 5-6.
 - ³ Letter from Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin, 22.9.39, ML MSS 364/32.
 - ⁴ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 29.4.38, NLA MS 1174/1/5380-80a.
 - ⁵ Eleanor Dark, *Waterway*, p. 250.
 - ⁶ Julie Wells, 'The Writers' League: a study in literary and working-class politics,' *Meanjin*, Vol 46, No. 4, Dec. 1987, pp. 527-534.
 - ⁷ Letter from Vance Palmer (U.K.), to Frank Dalby Davison, 25.11.35. O119.
 - ⁸ David Carter found the sense of being 'on the side of history' to be a principal thread through published memoirs of the Australian Left of this generation. Included in this study were the following memoirs: Audrey Blake's *A Proletarian Life*, Len Fox's *Broad Left, Narrow Left*, Oriel Gray's *Exit Left* and Roger Milliss' *Serpent's Tooth*, as well as Betty Roland's *Caviar for Breakfast* and A.F. Howell's *Against the Stream*.
 - ⁹ *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁰ Letter from Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 4.7.37, NLA MS 1945/1/115:12-13.
 - ¹¹ Eleanor Dark, *Prelude to Christopher*, p. 228.
 - ¹² Eleanor Dark, 'Caroline Chisholm and her Times,' *op. cit.*, p. 55.
 - ¹³ Drew Cottle, 'The Sydney Rich in the Great Depression,' *Bowyang*, vol. 1, no. 2, Sept.-Oct. 1979, pp. 67-97, p. 73.
 - ¹⁴ 27.7.36, diaries.
 - ¹⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 19.9.(36). Also in Carole Ferrier, *As Good as a Yarn with You*, pp. 33-34.
 - ¹⁶ ML MSS 4545 16(25) 6/93-98, letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, dated 16.8.37
 - ¹⁷ ML MSS 4545 16(25) 6/101-115, letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly dated 27.8.37

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- ¹⁸ ML MSS 4545 18(25), diaries, 31.8.37
- ¹⁹ ML MSS 4545 18(25), diaries, 10.11.36, 7.8.36, diaries, 18.4.37 diaries, 3.1.37, diaries.
- ²⁰ John Dark's Sydney Grammar School – Upper School – Report for term ending May 15, 1936, 15.5.36, ML MSS 4545 15(25)6/5.
- ²¹ ML MSS 4545 18(25), diaries, 6.7.38.
- ²² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. (1936), in possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ²³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. (1936), in possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ²⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to P.R. Stephensen, 30.7.38, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ²⁵ In Sydney in late May 1938 doing research work at the Mitchell Library, Dark encountered the author of *Man-Shy*, Frank Dalby Davison. (see diary entry, 20.5.38). A few days later another diary entry reads: 'left books at Bulletin for F.D.D. to autograph.' Diary entry, 25.5.37. Presumably among these 'books' were *Man-Shy* (1931) a favourite of hers, and *Forever Morning* (1931).
- ²⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen, 30.7.38, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ²⁷ She dreaded what she feared would be a 'most harrowing' farewell scene at the dock in Sydney. Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. (c.June 1937), in possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W. On arrival in the States – 'suddenly, & for no reason' besieged by 'the jitters' – she sent Molly an S.O.S. It was not until a cable arrived assuring her all was well that she regained her composure, but only temporarily. Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly (during U.S. trip) 27.8.37, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 6/101-115.
- ²⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 16.8.37 (from Los Angeles, California), ML MSS 4545 16(25) 6/93-98.
- ²⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly (from Los Angeles, California), 16.8.37, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 6/93-98.
- ³⁰ Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, p. 247.
- ³¹ 24.1.39.
- ³² 31.1.37, diaries.
- ³³ 1.2.37, diaries

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- ³⁴ Eleanor Dark, diary entry 7.8.36, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ³⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to P.R. Stephensen, 20.3.(1937), PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ³⁶ His covering letter to the general secretary of the union emphasising his moral solidarity with the striking wharfies underscores the strong ethical element informing his political crusade. Drew Cottle argued in 'Dr Dark and the Secret State' – 'after much archival research into both Commonwealth Investigation Branch files and 'the confiscated records of the Japanese Consulate' – that a copy of Eric Dark's letter to General Secretary Healy is to be found in both of these collections. Copy of Cottle's paper, unpublished, is held at Blue Mountains City Library. The gesture, the first of many to comrades-in-distress, did not escape the notice of the security services. A copy of his letter became the first of many entries in a Commonwealth Investigation Branch file (C.I.B.) labelled 'Dr E.P. Dark, M.D.'
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ I owe this suggestion to Tim Goodwin.
- ³⁹ Eric Dark's first book *Diathermy in General Practice* (1930) went into a second revised edition in 1935, receiving 'a favourable review' from *The British Medical Journal*. See Jacqueline Boyd, p. 46.
- ⁴⁰ Eric Dark, Preface, *Medicine and the Social Order*, F.H. Booth & Son Pty. Ltd., second printing, December 1943. Originally printed in September 1943.
- ⁴¹ A slip of the pen in a late 1938 membership list of F.A.W. – the 'Mrs' in an entry reading 'Dark, Mrs Eleanor Varuna, Katoomba' crossed out and replaced with 'Dr' – suggests unmet expectations and the oddity of the situation. Membership list as at 31.12.38, FAW ML MSS 2008 2(14) K22104.
- ⁴² Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, p. 253.
- ⁴³ Eleanor Dark, typed unpublished manuscript, 'Political Parties,' (1949), ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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- ⁴⁷ Though he published both verse and prose, Bartlett Adamson earned his living and his standing in the community mainly as a journalist – 1919-1950 – first with the *Sunday News* and later *Smith's Weekly*. *Comrades All and Other Poems for the People* (1945) evokes his typically firm and muscular commitment to communism and the C.P.A. of which he was a long-standing member.
- ⁴⁸ Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 4, 1901-1942, The Succeeding Age*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 315.
- ⁴⁹ Among his best-known books of this period are *The Cattle King* (1936) and *Forty Fathoms Deep* (1937).
- ⁵⁰ Letter from Henry Handel Richardson to Nettie Palmer, 15.12.38, NLA MS 1174/1/5471.
- ⁵¹ FAW, ML MSS 2008 2(14) Loose papers, letter from Xavier Herbert to Jean Devanny, FAW, dated 11.2.39
- ⁵² The practice of syndication allowed Australian magazine publishers to purchase American and English short stories for trifling sums thus undercutting the work of local producers.
- ⁵³ Letter from Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 9.2.38, O104.
- ⁵⁴ Letter from Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 9.2.38, in Smith, *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer*, pp. 154-155.
- ⁵⁵ Eleanor Dark, 'The Peril and the Solitude,' typed manuscript, unpublished, n.d. (c. late 1930s), ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ⁵⁶ Kisch's comments were supposed to have been made at the 1937 International Writers' Congress in Madrid. Ronald Radosh, 'The Spanish Civil War and the Intellectuals,' *Quadrant*, June 1987, pp. 41-47.
- ⁵⁷ Leonard Mann was increasingly drawn into the little company after *Flesh in Armour* won the A.L.S. gold medal for best novel of 1932. Mann was seized with the urge in early 1933 but 'some sort of feeling,' he later confessed, had kept him 'pretty independent, prevented me binding myself irretrievably.' (Ian Reid, *Fiction and the Great Depression*, p. 44, letter dated 8.10.33.)
- ⁵⁸ Handwritten note, in file entitled 'Note re *To-morrow and To-morrow* n.d.,' ML MS Set 451 Box 5(5).
- ⁵⁹ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 5.4.193(7) (although it reads 1933), NLA MS 1174/1/5252-53.
- ⁶⁰ Letter from Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 4.7.37, O107.

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- ⁶¹ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 17.12.37, O106.
- ⁶² The Palmers were among several writers of the little company with freelance or contract jobs with the A.B.C., the national broadcasting service established in 1932.
- ⁶³ Letter from Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 5.12.38, NLA MS 1945/1/15:61.
- ⁶⁴ Leonard Mann's *The Impending Crisis*, Frank Dalby Davison's *While Freedom Lives*, and Marjorie Barnard's "'The Case for the Future'" (this last one never published)
- ⁶⁵ Davison's decision to publish his political pamphlet – 'raising the standard against Fascism' – was the source of considerable attention among his colleagues. Vance Palmer warmly congratulated him. (Letter from Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 5.12.38, 97.) Barnard portrayed him as a martyr. It was, she said, 'an act of faith to put out a book like this when he has no job,' as it might 'close every newspaper and journal against him.'
- ⁶⁶ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 29.4.38, NLA MS 1174/1/5380-80a.
- ⁶⁷ Writing from Barcelona to a friend in Australia in June 1936, Vance declared himself 'happy and at home.' The Spanish people, he declared confidently, 'never surrendered to the capitalist industrialists that depleted the rest of Europe, and now that a new age is beginning I believe they'll be one of the leaders of civilisation again.' Vivian Smith, selected and edited, *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer: 1915-1963*, NLA, 1977, p. 131, letter of Vance Palmer to Leslie Rees, dated 20.6.36
- ⁶⁸ L. Fox, *Dream at a Graveside*, p. 64
- ⁶⁹ On her return, she plunged into speaking, writing and campaigning activities. The Spanish Civil War became her signature cause. She helped found and became the first president of the Melbourne Spanish Relief Committee. From her involvement grew *Spanish Struggle* (1936) and *Australians in Spain* (1937).
- ⁷⁰ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Vance Palmer, 30.10.(36), NLA MS 1174/1/5152.
- ⁷¹ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 2.2.37, O110.
- ⁷² Vivian Smith, selected and edited, *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer: 1915-1963*, NLA, 1977, p. 155.

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- ⁷³ A cryptic note from a close poet-friend in mid-1938 – ‘Glad you’ve returned to Vance again’ – suggests there may have been a period of separation. Letter from Hugh McCrae to Nettie Palmer, 10.7.38, NLA MS 1174/1/5405.
- ⁷⁴ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 19.3.37, FNLA MS 1174/1/5251.
- ⁷⁵ Ric Throssell, *Wild Weeds and Windflowers. The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard*, Angus & Robertson, 1990, p. 80.
- ⁷⁶ Jill Roe (ed.), *My Congenials. Miles Franklin & Friends in Letters*, Vol. One. 1879-1938, Angus & Robertson 1933, Introduction, Chapter 6 ‘The New Frontier: 1933-1938,’ p. 274.
- ⁷⁷ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 29.4.38, NLA MS 1174/1/5380-80a.
- ⁷⁸ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Dymphna Cusack of 1968, quoted in part in Fox, *Dream by a Graveside*, p. 49.
- ⁷⁹ Comments by I.K. Sampson, quoted in Fox, *Dream by a Graveside*, p. 43.
- ⁸⁰ Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- ⁸¹ FAW ML MSS 2008 2(14), K22104, minutes of committee meeting of 10.5.35.
- ⁸² Letter from Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 28.8.38, O117.
- ⁸³ Published to coincide with the sesquicentenary celebrations of 1938, this collection of writings by prominent women writers on prominent women figures of the nineteenth century was reprinted in the year of the bicentenary.
- ⁸⁴ Fox, *Dream by a Graveside*, p. 83.
- ⁸⁵ Letter from Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 8.11.38, NLA MS 1945/1/114.
- ⁸⁶ In its claims that in ‘all the democracies, from France to America, from Australia to Britain’ there was in government circles an ‘impulse toward fascism.’
- ⁸⁷ The branch, it warned, will ‘in future not be likely to give approval to any undertaking or policy unless it has been previously consulted.’ Letter from Leonard Mann, Honorary Secretary of Victorian Section of F.A.W. to Frank Dalby Davison, 20.1.39, ML MS 2008 2(14), also marked K22104.

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- ⁸⁸ Letter from Leonard Mann, Honorary Secretary of Victorian Section of F.A.W. to Frank Dalby Davison, 31.1.39, ML MS 2008 2(14), also marked K22104.
- ⁸⁹ Letter from Leonard Mann, Honorary Secretary of Victorian Section of F.A.W. to Frank Dalby Davison, 15.3.39, ML MS 2008 2(14), also marked K22104.
- ⁹⁰ These are Frank Dalby Davison's words as expressed in a letter to Vance Palmer of 9.1.39, NLA MS 1174/1/5481-82, in which he reported on the contents of a communication he had recently received from Leonard Mann, Honorary Secretary of the Victorian Section of F.A.W.
- ⁹¹ Letter from Editorial Board of the N.S.W. Committee of F.A.W. to Leonard Mann, Honorary Secretary of the Victorian Section of F.A.W., 13.1.39, NLA MS 1174/1/5486.
- ⁹² Authors' Week was intended as a bridge between writer and reading public. Since its inauguration in 1935, it continued annually thereafter for some years.
- ⁹³ See Doug Jarvis, 'Morality and Literary Realism: A Debate of the 1880s,' *Southerly*, Vol. 43, No. 4, 1987, pp. 404-420, for a detailed analysis of the various currents feeding into this debate.
- ⁹⁴ Ivor Indyk, 'The Economics of Realism: John Morrison,' *Meanjin*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Dec. 1987, pp. 501-512. In making this claim, Indyk was borrowing A.A. Phillips' formula of words in describing the work of the radical nationalist writers as a whole.
- ⁹⁵ Clipping of article by Katharine Susannah Prichard, in *Communist Review*, Oct. 1943, p. 137.
- ⁹⁶ Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment. Australian Literature in the Twenty Years after the War*, Allen & Unwin, 1989, p. 25.
- ⁹⁷ S. Murray-Smith, 'The Novel and Society,' in Geoffrey Dutton (ed.), *The Literature of Australia*, Penguin Books, 1964, pp. 427-440.
- ⁹⁸ C. Merewether, 'Social Realism: The Formative Years,' *Arena*, No. 46, 1977, pp. 65-80, p. 70.
- ⁹⁹ Sharyn Pearce, 'The Proletarianization of the Novel: the Cult of the Worker in Australian and American Fiction of the Depression,' *Southerly*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Dec. 1988, pp. 187-200, p. 190.
- ¹⁰⁰ I owe this suggestion to Tim Goodwin.

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- ¹⁰¹ Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment. Australian Literature in the Twenty Years after the War*, Allen & Unwin, 1989, p. 25.
- ¹⁰² Xavier Pons, 'The Battlers: Kylie Tennant and the Australian Tradition,' *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 1974, pp. 364-380, p. 369.
- ¹⁰³ Marjorie Barnard Papers, MSS SET 4511 Item 2, Lecture 4, Australian Democracy & Literature, p. 10)
- ¹⁰⁴ A method of social realist writing popularised by Egon Kisch, reportage was among the activities organised by the Writers' League. Tom Fitzgerald, Sydney journalist and a member of the League, described it as "a report plus atmosphere, description, comment and deduction – all with the thread of accurate fact running through it ... reportage strives to dig the meaning out of events. It rakes over the facts and tries to assess them. It often draws new conclusions and paints a moral. The best reportage is propaganda, and plus all these aspects it strives for artistic quality." In Julie Wells, 'The Writers' League: a study in literary and working-class politics,' *Meanjin*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Dec. 1987, pp. 527-534, pp. 531-532.
- ¹⁰⁵ Sharyn Pearce, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-200.
- ¹⁰⁶ Wilde et. al, *op. cit.*, entry for Capricornia, pp. 141-142.
- ¹⁰⁷ Stephen Clingman, (ed. and intr.), Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics & Places*, Penguin Books, 1989, Introduction, p. 2.
- ¹⁰⁸ Eleanor Dark, 'The Biffer Rising,' *Bulletin*, 16.10.35.
- ¹⁰⁹ Eleanor Dark, 'Publicity,' *Home* 18, 1 April 1937, p. 40.
- ¹¹⁰ Dark, 'Publicity.'
- ¹¹¹ Patrick Kavanagh was also the name of a real-life Irish poet who, while 'misunderstood and neglected' (his biographer) was 'an important contemporary writer.' This Kavanagh's similarities with Dark's are striking. 'Hailed in various literary circles as the best Irish poet since the death of William Butler Yeats' he was nonetheless yet 'to achieve either popular or critical acclaim' outside his native land. Like the fictional Kavanagh, he also felt sympathy with those below him. His talent lay in 'portraying the common man's daily triumphs and tragedies without sinking into either sentimentality or didacticism.' More striking still is the fact that Dark could scarcely have known about him at the time of writing

Sun Across the Sky in 1935-1936, for until then he was completing 'his literary apprenticeship,' signing in 1936 his first contract for a book *Ploughman and Other Poems* ('well received in England and Dublin'). John Nemo, Patrick Kavanagh,' George Prior Publishers, 1979, in Preface and Chapter 1.

- ¹¹² *Sun Across the Sky*, p.321 p. 40; p. 114; p. 306.
- ¹¹³ *Sun Across the Sky*, p. 34; p. 33; p. 45.
- ¹¹⁴ I owe this suggestion to Tim Goodwin.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ¹¹⁶ *Sun Across the Sky*, p. 263; p. 44; p. 107; p. 33; p. 39.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ¹¹⁹ *Sun Across the Sky*, p. 266; p. 53; p. 116; For example: of 'an intellect so vast, and a learning so profound as to make of him a being apart,' 'his genius inhabiting and driving him like some tyrannous and vengeful god.' p. 40; p. 307.
- ¹²⁰ Eleanor Dark, *Sun Across the Sky*, p. 60.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- ¹²⁶ David Potts, 'A Positive Culture of Poverty Represented in Memories of the 1930s Depression,' *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 26, May 1990, pp.3-14, p. 3.
- ¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.14.
- ¹²⁸ Dark, *Waterway*, p. 58.
- ¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.
- ¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- ¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ¹³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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- ¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- ¹³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹³⁹ *Herald*, Melbourne, Victoria, review of *Waterway*, dated 24.6.38
- ¹⁴⁰ *Mercury* of Hobart, review of *Waterway* of 2.7.38
- ¹⁴¹ Letter from P.R. Stephensen to Eleanor Dark, 13.11.35, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁴² Letter from Shirley Darbyshire Meynell to Eleanor Dark, 21.7.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁴³ Letter from Eric Lowe to 'Mrs Dark,' 17.8.38 and continued 19.9.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed.)
- ¹⁴⁴ Letter from 'Bert' Evatt to 'Pixie,' 8.7.38, from Paris, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁴⁵ Letter from Xavier Herbert to Eleanor Dark, 23.3.39, from Narrabeen, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁴⁶ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 18.10.40, NLA MS 1174/1/5826.
- ¹⁴⁷ It seems that even before reading *Sun Across the Sky*, Barnard was already ill-disposed towards it. It was 'an interlude novel I gather. I've only sniffed it.' Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 'Sunday' (1937), NLA MS 1174/1/5338.
- ¹⁴⁸ Letter from Miles Franklin to Eleanor Dark, 3.4.44, NLA MS 4998, file 2 (Closed).
- ¹⁴⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen, 30.7.38, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ¹⁵⁰ Lectures re Australian Literature Series 1. Marjorie Barnard Lit. MSS, ML MSS Set 451 3(5).
- ¹⁵¹ McKernan, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- ¹⁵² Dark's literature is conspicuous for its absence in later accounts and reviews of Australian social realist literature of this period, such as those by Louis & Turner in *The Depression of the 1930s* (1960), Reid in *Fiction and the Great Depression* (1979), and Mackinolty in 'Literature and the Depression.'
- ¹⁵³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 27.10.37, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 6/127-133: 6/131.

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- ¹⁵⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 22.2.38, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁵⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to P.R. Stephensen, 1.4.38, PRS ML MSS 1284.
- ¹⁵⁶ Spoken by Gilbert Massey, major protagonist of *The Little Company*, p. 17.

Chapter Five.

'Hour of lead, hour of gold'¹: September 1937 – July 1940

it was material for a fine corroboree, but secretly there was more, much more, that would never pass his lips. For almost unconsciously, in the ecstasy of composition, he had gone beyond the tale of things which had happened, into the realm, to him not very different, of things which might happen; and his song had become a saga.²

'September, 1937 – July, 1940,' portentously recorded at the end of *The Timeless Land*, was an auspicious time to write a novel about the early period of European settlement in Australia. The advent of international fascism had raised the spectre of another world conflict, and after futile attempts to cushion Nazi aggression, Britain and France had declared war on Germany in September 1939. Australia had followed suit. By June 1940, a month before the completion of Dark's novel, Paris had fallen to the Germans. The Battle of Britain began a month later. The period had more personal associations for Dark, and implications for the writing of her novel. This three-year period spanned a critical time in several aspects of her life: framed, at one end, by her 'desperate decision not to write any more,'³ and her fantastic idea of a 'semi-detached villa' as 'a solution to the problems of living together,'⁴ and, at the other, by the most resounding success of her literary career.

Dark's decision of September 1937 to write what she later called a 'semi-historical' or 'historical' novel came on the eve of combined personal and professional crises. Years of frustration with the tyranny of 'a doctor's phone,'⁵ shouldering the responsibility for the children's care, coping with the bedlam of school holidays and occasional periods of 'maidlessness'⁶ had conspired to erode precious writing time. Marriage to Eric had entailed a considerable degree of adjustment to his inexhaustible enthusiasms: for the action and drama of military life, the thrills of mountaineering and, more recently, the missionary and reformist dimensions of his profession. It may even have begun to suffocate her.

Recently, Dark had also suffered some professional setbacks. *Sun Across the Sky* had not found 'favour with the Book Society' in England⁷, reviews had not been 'over-enthusiastic'⁸ and sales had been disappointing. Her literary reputation seemed generally to have declined, a fact capitalised on by Macmillan's, American publishers of *Return to Coolami* and *Sun Across the Sky* during negotiations for a

contract for *Waterway*. 'When it came to the discussion of terms,' her agent reported, 'there was not much I could do for they pointed out rather tartly that they hadn't had much success in the past.'⁹ A year later had come the news that *Sun Across the Sky*¹⁰ and *Waterway*¹¹ had failed in the Commonwealth Sesquicentenary Literary Competition. Graciously conceding defeat to 'a much better book than mine,'¹² the proud twice-winner of the A.L.S. gold medal for best novel in fact nursed a deep disappointment. Increasingly despondent about her literary prospects, Dark seemed suddenly devoid of the healthy arrogance that had seen her through earlier setbacks, pronouncing herself 'slightly surprised' that Macmillan's had agreed to publish *Waterway*.¹³

Her agents and publishers, agreeing that her writing style had staled, joined in a chorus of disapproval of her 'one-day action books'¹⁴ and formula-writing, arguing that 'the method of construction in each succeeding novel was so similar that the characters themselves tended to become types to the ordinary reader & the reviewers.'¹⁵ Feeling under siege, Dark was in no mood to accept these comments graciously. She claimed special indulgences. 'I can't *help* what I write,' she wrote emphatically to her British publisher in late 1937, and 'this being so, it is not possible for me to *decide* what kind of a book I am going to write.'¹⁶

This reaction was to be expected. It had been her posture for years, and even now, confronting her declining literary standing, she was not about to recant without a fight. For the first time, however, she argued the artist's case from a position of weakness. The lukewarm reception accorded to her novels was inescapable. And she herself realised the time had come either to mend her ways, or quit her beloved art altogether.

Dark's idea of a 'semi-detached villa' appears closely linked to her 'desperate decision not to write anymore.' The two arose within months in 1938, and shared a similar air of desperation and the urge to escape what seemed to her untenable circumstances. With Eric's support, both were resolved as one.

The decision to build Eleanor a private and separate study was made probably in March or April. Dark could hardly contain her excitement, sending 'snapshots of the room at various stages' to Molly and searching for 'fire-dogs in one of those little odds-&-ends shops'¹⁷ for the hearth. In early August, her study some two weeks away from completion, impatience got the better of her and she 'lit fire in my room & sat here.'¹⁸ By mid-August, her room 'all but finished,' she declared

it 'all very successful.'¹⁹



Eleanor Dark's 'room of her own' – a study-cottage adjacent to the main house



The artist's studio

The 'room' of which Eleanor spoke – perhaps resonating with

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of Her Own* (1929) with significantly also its lock and key – was, in fact, a quaint little cottage, with a small entrance hall and a good-sized fireplace. Fifteen metres from the main house, overlooking the more private aspect of the gardens, the study comfortably accommodated a big writing desk, a cosy armchair and a library. In size and character, Dark's 'room' was not very dissimilar to her original idea of a 'semi-detached villa.'

What lay behind her need for such a retreat? Eric's consuming crusade for socialism now disturbed her peace and niggled at her conscience. She was both drawn to and repelled by it. She envied his single-minded commitment to his cause, yet was frightened of what sharing his level of emotional abandonment might do to her art and integrity as an artist. Her last two novels had reflected this confusion of priorities, and there was no escaping their damage to her literary standing. She had learned that for her, at least, political expression had either to proceed naturally from within her art or not at all.

Eleanor's feelings for her husband during these years appear ambivalent and confused. She resented his influence on her life, yet was devoted to him; she drew away from him, yet revelled in their intimacy. A comment she made at around this same time to a family friend – warning him that marriage was 'a millstone round your neck' – suggests a suffocating element in the marriage.²⁰ Other evidence suggests that her unhappiness was not due to any estrangement from her husband. She craved greater privacy and independence, rather than separation, from the one who still occupied a central place in her life.

A sound testimony to the basic soundness of their marriage is provided by Dark herself, in an account of a family camping trip of August 1938. A 'Mad Hatter Party' – a 'sort of fancy dress affair, but of hats and headgear only' – had been organised near their camping site at Mountain View. She, Eric, and Mike had improvised a joint family costume, entered in the competition under the title of 'A Day in the Bush.' Eric looked

delicious in a hat which I manufactured out of grass-tree leaves during our lunch on top of Benilow, & trimmed with wattle & boronia, I in a chaplet of huge bottle brushes and a vast plume of grass tree leaves worn like an osprey, and Mike in a billy turned upside down with a mug on top of it.

The occasion 'ended in a blaze of glory when we took a prize.'²¹

The intimate details of a marriage remain a mystery to outsiders, and the Darks' crisis of 1938 is no exception. But there is little doubt that

once safely ensconced in her new 'room' the crisis atmosphere evaporated. Eric's response to the crisis was a key factor to its resolution. Typically, he threw all his financial and moral resources behind the project. The self-appointed custodian of his wife's new independence also instituted a 'rule,' to maids and children alike, that 'she was not to be disturbed except on matters of life and death.'²²

The luxury of escape was not, by this time, an unusual thing for Eleanor Dark. Their move to Katoomba in the early 1920s to escape city life, and the family cave they had sought and found in 'Jerrikellimi'²³ in 1937 so as to 'forget the horrors of the world for a while'²⁴ had already established this family tradition. But her new 'room' constituted her lone attempt to draw a line between herself and those closest to her. The significance and implications of that gesture would not have escaped Eric Dark.

Her needs recognised and addressed, Eleanor seemed more amenable to her husband's irrepressible ways, even as his growing political militancy threatened to undermine their standing in the local community. Reporting to Molly 'the latest rumour about us' (apparently passed on to Eric by a fellow doctor) 'that we have a *year's supply* of food hidden in our cave!!,' she seemed amused.

By now, no doubt we are also supposed to have machine guns & bombs & a radio-transmitter, & perhaps it is even the secret headquarters of the Fifth Column!!²⁵

Though the Darks were probably unaware, such rumours formed part of a broader, more sinister campaign. In 1938, Eric's overt displays of his socialist/communist sympathies came to the attention of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch (C.I.B.), later to turn its growing file on 'Dr E.P. Dark, M.D.' over to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (A.S.I.O.).²⁶ A.S.I.O.'s interest in Eric, and later (and mostly by association) his wife, continued through the 'forties and early 'fifties.

For the moment, though, Dark's new domestic and work arrangements, symbolised and facilitated by the little structure standing apart from the family home, lent her a kind of invulnerability and control over her destiny. From this new environment would soon grow two major initiatives: first, a confident resumption of the historical novel begun almost a year before; and later, with her novel near completion, a first plunge into the politics of her profession.

Dark's turn to historical fiction at this juncture is not surprising. *Waterway* reflected her deepening interest in the history of Sydney Cove. Her article on Caroline Chisholm for *The Peaceful Army* showed her adept and confident in dealing with historical material. She had

experimented with new forms before – first modernism, later social realism – and though only with mixed results, the instinct was there. By late August 1938, she turned her attention at last to the manuscript which, at the height of her depression, she had almost abandoned altogether.²⁷ At present, she had little more than what, in November 1937, she had excitedly reported to her publisher: ‘one historical character, a blackfellow, and the idea of Australia which is rather an alarmingly large idea, but alluring!’²⁸ A few days later she was firming ideas on the character of her book which she felt confident would ‘turn out to be a good deal different from the others, and will certainly cover a longer period.’²⁹

In less than a year, by June 1939, she had written ‘a little over 70,000 words’³⁰ and, although ‘not in sight of the end yet,’ was hopeful of a speedy end as she was ‘getting more time for writing than I have had before.’³¹ By then, she had also decided on a radical condensation of the projected span – from two-hundred to ten years – ‘about the time when the central character, a native, disappears from the picture.’³² By September, just before ‘a series of interruptions of various kinds – moving house, visitors, no domestic help, and ... two bouts of illness myself’ halted the work for several months, the manuscript had grown to ‘over 100,000 words.’³³

The last phase of her work seemed to tax her energies to the limit. ‘I have grown so sick of the thought & sight of it,’ she wrote, ‘that its only by simply forcing myself that I can bear to tackle it now.’³⁴ By May 1940, however, she had ‘hauled out a vast file of MS’ and pressed on. By June the already ‘vast file of MS’ was still growing and, she coyly warned her British agent, it looked as if it might ‘finish up at somewhere about 200,000 words.’ She felt ‘so stale after having lived with it for nearly three years.’³⁵ Only the thought of her novel as ‘an unfinished failure in my conscience’³⁶ had persuaded her to stick by what she was now calling her ‘abominable book.’³⁷ *The Timeless Land* was finally completed in late July 1940.³⁸

Dark’s writing went hand-in-hand with extensive research into conventional and unconventional sources on the early period of European settlement in Australia. Her references included Collins’ *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* and Tench’s *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* (1789) and *Complete Account of the Settlement* (1793)³⁹, and the Mitchell Library’s ‘enormous mass of contemporary journals, letters, etc.’⁴⁰ Later she immersed herself in whatever secondary sources – historical, biographical, anthropological, mythological – could lend insights into Aboriginal history and culture, fields in which, she confessed in the

book's 'Preface,' she felt 'increasingly conscious' of her 'abysmal ignorance'⁴¹

A perfectionist, Dark set herself another task of research, this time into an unconventional category of sources. She went to the land itself to study, analyse and experience first-hand the physical context of key aspects of her story. Just before finishing the book, she and Eric arranged to make the same trip attempted by Dawes and his party in 1789 in order 'to go over the actual country myself' and thus ensure her brief account of it was 'true to life.' Theirs, she explained to her American publishers, had been the first attempt to retrace Dawes' expedition.⁴² The journey took about a week as they followed the original track, leaving 'Emu Plains to walk in a straight line to Round Hill (Mount Hay).'⁴³ 'Every ridge and crest we got on,' Eric recounted with relish many decades later, 'we could see Mt. Hay and with a compass there was no trouble at all.'⁴⁴ To the seasoned rock- and mountain-climber, it may not have seemed much, but to his less expert wife, it proved a more daunting enterprise. The terrain – 'still practically untouched by civilisation'⁴⁵ – she later recounted, proved challenging.⁴⁶

Dark devoted five pages of her novel to an account of Dawes' expedition.⁴⁷ To point to this passage as evidence of her affinity and intimacy with the land may be misleading, for the whole novel reflects her rapport with the physical environment in which her story is set. This passage, however, is striking for the visual and sensual experience it evokes of the particular tract of land perceived through the consciousness of members of the expedition party, particularly Dawes himself. Climbing up Round Hill, they arrived at a section of

comparatively level ground; underfoot, it was hard and parched and stony, and yet things grew in it. On the tall shrubs which had borne the bold red flowers which the natives called waratahs, long seed-pods were already forming, and here and there, from a scatter of lavender-coloured blossoms, a faint smell of vanilla mingled rather incongruously with the stronger scent of eucalyptus and the heady perfume of small plants bruised by their passing.⁴⁸

Later in the passage, exhausted from 'climbing to the summit of yet another ridge, the party halted' and

Dawes began to study the rock which was his seat ... It looked as if it had once been liquid – poured out while a gale was raging, so that it had hardened suddenly in curves and convulsions, ridges, ripples and crests, like those made in sand by an incoming wave. In places it

appeared to have boiled, as porridge boils; some Gorgon force of nature had arrested it in the very act of bubbling, for here they were, bubbles in stone, some burst, some intact.⁴⁹

Dark's ingenious and enterprising idea of retracing Dawes' steps thus transformed a particular tract of land into a kind of text, unique among her sources as palpable and unmediated source material.

Dark also brought a fresh and imaginative approach to the writing of Australian history. Australian historiography, she felt, contained two major gaps: a lack of attention to what had preceded 'the coming of the whites,' in 'a kind of assumption that this was the beginning of their history'; and a lack of an Aboriginal perspective on 'the story of the white settlement.'⁵⁰ She wanted to redress these imbalances. Through her device of multiple perspectives – 'the official attitude of Phillip and his officers, the convict, and the native attitude' – she also sought to contribute a broader, more subtle understanding of the diverse social forces at work during this period.

Dark's professional approach to her novel showed in her willingness to submit her work to the scrutiny of agents and publishers, unthinkable in earlier times. She sent regular reports to her literary advisers, and described plans for the next stages of her writing. She sought their advice on a wide spectrum of matters: the general scheme, 'Black Man's Burden' as a possible title,⁵¹ the advisability of writing it 'as one or two, or possibly three separate books.'⁵²

She also introduced the changes to her literary style advocated for some time by her advisers. Her preference for what she called 'my "backward and forward"' method had made the techniques of stream of consciousness and flashback major trademarks of her literature. Now, although she disliked it and felt it did not 'come naturally' to her, she adopted the technique of 'straight narrative' because it seemed 'the right way for this particular book.'⁵³ Abandoning her 'one-day action books' for a much longer time-frame was also not easy. This 'should but probably won't please the reviewers,' she remarked pointedly to her British publisher.⁵⁴ Encouraged by the thought that her new novel should 'appeal more widely' than her past ones given the 'fashion for semi-historical stuff at present,'⁵⁵ Dark seemed prepared openly to countenance considerations of market and popular appeal. Her agents and publishers, delighted with her receptiveness to their advice, fed her confidence. A lengthy report from his client prompted a most enthusiastic response from her British publisher: the book 'should have tremendous possibilities.'⁵⁶

Despite her advisers' encouragement, Dark could not escape the 'overwhelming (and quite unreasonable) feeling that novels – particularly about things that happened 150 years ago! – are now supremely unimportant.'⁵⁷ Her naturally philosophical bent of mind told her 'that so called "modern" problems are not new, but only old problems now reaching culmination point.' Her social conscience told her otherwise, and she remained 'continually bothered by the feeling that all writers *should* be writing about momentous contemporary events.'⁵⁸

Ultimately, what constituted 'momentous contemporary events' was idiosyncratic. Even before adding that extra layer of padding to her cocoon-like existence in the Blue Mountains, her relationship to society at large had been highly selective and formal. Thus, her concern for what she called 'The Situation' in Europe was typically centred on particular individuals: friends in England and the Continent, even passing strangers. Here emerges the best of Dark, in her genuine warmth and concern for the plight of fellow humans. Asked by 'a fellow Collins novelist' to extend some hospitality to 'a young Austrian doctor,' she immediately issued him with an invitation 'to stay with us for a few days' imagining he might welcome 'a foothold in a strange land.'⁵⁹

Dark's most extraordinary expression of concern for 'the momentous contemporary events' came in November 1940. In receipt of her British agent's enthusiastic response to her manuscript expressing hopes of securing her 'a very good contract' for her book, she requested that in the event of a contract, he donate on her behalf 'one third of whatever royalties may become due to me from sales of this book (including the advance, of course)' to 'some fund for London children of the poorer classes.' Later, she asked that her 'small gift' be made anonymously. 'I have an almost morbid dislike of publicity.'⁶⁰ Dark's donation, administered by the Civilian War Distress Fund and 'specially earmarked for children still remaining in London,' came to the substantial sum of '265s.'⁶¹

Dark's response to 'the Situation' also assumed philosophical forms. Unlike her colleagues in the little company, whose correspondence reflects intense preoccupation with Europe, Dark displayed little interest. When she wrote about the crisis at all, it was basically in moral terms: of the relationship between 'momentous contemporary events' and 'the basic, perennial problem of human experience ... the conflict between "good" and "evil" – which I, personally, define as social or anti-social behaviour.'⁶² Her lens was so adjusted to this kind of universal view of the world that it sometimes obscured altogether such 'momentous' developments as the Spanish Civil War.⁶³

But not even Dark could evade emotional involvement in what she called 'this awful war,' for it haunted her with associations past and present. 'There is something quite nightmarish about the echoes of 1914 – all the same old catchwords & phrases,' she wrote to Molly in June 1939.⁶⁴ Dark had painful and enduring memories of the last war, particularly through her brother Pat. Eric too, she feared, had been scarred by his war experiences. To her dismay, he would seek throughout his life to recreate in other contexts, like the Army Reserve's training camp in Liverpool in the early 'twenties, the passion and discipline of his wartime days.

Dark also had friends living in England and Europe at this time. God-father to their son Michael, Eric Lowe was by then perhaps the Darks' closest friend. Through his travels in 1937-1938, Lowe sent lengthy and vivid accounts of the rush of developments around him. By mid-June 1938, he offered the gloomy appraisal that "'The Situation" strikes me as about as bad as it could be ... The tension is almost unbearable.' From England he reported that bomb-proof shelters were advertised in house sales. 'I wouldn't be surprised if war broke out in a half a dozen places tonight.'⁶⁵

Shirley Darbyshire Meynell was an old Redlands' schoolmate whose marriage to British author Lawrence Meynell had taken her permanently to England. Her occasional letters brought an intimate and female perspective on the European situation. News that her friend was pregnant and scheduled for a caesarean operation on 28 September 1938⁶⁶ affected Eleanor deeply. The day before the operation, she confided to Molly: 'I can't help thinking of her at this awful time with radios blaring and warnings to parents to fit their children with gas masks!'⁶⁷ Meynell's letter two months later announcing the arrival of her baby daughter 'right in the middle of the crisis' described

the guns in Hyde Park and trenches being dug, which was not encouraging, and quite thought that I would be bombed before the infant was more than a day old.

She concluded by urging her friend to visit England soon. 'Do consider it,' she pressed, 'Europe is in such a strange state that you should come while there is still something left.'⁶⁸

Dark's determination that her historical novel should speak to 'momentuous contemporary events' brought about a quantum shift in the book's focus: from Bennelong and his tribe to Arthur Phillip and his tribe; from the historical to the contemporary implications to Australia of events of the period 1770-1792. It was no longer the clash of Black and White cultures but the clash of values within White culture that

would be the main driving force behind her tale. In a curious borrowing of Aboriginal folklore, she argued to Franklin: 'no one ever had a more evil magic to contend with than the intellectual torpor and psychological collapse of the white race today.'⁶⁹ It was of this collapse, its roots and possible resolution, that she would write in her book.

Between June 1939 and the novel's completion in July 1940, a fundamental change in direction took place. Symbolically, it was her decision to abandon the title 'Black Man's Burden' in favour of 'The Timeless Land,' claiming it now seemed to her 'to place undue emphasis on the aboriginal aspect, which is only one part of the story.' Later in the same letter, 'the aboriginal aspect' suffered another demotion. Conceding the manuscript was 'a dreadful length,' she proposed omitting 'the first section' whose function had originally been 'to suggest the ages of human history in the continent *before* the White settlement.' Though 'rather sorry to dispense with it,' she felt the omission would not harm the integrity of the book for 'the real "story" only begins with the second section.' By the time she had finished outlining the basic thrust of her book as she now saw it, as well as of the other two she now hoped would follow it, 'the aboriginal aspect' had disappeared altogether. The first volume would deal 'with the white people as aliens in the country.' The second was to be entitled 'My Native Soil' and 'would be set about in the middle of the last century, and would show the Australians becoming Australians.' The third – 'quite modern' – would suggest 'the still further evolution, now obviously necessary, towards a realisation that "Patriotism is not enough," and that one's loyalties must be human loyalties rather than national.' Admitting that this was 'an ambitious plan,' she explained that it had nonetheless been 'the idea which was behind the writing of this book.'⁷⁰ In her excitement over completing her novel, and plans to extend her story beyond it, Dark had apparently forgotten the key role which Bennelong and his tribe had played in the early stages of the planning and writing of her novel. By September 1940, they and the considerable work that had gone into the omitted 'first section' seemed of little importance.

Fifteen pages long, the omitted section reflected much historical research and careful interweaving of the real and imagined past – of 'things which happened' and 'things which might happen' – which was to become a major trademark of the novel as a whole. Here Dark traced over several centuries the evolution of 'a rumour, a guessed-at mystery, a will-o'-the-wisp' teasing the imagination and greed of adventurers about this 'blank space' that was the Australian continent. Its cast, which embraced actual and would-be participants in the discovery of the land the Australian Aborigines called home since 'some remote past

age,' included such luminaries as Alexander, Kubla Khan, Marco Polo, Magellan, Sarmiento and Mendana, Drake, Quiros, Torres, Hartog, Carstensz, Tasman, Dampier and Morgan. The section ended with the arrival of the *Endeavour*: 'the beginning of the end.'⁷¹

A possible inducement to alter the original emphasis of her book may have come as early as April 1938,⁷² with Herbert's letter bearing news of the book that was to follow *Capricornia*, tentatively entitled 'The King and the Kurrawaddi.' Herbert's elaboration of his plans for his new book sounded, ominously, very much like her own. The 'King,' he explained, was 'Geo. IV, the Law of the Land, and the Kurrawaddi, the ancient, awful, inextinguishable law of the Aborigines.' The 'clash between these two forces,' he went on, 'is the greatest tragedy this land has ever known.' Exuding his usual confidence, Herbert declared it to be 'a great story.' With memories of *Sun Across the Sky*'s and *Waterway*'s recent loss to *Capricornia* in the Commonwealth Sesquicentenary Literary Competition still painfully fresh in her mind, herself in awe of his writing,⁷³ and aware of Herbert's half-genuine, half-inflated claims of familiarity with the Aborigines, Dark may have been prompted to re-think the thrust of her book.

Whatever the impact of Herbert's letter, events in Europe were also pressing on Dark a very different approach to the story of early European settlement in Australia. Shirley Meynell's ominous invitation of November 1938 – 'come while there is still something left'⁷⁴ – had underscored the gravity of 'The Situation,' and fortified her resolve not to write about things 'supremely unimportant' to these critical times. How was her Aboriginal story to speak to and about the spectre of the collapse of Europe? Bennelong, a half-comic, half-tragic figure, bound inexorably to a race Dark regarded as 'nearly gone,' could not serve as a medium through which to explore the contemporary scene. A different kind of central character was needed, whose racial and cultural background might serve to link the story of the early years of Sydney Cove to the present, and whose personality could inspire a contemporary audience to a heroic vision of the future.

'Arthur Phillip the Governor,' seemed to fit her new requirements well. Dark saw in him qualities of 'physical courage and endurance, moral fortitude, a struggling humanitarianism, and a streak of illogical faith' which redeemed whatever role he had played in the 'coming of the whites.' A man wrestling between loyalties to King and Country, and humanist instincts; caught between often unsavoury official duties as Governor of the colony and 'visions of a future when nothing in the present seemed to justify them,'⁷⁵ Dark's Philip would be portrayed as the embodiment of the contemporary moral dilemma confronting

Western democracy. Although in his moral instincts not unlike earlier heroes in her literature – Nigel Hendon, Oliver Denning and Professor Channon – Phillip stands in *The Timeless Land* less as a heroic figure of the past than as the model Individual of the New Order.

Much remained of ‘the aboriginal aspect’ in the final draft of *The Timeless Land* in anecdote and allegory, but this about-face in what ‘the “real” story’ was about radically altered its function. No longer actors in their own drama, the Australian Aborigines became a pastoral symbol, a moral reference point through which to explore, in J.J. Healy’s words, ‘one of the noble, lost options of history.’⁷⁶ Above all, what remained of what had once been the central focus of the story was a profound sense of loss, not so much for the plight of the race itself but for what, as Dark explained, ‘the “civilised” world’ might have absorbed of its ‘great virtues.’⁷⁷ Dark emphasised this point in one of the most telling passages in the book’s ‘Preface’ where, it should be noted, she spoke of the Aborigines exclusively in the past tense.⁷⁸

Academic considerations of *The Timeless Land* have generally proceeded from one of two premises. They place it within the broader framework of Dark’s historical trilogy, completed some twelve years after the first volume; or they approach the novel from a historical perspective. Both distort the integrity and nature of the text, a single, unified work; a work of artistic imagination, rather than as a history *manqué* at once fiction and non-fiction.

This novel was conceived and written as one book, and remained so until it was joined by *Storm of Time* in 1948 and *No Barrier* in 1953. Dark’s conception of her novel as part of a broader whole arose in the last stages of writing.⁷⁹ Studies of the novels as a trilogy impose a false sense of fluidity and internal logic between them which, in the case of the first volume particularly, is highly misleading.

Reading *The Timeless Land* as a piece of history, mediated or otherwise by the artistic imagination, also violates the spirit as well as the thrust of the story. Dark never claimed to be a historian. Her remarks to Hartley Grattan of August 1938 that ‘history is not my strong point,’ may be read in a variety of ways:⁸⁰ dismissive, self-effacing, or simply a recognition of her limitations. Whatever their intention, they reveal a certain perceived distance between her and a discipline for which she had little training or allegiance.

While given to considered contemplations of the nature of art, Dark’s views on what constituted ‘history’ can only be described as vague and banal. ‘History,’ she remarked twenty years after the publication of *The Timeless Land*, ‘is to a community what memory is to an individual. Without memory we should be unable to learn from our

past experience, and a knowledge of its history is in the same way indispensable to a nation.'⁸¹ Significantly, in her scrapbook of private notes, Dark's only comment on the nature of history was from the perspective of the artist:

the question is not whether, in a given place in a certain period of history such things did or did not occur. To report facts, and stop there, is the function of reportage, not of art. Art has to add an interpretation which relates the facts to universal experience.

Art had also an ethical dimension which imposed different priorities on the artist. It was better, she felt, for the artist 'to violate contemporary reality' by displaying a magnanimous faith 'in human beings as human beings,' than to violate 'the permanent reality of all times, all places and all people.'⁸²

Another reason for considering *The Timeless Land* a work of fiction lies within the novel itself. For all its historical trappings – a 'Bibliography,' 'Glossary of Terms,' 'Preface' in which the author claimed her 'picture of the settlement of Sydney' to be 'always true in broad outline, and often in detail'⁸³ – the world which the reader is asked to enter is not, and was clearly not intended to be, a faithful rendition of Sydney Cove of 1788-1792. Rather, as the introductory quotation to this chapter suggests, it is like the 'fine corroboree' composed in Bennelong's imagination which 'had gone beyond the tale of things which had happened, into the realm, to him not very different of things which might happen.' It is, above all, a moral landscape, peopled by fictional and historical types, both ultimately artistic creations whose lives and preoccupations, though rooted in their historical context, transcend it to assume allegorical proportions.

Sydney Cove is endowed in *The Timeless Land* with qualities that transcend its historical significance as England's latest attempt to solve its convict problem. A principal conceit of the novel, the convict colony is transformed into an image of a vast human gaol whose walls enclose gaolers and gaoled, Whites and Blacks alike. The antithesis of and antidote to Sydney Cove is the timeless land, a metaphysical country where true values reign. A symbol of the ultimate triumph of good over evil, the timeless land remains inviolate,⁸⁴ aloof and dispassionate⁸⁵ to the activities in Sydney Cove:

It would watch them die and take their bones into its earth, and re clothe their deserted settlement with its quiet, gaunt trees, and remain undisturbed in its ancient tranquillity.⁸⁶

Underscoring the sense of moral bondage are scenes of capture and escape. Capture assumes here a variety of forms and motivations: the male convict caught in the act of escaping, the female convict's moral captivity at the hands of her master, the forceful return of the young White child retrieved from a happy escapade in the bush, Phillip's well-intentioned orders to kidnap Bennelong and Colbee, the smallpox epidemic and the White Man's liquor, both of which caught the innocent Aborigines in their grip. Even Arthur Phillip is a captive of his official status and duties as governor of the colony.

Escape is also portrayed in *The Timeless Land* in complex ways. Stephen Mannion, the wealthy Irish landowner recently arrived in the colony, seeks escape in alcohol from guilt and solitude after his wife's recent death, and in the arms of his convict woman housekeeper. Little Johnny Prentice flees the nightmarish convict camp to his Aboriginal friends in the bush. Officers escape the boredom of life in the colony through letters home, and through longing looks at portraits of their loved ones in England. Bennelong, unable to resolve his ambivalent feelings of attraction to and repulsion of the Whites, lends the novel its final scene of escape – or is it capture? – as he sinks into a grotesque state of oblivion from his latest drinking bout.

Successive scenes of capture and escape lead inexorably here to ethical questions of means and ends. Personal freedom – not from responsibility, but rather to assume responsibility for one's actions and choices – emerges here as the ultimate means and end.

This point is brought home with compelling moral force in the scene which constitutes the climax of the novel. Andrew Prentice is an escaped convict to whom 'neither man, nor God, nor nature, had ever given anything for nothing. There had always been a bargain, with the worst of it for him.'⁸⁷ Prentice's coldly and meticulously laid plans to flee his condition in the settlement are repaid by a period of growing self-discovery in the bush. Soon after his escape, he marries an Aboriginal woman as 'a slave, a guide, a mistress, a beast of burden all in one – what could be better?'⁸⁸ and, with her, produces a son. Access to the timeless land and his new-found freedom gradually changes Prentice from 'a tyrant' to 'a good husband';⁸⁹ from a hunted animal to a man so free that, for the first time in his life, he can indulge his moral integrity and his feelings of compassion.

The ultimate test of Prentice's journey from captivity to freedom comes as he sits in his secret watchpost, monitoring the movements of a small community of Whites beginning to form in his area. Below him is a rising river fast reaching flood proportions, and in it, as he suddenly realises, are his wife and son, clinging desperately to a big dead tree

floating in the rapid current. Prentice's spontaneous urge to rescue his family is momentarily checked by his sudden realisation that, 'at the first sight of him ... muskets would crack from across the river. An escaped convict!' 'Not only life was endangered here,' he realises, 'but freedom.'⁹⁰

In this, 'his first spiritual conflict,' Prentice confronts the real meaning of the freedom he has dreamed of since 'the ugly years of hand-to-mouth existence in London'⁹¹ and which he thought he had finally achieved by escaping from the convict barracks some time ago. Now, rather than 'a jailer or an overseer' issuing an order, it is his own conscience urging him: '*you must decide*.'⁹² His instincts for self-preservation⁹³ and 'for concealment, for secrecy'⁹⁴ press him to: 'Remember your hut in the hills, your cattle, your possessions, the visible signs of that inner worth which rejected slavery, defied captivity.'⁹⁵ But his instincts for personal freedom triumph, as in response to his wife's 'wild note of despair' he emerges from his hiding-place 'full of defiance, and a strange mood of exultation.' Scrambling to save his family, and what he knows will be his certain death, either by drowning or shooting, he comforts himself with the thought that: 'Not until I chose did they find me, and not their cleverness discovered me, but my own free action!'⁹⁶ Prentice's heroic rescue of his wife and child costs him his life. He drowns.

Despite the action and drama that accompany it, the fact and manner of Andrew Prentice's death is unimportant to the novel's major theme of motivation and purpose. The blend of romance, adventure and suspense in this scene may explain this book's popularity, but Prentice's death, following the rescue of his family, is not what makes this scene the climax of the story. It is the moral force of the moment when, after agonising over his options, he emerges defiantly and triumphantly from his hiding place as a man of integrity and compassion, in full knowledge of the consequences of this action.

That fictional characters play a key role in *The Timeless Land* is obvious from the example of Andrew Prentice. But their function is not only to heighten the moral landscape but the historical context as well. The '*embarras de richesse*,' as Dark described the sources available on this period, was one of quantity rather than diversity of perspectives. As such, the historical record, composed largely of material written by Phillip and fellow officers, did not grant a direct voice to important elements in that society: Aborigines, convicts, and the first small batch of free settlers. There lay a *lacuna* in place of the view from below. Dark's fictional characters thus serve a key historical function as a corrective to existing records, lending substance as well as moral

complexity to the social forces of the colony.

Artistic imagination also played an important role in the portrayal of the historical characters. A case in point is Dark's portrayal of Arthur Phillip as he sets out to preside over the official ceremonies to mark 'the formal establishment of the colony.'⁹⁷ The focus on Phillip shifts between the outer and inner man, the Governor-in-Chief of New South Wales who sets out 'to plant in a remote and barbaric land the seed of his own land's glorious tradition'⁹⁸ and the voice from within who sees 'this proclamation of ownership, with its pathetic pomp and ceremony, as a piece of infantile impertinence.'⁹⁹ As the perspective changes from one level of consciousness to another, the narrative dissolves into conflicting versions of the one historical event. The Governor sees that: 'The marines, under arms, were now drawn up in a circle round the convicts, their scarlet coats contrasting bravely with the wayward blue of the water and the steadfast blue of the sky.'¹⁰⁰ His unconscious captures quite a different picture: 'a queer little view through the wrong end of a telescope, a puppet-show, very far away, a parade of mannikins--not even mannikins, but toy soldiers.'¹⁰¹

Something of the same moral force – of assuming responsibility for life-choices – was also apparent in Dark's emergence into the politics of her profession at this time. She had done little to further the interests of her profession, leaving it to a small group of committed individuals – Davison, Eldershaw and a few others – to begin dialogue with government and industry, protest against censorship and syndication, and the like. Determined after her dismal attempts at social realism of the mid-'thirties never again to engage in the politics of her art, she was ready now to join in the politics of her profession.

In 1939, she finally joined the Fellowship of Australian Writers and in the same year became a vice-president of the Council for Civil Liberties, an organization increasingly identified with anti-censorship campaigns.¹⁰² While these proved little more than symbolic gestures,¹⁰³ the importance of these moves should not be underestimated. Instinctively averse, in principle and practice, to joining organisations of any kind, Dark was signalling a new commitment to set aside personal considerations and biases for the good of her profession. This new spirit of comradeship is most apparent in her personal initiatives of late 1939-early 1940 on the issue of censorship.

Though never directly affected, Dark nurtured deep grievances against censorship restrictions in Australia. In her work she inveighed against the denial of the freedoms of speech and information. Few issues touched her as deeply. Ethical objections were and remained but one aspect of her opposition. There were also professional considerations, as

she emphasised in mid-1940, for 'to take away his freedom of speech from a writer is to take away his tools of trade.'¹⁰⁴

In early 1940, after composing a public letter to the Prime Minister protesting against censorship, Dark had the idea that 're-cast in the plural, signed by a number of writers instead of one, it might carry more weight & have a better chance of being published' by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She asked Franklin's help in procuring signatures from 'the (Sydney) writing fraternity,'¹⁰⁵ while she undertook to contact colleagues elsewhere.¹⁰⁶

Most agreed immediately with the request. But Nettie Palmer returned the letter, signed, while expressing serious reservations about its timing which she described as 'inopportune.' 'The present crisis,' she argued, 'is like nothing before, in seriousness. We can only mark time & look on: not protest yet.'¹⁰⁷ Dark bristled with irritation about Nettie's response to her letter.

The principle of free speech, seems to me to be something so fundamental that it can be asserted at any time and in any circumstances.¹⁰⁸

Around this time and in collaboration with Eric, Eleanor also composed a 'folder' entitled 'Do you believe in freedom of speech? The thrust of their argument lay in the question: 'how can we fight with conviction against Fascism in Germany when in our own land our liberties are being taken away from us?'¹⁰⁹ The 'folder,' submitted to the Council for Civil Liberties in May 1940, was intended for publication and distribution to 'individuals for posting to either their Federal members, or the Prime Minister.' The Darks offered to contribute 10 pounds each towards the cost of printing.'¹¹⁰

In the end, both initiatives miscarried. The *Sydney Morning Herald* did not publish the letter;¹¹¹ and the Council, itself in the process of drafting a protest against censorship to the Prime Minister,¹¹² politely rejected the Darks' 'folder.'¹¹³ These setbacks did not dampen Dark's spirits. 'Never did I feel less dove-like!'¹¹⁴

Expressions of solidarity from others in the little company buoyed her. A friendly Barnard wrote to say she was glad 'to know that you are standing firm. There are so few now.'¹¹⁵ Davison, who had signed, circulated and offered to hand deliver the letter to the *Herald*, addressed her for the first time as a comrade-in-arms:

The writing world is in the process of sorting itself out into those who are prepared to do what they can for our traditional freedom of expression and those who (are) prepared to let the war swamp everything.¹¹⁶

Government commitment to silence political dissidence was made all too clear to Australian writers by the campaigns of harassment to which Prichard and other left-wing radicals were being subjected. A founding member of the C.P.A., Prichard was no stranger to intimidation. Though the police raid on her house in June 1940, which stripped her unceremoniously of precious personal and professional material, shocked the writing community, Prichard would not be cowed. There was more to come. A few months later, her contract to deliver a series of lectures on Australian literature at the University of Western Australia was cancelled without explanation. Her letter of protest to the Professorial Board of the University accused it of prostituting its 'power to the service of hysterical obfuscation.' 'That those, who should defend intellectual integrity have thrown the first stone at me, is a matter of surprise and shock.'¹¹⁷ Prichard's words of defiance, and the representations made on her behalf by the Sydney Fellowship¹¹⁸ to the W.M. Hughes, Federal Attorney-General,¹¹⁹ were all to no avail. An appeal from the Fellowship's Western Australian Branch to the University Senate eventually succeeded in securing the University's agreement to fulfil some of its financial obligations to Prichard.¹²⁰

These were taxing years for the little company, with their options for protest markedly diminished. War, and the issues of conscience and conflicts of loyalties it raised, were rupturing relationships. Indeed, the war found many of them anxious and stressed. Barnard was concerned that the 'ideas that seemed to be springing have shrivelled up.'¹²¹ Increasingly, she seemed to rely on 'Teenie' (her pet-name for Eldershaw) to 'drag me out of the bag.'¹²² Eldershaw herself had had what Barnard described as 'a bad discouraging sort of year,' and Davison was 'looking for a job and desperately white on it. Not so good.'¹²³ Meanwhile Franklin, 'torn between half a dozen conflicting loyalties,' was berating herself.

I forsook literature until a few years back and gave all my youth, my love years, financial security and everything else to the struggle for freedom consumedly.¹²⁴

Devanny, her work for the C.P.A. draining her emotions and energies, had had 'her heart simply torn out of me over Czechoslovakia.'¹²⁵

The Palmers were amongst the most affected in the group. With their daughter in England 'indefinitely,'¹²⁶ it threatened to be (and was) a nightmarish time for them. A month before the official outbreak of war, Nettie confessed to her diary:

For me, war is something that has been going on remorselessly since July 1936, when that sudden attack

came on Barcelona.¹²⁷

Though some of the old aloofness still remained, Dark's initiative of early 1940 in organising the letter to the Prime Minister had warmed the hearts of many of her colleagues, who suddenly saw in her a willing comrade-in-arms. 'I am honoured,' Barnard remarked in a letter of mid-June 1940, 'that we can put our hands to the same plough.'¹²⁸ Keen to develop these relationships, Dark grew uncommonly expansive, engaging in lively correspondence, issuing invitations for week-end visits to 'Varuna,' even attending the occasional private party or Fellowship gathering in Sydney. Among her small triumphs of the period 'September, 1937 – July, 1940,' achieving closer bonds with colleagues in the little company was one. The crowning glory of these years, however, was yet to come.

News of the safe arrival in Britain of her manuscript reached her by telegram, and in due course a letter from her British agent arrived providing her with the first official response to it. Enthralled by *The Timeless Land*, which he claimed to have read 'not superficially but with complete absorption,' he declared himself 'still under its spell.' 'To communicate my own enthusiasm to Collins and to get you, I hope, a very good contract,' he declared, 'will be a real labour of love.'¹²⁹

The general reception accorded to *The Timeless Land* ranged from warmly to extraordinarily enthusiastic in its three original places of publication in 1941: the United States, in September;¹³⁰ England, in October;¹³¹ and Australia, in November.¹³² The novel was reviewed by major press outlets in each of these countries: the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune* in the U.S.; the *Times Literary Supplement* in England; and the *Melbourne Age*, the *Melbourne Herald*, and *Smith's Weekly* in Australia.¹³³ A key review was that of Dorothy Caulfield in the *New York Herald Tribune* of 5 October 1941 entitled 'The Birth of a Nation – Down in Australia,' and subtitled 'The Big Novel is a Rich Reconstruction of an Historical Saga Strongly Akin to our Own.' Marvelling at its 'extraordinary quality of depth, of moral perspective,' Caulfield declared she knew of no other story 'more touching, more pathetic, more literally heart-breaking in its honest, austere restraint.'¹³⁴ Australian literary columnists devoured it,¹³⁵ making Caulfield's rave review a companion piece to the news of the (U.S.) Book-of-the-Month Club's selection of the novel as their October choice.¹³⁶

Dark found herself the object of much press attention, with photographers at her doorstep keen to capture her 'sitting, & standing, reading & knitting, entering front door, leaving workroom door, and seemed quite put about that I could not produce a dog or a cat (or even

Michael) to be taken with!' Keen to play down her celebrity status, the artist despaired of the 'wasted money & effort that goes into such "publicity."' ¹³⁷

Negative responses were rare, and generally revealed reviewers' ignorance in the *genre* of historical fiction. The *Bulletin* ¹³⁸ questioned the appropriateness of Dark's aim 'to give a true picture of the first settlement of Sydney' for 'a novelist.' ¹³⁹ The reviewer in *Country Life* was troubled by the fact that Dark had 'so heavily underlined the aboriginal references by placing a glossary right in front of the book before the first page of the story can be enjoyed.' ¹⁴⁰ Of these, only one prompted a reaction from the author. Claims by the *New Republic*'s reviewer that, as Dark reported it to Franklin, 'Melville is "literature"', and I – alas! – "commodity"' quite clearly touched a sensitive chord. ¹⁴¹ Stung by the remark, she resorted to her usual line of blanket attack on critics and reviewers. 'Was there ever a review,' she asked rhetorically, 'which affected your writing? Of course not, nor anybody else's either!' ¹⁴²

Generally, Dark seemed as immune to criticism as to the 'hullabaloo' ¹⁴³ over her book. Her contempt for critics went too deep to be overturned by the praise for her book. Of the many flattering reports reaching her about the success of her book, 'the most welcome bit of commendation' was, she told a colleague, news 'that the crew of the "Monterey" had Timeless Land in their ship's library, and had been reading, apparently with approval, during their last voyage.' 'That,' she affirmed to Miles Franklin, '*did* rather warm the cockles of my heart!.' ¹⁴⁴ Why such delight at the news? The image of young sailors turning to her book in their leisure hours had irresistibly romantic elements. But it went further than that. Out at sea, they were blessedly isolated from the 'hullabaloo,' the critic and the reviewer, indeed the whole infrastructure supporting the book market but the book itself. Herein lay the closest thing to her ideal of that pure unmediated nexus between book and reader.

Colleagues of the little company were among the first to offer their congratulations. Some did so even before reading the book. 'This is delightful news in the paper,' Franklin wrote, 'a lift to all who are trying to express this continent.' ¹⁴⁵ Eldershaw complemented her on 'the lovely title,' saying that it was 'very nice to know of its success' and that she looked forward 'very much to reading it.' ¹⁴⁶ Nettie Palmer wrote assuring her the novel 'interests me deeply in advance' ¹⁴⁷ and later expressing 'admiration for Timeless Land,' although it is clear by her comments that the book's wide appeal made her uneasy. The book, she said, is 'valuable for the general mind' and 'people who read &

people who usually don't read are touched by it.' On a visit to Brisbane, she had observed 'very many were reading it-& seeing the point of it, seeing how you had attempted the impossible, the confrontation of timeless man & modern man.'¹⁴⁸ Devanny thought it was 'grand,' confessing she had 'shed tears over it many times.' 'I wish I could write like you,' she confessed.¹⁴⁹ Predictably, Barnard's was the singular note of disapproval in the group, but her trenchant views about *The Timeless Land* remained the exception.¹⁵⁰

From old Redlands' schoolmate, Mary Alice Evatt, came a most welcome bouquet. Congratulating 'Pixie' on her 'grand book,' she passed the news that Richard Casey (appointed in 1940 as Australia's first Minister to the United States) had written 'from Washington about the favourable impressions *Timeless Land* made there' and that 'on taking the train up to New York he said he observed several Americans absorbed in the book. He thinks it created a very good public for Australia.'¹⁵¹

It was only after the initial 'hullabaloo' subsided that the extent of the book's popularity and acceptability among a wide spectrum of audiences began to emerge. Its enthusiasts included academics in diverse fields – anatomy,¹⁵² anthropology,¹⁵³ literature,¹⁵⁴ and history¹⁵⁵ – some of whom issued her with invitations to speak to student groups, and to participate in special educational broadcasts. The Royal Australian Historical Society declared it 'would be honoured to have you amongst its members.'¹⁵⁶ A most ardent and enduring admirer of *The Timeless Land*¹⁵⁷ was a promising young Australian historian soon to make his own indelible mark in Australian history.¹⁵⁸ Then in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne, Manning Clark invited Dark in 1948

to talk (conversationally only – not a speech) to a bunch of his young students who are "doing" the *Timeless Land*, & abashed me by seeming to know much more about it than I can remember at this length of time.¹⁵⁹

Each response challenged the artist to utilise the wide range of new opportunities offered her to broaden her audience and thus her influence. The point applies equally to the 'lowbrow' as to the 'highbrow' circles. What Dark called her 'once in a lifetime'¹⁶⁰ novel exceeded all expectations. Its selection by the (U.S.) Book-of-the-Month Club not only guaranteed some \$7,000 in royalties, but gave the book wide international publicity.¹⁶¹ New editions succeeded reprints, as did translations into Swedish, German, Italian and Spanish. In 1946, the book was made part of the matriculation reading in Victoria¹⁶² and by

1947 plans were being finalised for a special University edition of the book.¹⁶³ (Much later, came plans to serialise and televise a condensed version of the trilogy; after much delay, it went to air in 1979¹⁶⁴). Each new wave of interest stimulated sales and, in some cases, even more enthusiastic reviews. Of Dark's ten published novels, only *The Timeless Land* has never been out of print.

Beyond the many obvious implications which the success of her first historical novel had for Dark, a vital one was its implicit challenge to her conception of art. In her letter of congratulations, Nettie Palmer had puzzled over the fact

that such a good book should be so popular: or to put it the other way, that a popular book should be so good.¹⁶⁵

'Popular' and 'good' seemed to Palmer, Dark and others in the little company mutually exclusive categories of achievement. Would the success of *The Timeless Land* in time alter Dark's views on these matters? Would she now seize the moment granted her by her 'once-in-a-lifetime' novel and court the kind and scale of readership that might serve as a basis for that elusive people's literature?

The years leading up to and including the outbreak of the Second World War witnessed the extremes in Dark's life as an individual and as an artist. Her hour of lead had turned to her hour of gold. Her despondency of the months following the publication of *Waterway* had been transformed into euphoria following the publication of *The Timeless Land*. She could now look forward to a consolidation of the gains she had made in these years. She had fought for her own individuality at home, and secured her own patch of private ground. Linking arms with kindred spirits of the little company, she had finally engaged with the politics of her profession. She had attained a level of commercial and literary success that placed her indisputably among her country's leading creative writers. She had given the story of European settlement in Australia wide currency at home and abroad. For the moment, she felt emboldened for the struggles she could see ahead. As she wrote to Miles Franklin in October 1941:

Heaven forbid that the corroboree-makers should be the ones to turn their faces to the wall & die!¹⁶⁶

Awaiting Dark, however, were challenges for which this period had ill-prepared her, most particularly the war and the unexpected trials it would bring to her work and family life. There would also be, she later confessed, the 'reverse side to the satisfaction of writing a book which has had a "success."¹⁶⁷ As Devanny remarked some four years after the novel's publication and with no successor yet in sight:

I could not help wondering about Eleanor Dark's next book. In her historical masterpiece she has set a standard by which all her future work will be judged. Will the torments and anxieties and impulses of world war enable her to maintain her place on the Olympian heights? I wonder!¹⁶⁸

The legacy of the period 'September, 1937 – July, 1940,' like the period itself, would be a mixed one.

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- ¹ Phrase borrowed – reversed – from title of the second volume of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's diaries: *Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead: Diaries and Letters, 1929-1932*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York and London, 1973.
 - ² Eleanor Dark, *The Timeless Land*, p. 69.
 - ³ Letter from Shirley Darbyshire Meynell (England) to Eleanor Dark, 21.7.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1. While this is the only reference that exists to this momentous decision on Eleanor Dark's part, Meynell's remarks leave no doubt that she was responding directly to what her friend had written in an earlier correspondence, most probably sometime between mid-April 1938 and mid-July 1938, the intervening time between Meynell's two letters to Dark of this period.
 - ⁴ Letter from Eric E. Lowe (London) to Eleanor Dark, 23.3.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1. Again, this is the only reference available on this point. Lowe made it explicit here that Eleanor had asked for his advice on the question of 'the problem of living together & the semi-detached villa.' Clearly embarrassed to have been so approached, Lowe devoted a solid paragraph to sending the whole thing up.
 - ⁵ Interview by Mrs J. Moore with Eleanor Dark, Broadcast in National Women's Session, 14.11. 46, ref. ST 333 2/1 Box 1, Australian Archives, p. 1.
 - ⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 23.6.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
 - ⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 14.7.37, ML MSS 4545 24(25)
 - ⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to A. Collins, Curtis Brown, U.S.A., 22.1.38, ML MSS 4545 24(25)

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- ⁹ Letter from A. Collins, Curtis Brown, U.S.A., to Eleanor Dark, 31.12.37, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ¹⁰ Diary entry of 9.12.37, ML MSS 4545 18(25)
- ¹¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 24.12.37, ML MSS 4545 24(25)
- ¹² Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins (UK), 1.4.38, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ¹³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to A. Collins, Curtis Brown, U.S.A., 25.1.38, ML MSS 4545 24(25)
- ¹⁴ Letter from William Collins, U.K., to Eleanor Dark, 5.11.37, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ¹⁵ Letter from Eric Lowe (London) to Eric Dark, 30.9.37, NLA MS 4998, file 1. Lowe had been asked by Collins, Eleanor's British publishers, to relay a message to her (which he did here via Eric) concerning 'her method of writing.'
- ¹⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 26.11.37, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ¹⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 21.6.(38), in the possession of Michael Dark.
- ¹⁸ Diary entry of 7.8.38, ML MSS 4545 18(25)
- ¹⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 15.8.38, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 6/147-148.
- ²⁰ Letter from 'Mollie' White, widow of Osmar White, to me, 12.2.92.
- ²¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 23.8.38, ML MSS 4545 16(25), 6/159-160: 6/160.
- ²² Fenella Souter, 'After Dark,' *The Arts, Panorama*, pp. 35-38: p. 37.
- ²³ Diary entry, 3.1.37, ML MSS 4545 18(25)
- ²⁴ Devanny, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
- ²⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 'July 1940,' ML MSS 4545 16(25)
- ²⁶ The first entry in the file, dated May that year, concerns his intercepted letter to J. Healy, General Secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation promising 'practical assistance' to the striking Port Kembla dock workers. Another early entry holds a copy of Eric's furious letter of protest of 20 April 1940 to the N.S.W. Attorney-General in which 'as a private citizen attached to no political party' he expressed his 'loathing & utter detestation of the

repressive measures proposed against Communist publications.’ By July 1940, the C.I.B.’s enquiries into Eric’s activities had become potentially much more damaging. A fellow Medical Repatriation Officer – ‘the M.R.O. from Katoomba’ – had accused him of attempting ‘to dissuade enlistments in A.I.F. or A.M.F.,’ and the organisation was actively pursuing these allegations of professional misconduct. (Memorandum from (name illegible) Captain, Intelligence Section (Ia), Eastern Command, to Intelligence Section, Eastern Command, 30.7.40, A.S.I.O. file A6119/1:82.) By May 1941, however, with no ‘evidence to show that whilst he was acting as M.O. there were higher proportions of rejections than when any other M.O. was acting’ the case was closed. (Memorandum from Lieutenant G.H.V. Newman, Intelligence Section, (I b), Eastern Command to B 3 (I) Eastern Command, 3.5.41, A.S.I.O. file A6119/1:82)

- 27 Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 1.4.38, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- 28 Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 26.11.37, ML MSS 4545 24(25)
- 29 Letter from Eleanor Dark to J. Green, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 29.8.38, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- 30 Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 23.6.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- 31 Letter from Eleanor Dark to J. Green, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 17.6.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- 32 Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 23.6.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- 33 Letter from Eleanor Dark to J. Green, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 16.12.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- 34 Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O’Reilly, (early half of) 1940, in possession of Michael Dark.)
- 35 Letter from Eleanor Dark to J. Green, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 10.6.40, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- 36 Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 9.5.40, 437, ML MSS 364/26.
- 37 Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O’Reilly, (early half of) 1940, in possession of Michael Dark.

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- ³⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Alan Collins, Curtis Brown Ltd., New York, 29.7.40, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ³⁹ In late 1938, in what she called 'a fit of extravagance,' Dark bought 'quite a collection' of 'second-hand Australian books,' including about Aborigines, at a Dymocks' sale. The 'gem of the collection' was 'a copy of "The Voyage of Gov. Phillip to Botany Bay" date 1789.' The three books listed above were most probably among her purchases at this time. Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 8.12.38, 6/171-77, ML MSS 4545 16(25)
- ⁴⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., dated 23.6.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁴¹ Eleanor Dark, *The Timeless Land*, Collins, 1956, Preface, p. 9.
- ⁴² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Mary S. Thompson, The Macmillan Co. of New York, 9.4.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁴³ Letter from Eric Dark to Warwick Blayden, 12.5.83, in possession of Michael Dark.
- ⁴⁴ Interview by W.L. Blayden of Eric Dark at 'Varuna' in Katoomba, 3.8.83, copy of transcript in the possession of Michael Dark.
- ⁴⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Mary S. Thompson, The Macmillan Co. of New York, 9.4.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁴⁶ Interview by Blayden of Dark, *loc. cit.* Indeed, in the course of their journey, Eric gave his knee 'a bit of a wrench' which forced them to cut their trip short. They eventually 'went back and finished it another day.'
- ⁴⁷ Dark, *The Timeless Land*, pp. 217-221.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- ⁵⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 23.6.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 9.12.38, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁵³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 23.6.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁵⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 26.11.37, ML MSS 4545 22(25)

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- ⁵⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to J. Green, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 29.8.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁵⁶ Letter from William Collins, U.K., to Eleanor Dark, 19.7.39, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁵⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to J. Green, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 10.6.40, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁵⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. of New York, 8.9.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁵⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 23.9.(38), in the possession of Michael Dark.
- ⁶⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Geoffrey Halliday, Curtis Brown Ltd., (London), (around mid-September1941), ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ⁶¹ Letter from Ursula Heather, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, to Eleanor Dark, 25.11.41, ML MSS 4545 23(25)
- ⁶² Undated manuscript, n.p., written most likely in 1940 or thereabouts, ML MSS 4545 14(25)
- ⁶³ Extraordinary as it may seem, a matter which consumed the interest and emotions of so many of her colleagues, as it did Western intellectuals generally, is left unrecorded within her collection of papers, except for a passing note in a diary entry of 23 March 1938 that she was 'Reading "Spanish Testament."'
- ⁶⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 9.6.39, 6/189, ML MSS 4545 16(25)
- ⁶⁵ Letter from Eric Lowe (in Copenhagen) to Eleanor Dark, 15.6.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ⁶⁶ Letter from Shirley Darbyshire Meynell (from England) to Eleanor Dark, 21.7.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ⁶⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 27.9.38, 6/165/167: 6/167, ML MSS 4545 16(25).
- ⁶⁸ Letter from Shirley Darbyshire Meynell (from England) to Eleanor Dark, 26.11.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ⁶⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 10.10.41, MS MSS 364/26/447.
- ⁷⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, U.K., 29.7.40, ML MSS 4545 22(25).

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- ⁷¹ Typed rough draft of intended 'Prologue,' pp. 15, p. 3, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁷² Letter from Xavier Herbert (Northern Territory) to Eleanor Dark, 24.4.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ⁷³ 'Culture in Australia,' part of The Arts V Series entitled 'Australia Speaks to America,' 1944, A.B.C. Documents Archives, ref. SP300/1 box 14. Speakers include Leslie Rees, Ure Smith and Eleanor Dark. Asked by Rees to name the Australian writers which most interested her, Dark replied 'A very difficult question – except that I think I could put at the head of the list Xavier Herbert.' *Capricornia*, she argued, was 'less than a book than an experience.'
- ⁷⁴ Letter from Shirley Darbyshire Meynell (England) to Eleanor Dark, 26.11.38, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ⁷⁵ Transcript of Hazel De Berg Collection, 'Eleanor Dark,' Tape 92, Cut 3, first side, taped on February 1960, from 'Varuna.'
- ⁷⁶ J.J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia 1770-1975*, St. Martin's Press, 1978, p. 175.
- ⁷⁷ Dark, *The Timeless Land*, 'Preface.'
- ⁷⁸ It reads in part: 'I do believe that we, nine-tenths of whose "progress" has been a mere elaboration and improvement of the technique, as opposed to the art of living, might have learned much from a people who, whatever they may have lacked in technique, had developed that art to a very high degree. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" – to us a wistful phrase, describing a far-away goal – sums up what was, to them, a taken-for-granted condition of their existence.' *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁹ By placing *The Timeless Land* outside its own distinctive contextual framework, studies have tended to blur what are significant differences between this and other volumes of the trilogy. Stephen Murray-Smith was correct when he argued in 1963 that 'the effect of the trilogy is less impressive than that of *The Timeless Land* considered by itself,' although the problems which a joint study of the three volumes presents are not simply of an artistic but also of a historical kind. Stephen Murray-Smith, *Australian Book Review*, Vol., 2, No. 11, September 1963, p. 178.
- ⁸⁰ C. Hartley Grattan Collection, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas at Austin.
- ⁸¹ De Berg Collection, *loc. cit.*

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- ⁸² Undated manuscript, n.p., probably written in 1940 or thereabouts, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ⁸³ Dark, *The Timeless Land*, Preface.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 407.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 407.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 406.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 407.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 408.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.
- ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- ¹⁰² Letter from Brian Fitzpatrick, General Secretary of the Council for Civil Liberties, to Eleanor Dark, 23.10.39, NLA MS 4965/1/429.
- ¹⁰³ Letter from Len Fox (official historian of the Fellowship of Australian Writers) to me, 5.3.90, explaining that according to his records Eleanor never attended any F.A.W. meetings. This information fits with the lack of any suggestion in Dark's papers of her attendance at any Fellowship meeting. Being a vice-president of The Council for Civil Liberties, *per se*, does not seem to have entailed very much at all, except having one's name appear as part of the Executive on Council letterheads. Kim E. Beazley (member of the House of Representatives in Canberra) in a letter to 'the Secretary' of the Council, 31.8.53, resigned as vice-president for precisely this reason. The 'position,' he complained, 'has no reality--that is to say, no consultation on policy takes place, so that a Vice-

Presidency is purely ornamental. It amounts to lending one's name for projects on which one is not consulted.' NLA MS 4965/1/ (somewhere between 964-1000).

- ¹⁰⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 9.5.40, ML MSS 364/26/437.
- ¹⁰⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 27.4.40, 433-435, ML MSS 364/26.
- ¹⁰⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 9.5.40, 437, ML MSS 364/26.
- ¹⁰⁷ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 26.5.40, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁰⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 4.6.40, 439, ML MSS 364/26.
- ¹⁰⁹ 'Folder' entitled 'Do you believe in freedom of speech?', written by Eleanor and Eric Dark, 4 pp., NLA MS 4965/1/1177-78 enclosed in a letter from Eric Dark to Brian Fitzpatrick, 14.5.50, NLA MS 4965/1/1174.
- ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Frank Dalby Davison, 23.6.40, NLA MS 1945/1/127.
- ¹¹² Letter from Brian Fitzpatrick to Ted Laurie, 9.6.40, NLA MS 4965/1/556.
- ¹¹³ Letter from Brian Fitzpatrick to Herbert Burton, (President of the Council for Civil Liberties), 25.5.40, NLA MS 4965/1/ (between 542-556).
- ¹¹⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 9.5.40, 437, ML MSS 364/26.
- ¹¹⁵ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, 11.6.40, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹¹⁶ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Eleanor Dark, 14.6.40, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹¹⁷ Letter from Katharine Susannah Prichard to the Professorial Board of the University of Western Australia, (9.40), ML MSS 2008 2(14) K22104.
- ¹¹⁸ Letter from L.G. Ashton, Hon. Sec., F.A.W., Sydney, to Rt. Hon. W.M. Hughes, Attorney-General, 14.7.40, ML MSS 2008 2(14) K22104.

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- ¹¹⁹ Letter from W.M. Hughes to L.G. Ashton, 22.7.40, ML MSS 2008 2(14) K22104.
- ¹²⁰ Letter from Katharine Susannah Prichard to L.G. Ashton, 4.9.40, ML MSS 2008 2(14) K22104.
- ¹²¹ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 16.5.38, NLA MS 1174/1/5384.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*
- ¹²³ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Vance Palmer, 28.12.40, NLA MS 1174/1/5873.
- ¹²⁴ Letter from Miles Franklin to Jean Devanny, 30.8.39, 0064, ML MSS 364/32 CY 1174.
- ¹²⁵ Letter from Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin, 22.9.39, 0065, ML MSS 364/32 CY 1174.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁷ Diary entry, 4.8.39, in Vivian Smith (ed.), *Nettie Palmer*, University of Queensland Press, 1988, pp. 249-250.
- ¹²⁸ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, 11.6.40, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹²⁹ Letter from Geoffrey Halliday, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, to Eleanor Dark, 27.9.40, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹³⁰ Letter from James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. of New York, to Eleanor Dark, 22.7.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹³¹ Letter from William Collins, U.K., to Eleanor Dark, 1.10.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹³² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Geoffrey Halliday, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 8.11.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹³³ 'Novel of Australian Settlement,' *The New York Times Review*, 5.10.41, pp. 5 & 18, ML MSS 4545 21(25); Dorothy Caulfield, 'The Birth of a Nation – Down in Australia, the *New York Herald Tribune*, 5.10.41, ML MSS 4545 21(25); 'Novels of the Week,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1.11.41, ML MSS 4545 21(25); R.K., 'Eleanor Dark's Most Outstanding Work,' the *Melbourne Age*, 11.4.42, ML MSS 4545 21(25); '3 years work writing and researching *The Timeless Land 1937-1940*,' *Melbourne Herald*, 24.1.42; 'Literary Honour from Uncle Sam,' *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 13.9.41, ML MSS 4545 21(25).

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- ¹³⁴Caulfield, *loc. cit.*
- ¹³⁵ See for example: 'Recent Books and American Reviews,' *The Advocate* (Melbourne), 20.11.41, ML MSS 4545 21(25); (Joyce Lambert, 'Great American Honor for Australian Novelist,' *Woman*, p. 4, 8.12.41, ML MSS 4545 21(25); Book review, *Telegraph* (Sydney), 6.10.41, ML MSS 4545 21(25); 'Lets her pencil lead her,' *Sun* (Sydney), 4.9.41, ML MSS 4545 21(25)
- ¹³⁶ This was an honour which, at the time, had been attained only once before by an Australian author: Henry Handel Richardson in 1929 for *Ultima Thule*, the last volume of her historical trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930).
- ¹³⁷ Portion of a letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 16.10.41, in the possession of Michael Dark.
- ¹³⁸ Book review, the *Bulletin* (Melbourne), 7.1.42, ML MSS 4545 21(25).
- ¹³⁹ Dark, *The Timeless Land*, 'Preface.'
- ¹⁴⁰ Book review, *Country Life* (Sydney), 9.1.42, ML MSS 4545 21(25)
- ¹⁴¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 16.4.42, 455, ML MSS 364/26.
- ¹⁴² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴³ Handwritten copy of letter from Eleanor Dark to Geoffrey Halliday, Curtis Brown, Ltd., London, (mid-September 1941), ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ¹⁴⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 17.11.41, ML MSS 364/26 421-85.
- ¹⁴⁵ Letter from Miles Franklin to Eleanor Dark, 5.9.41, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁴⁶ Letter from Flora Eldershaw to Eleanor Dark, 15.7.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁴⁷ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 24.11.41, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁴⁸ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 14.10.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁴⁹ Letter from Jean Devanny to Eleanor Dark, 10.5.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁵⁰ Her antagonism towards *The Timeless Land* was apparent even before reading the book. Expressing herself 'anxious to see this

book,' it is clear that what she mockingly called Eleanor's "Enormous Success" irked her. Dark, she remarked acidly to Nettie, 'always could write but never had anything to say, perhaps that is changed now. We shall see.' To Dark, Barnard struck a very different note. 'Delighted to hear good news of "The Timeless Land,"' she wrote, adding that 'American success is success, & should be profitable--not that I know much about that.' 'I'm looking forward very eagerly,' she said, 'to seeing the book.' (Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, 18.8.41, NLA MS 4998, file 1.) Soon after reading it 'slowly and digestingly,' Barnard wrote again expressing the view that the 'original impulse,' as she put it, had 'never quite floated the mass of the book.' The novel suffered from 'a weight of explanation, a failure to fuse. The idea is there but not the technique.' Assuring Dark that she was 'not out of sympathy,' Barnard apologised for her bluntness. 'If I did not think the book of great importance, well I'd find some more or less smooth way of saving your face & mine. This, this is like the burial of William the Conqueror.' (Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, 'Tuesday' (c. November-December 1941, NLA MS 4998, file 1.) Separating the personal from the literary threads in Barnard's comments is not always easy, yet it is important to do so here. Whether or not her comments stemmed originally from ungenerous feelings, some of them were valid and insightful. Her comments on Dark's novels, however couched, all ultimately convict the author of failing to merge 'idea' and 'technique,' of being able to write but having 'nothing to say.' Dark, Barnard maintained, was a consummate craftsperson but she was no artist or thinker. Some works justify these views more than others; *Prelude to Christopher* and *The Timeless Land* do not.

¹⁵¹ Letter from Mary Alice Evatt to Eleanor Dark, '41-'42,' NLA MS 4998, file 1. E. Daniel Potts and Annette Potts have written in some detail about what they call Richard Casey's 'great propaganda campaign' in Washington to promote a sympathetic understanding of Australia among Americans, 'in the hope that this would lead to an American commitment to come to the aid of Australia in the event of the outbreak of a Pacific war.' Part of his campaign included the publication of a small monthly bulletin entitled *Australia*, and urging Australian 'literary visitors' to the United States 'to speak and write on Australian subjects.' *The Timeless Land* fitted well into his campaign. E. Daniel Potts and Annette

Potts, 'Australian Wartime Propaganda and Censorship,' pp. 565-575, *Historical Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 85, October 1985.

- ¹⁵² Letter from M.F. Ashley Montagu, Associate Professor of Anatomy, The Hahnemann Medical College & Hospital of Philadelphia, to Eleanor Dark, 1.21.41, NLA MS 4998, file 1. He is the author of *Coming into being among the Australian Aborigines* (1937) referenced in the book's Bibliography.
- ¹⁵³ Letter from A.P. Elkin, Department of Anthropology, The University of Sydney, to Eleanor Dark, 29.4.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1. Elkin was another author of a work consulted in the writing of the book, and named in its 'Acknowledgements.'
- ¹⁵⁴ Letter from R.G. Howarth, Department of English, The University of Sydney, to Eleanor Dark, 17.4.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁵⁵ Letter from C.H. Currey, Lecturer-in-charge, Department of History and Social Science, Teachers' College, The University of Sydney, to Eleanor Dark, 19.1.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁵⁶ Letter from Alfred E. Stephen, Royal Australian Historical Society, to Eleanor Dark, 21.11.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁵⁷ Some fifteen years later, Dark received a letter from the historian Manning Clark informing her of his request to his publishers to send her 'a copy of the new impression of my book on Australian history.' 'The reason for this,' he explained, 'is that if there is any value in the work at all this issues in part from the inspiration in reading *The Timeless Land*, and I would like you to accept the book in gratitude for all that I owe to your own work.' Letter from Manning Clark, the School of General Studies, Australian National University, to Eleanor Dark, 22.8.63, NLA MS 4998, file 2. In the second volume of his autobiography, *Quest for Grace*, Clark paid a public tribute to Dark for offering him, on the eve of his first lecture on Australian history at the University of Melbourne, 'the response of an Australian' to the land. Eleanor Dark, Clark argued, 'belonged.' 'Here was someone looking out, not looking in, and not recoiling from much that she noticed.'
- ¹⁵⁸ Manning Clark, *Quest for Grace*, Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 160-161.
- ¹⁵⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Margaret Kent Hughes, 27.10.48, 7/101, ML MSS 4545 16(25).
- ¹⁶⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. of New York, 5.3.44, ML MSS 4545 22(25).

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- ¹⁶¹ Letter from A. Collins, Curtis Brown Ltd., New York, to Eleanor Dark, 3.9.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25)
- ¹⁶² Letter from Enid Moodie-Heddle, Collins (Australia), to Eleanor Dark, 28.5.45, ML MSS 4545 23(25).
- ¹⁶³ Letter from William Collins, U.K., to Eleanor Dark, 23.5.47, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁶⁴ In 1971, as part of the historical trilogy which carried its name, *The Timeless Land* reached the apex of its commercial success when, for the sum of \$20,000, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (A.B.C.) purchased the television rights. News of the A.B.C.'s plans, in turn, sparked off renewed interest in the book itself, as had earlier the publications of the second and third volumes of the trilogy.
- ¹⁶⁵ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Eleanor Dark, 14.10.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1.
- ¹⁶⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 10.10.41, ML MSS 364/26/447.
- ¹⁶⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam of The Macmillan Co. of New York, 28.7.44, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁶⁸ Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, pp. 255-256.

Chapter Six.

War within, war without, 1940-1945¹

I write what I can when I can. At the moment I'm "stuck", and have finished nothing since "Timeless Land", but I hope to come unstuck shortly. Australian literature was, I think, beginning to gallop before the war; since the war there seems to be a certain paralysis.

²



'E & I,' c. mid-1940s

The Timeless Land lifted Eleanor Dark's profile from writer to woman of letters, literary to community figure. It broadened her audience: her fan mail now included serious and popular, national and international readers. It earned her recognition as a scholar from academics in fields as diverse as anthropology, anatomy, botany, history and literature. For a time it even lent her celebrity status, raising the currency of her opinions on war-related and other matters and leading a wide spectrum of groups to seek her patronage. The artist was besieged by calls from friendly societies, institutions of learning, fellow writers and radicals to lend her name and expertise to their causes.

Dark achieved this acclaim at one of the most critical junctures in

modern Australian history. The timeless land was soon to come under threat of foreign invasion. Barely a month after the Australian publication of her novel, Australia declared war on Japan on 8 December 1941. The months that followed, punctuated by the fall of Singapore, the Japanese raids on Darwin, the discovery of three midget submarines in Sydney Harbour, called into question Australia's very survival as a nation. Allied victories in the Coral Sea of May-June 1942 served to ease the fears of an imminent Japanese invasion of the mainland, but three years had to pass before the spectre of Japanese military ascendancy in the Pacific and a Nazi-dominated Europe was removed.

In theory, the artist did not flinch from the challenges posed by such developments, being, as Dark saw it, two people fused into one: 'the citizen and the writer (who observes, relates, analyses, interprets and records).' The artist was 'not something else than a citizen, but something more. That extra dimension called his art.' As 'the battleground over which all the problems and passions of the world go brawling, yelling and struggling'³, the artist's responsibility was to absorb, assimilate and interpret the tensions of society for the ordinary citizen. One was 'master,' the other 'disciple.'⁴ The artist belonged to the select few who as society's 'creative thinkers, the pioneers of thought' constituted, in her view, 'the true leaders of mankind.'⁵

The theory did not reflect the practice. Dark's conception of the artist as a natural leader bound inevitably to 'the problems and passions of the world' bore little relation either to the needs of her country-at-war or to her response to those needs. Indeed, the practice constituted an ironic reversal of the theory. Plunged into a state of 'internal chaos'⁶ and 'productive paralysis'⁷ from which she only emerged in 1943-1944, the artist was demobilised even before military hostilities began. Deprived for all intents and purposes of that 'extra dimension,' it was the citizen – not the artist – who answered the call of country and joined ordinary Australians as one more invisible thread in the large canvas that was the home front of the war years.

Wartime saw the blossoming of Citizen Dark. She brought an impressive array of skills and gifts to her tasks: a talent for organisation, media experience, contacts in high places, boundless energies, humour and compassion. The rewards were mutual. Katoomba seemed to expand to accommodate her more generous attitude to community life. Young strangers infiltrated her home and her hours, her diaries and her heart. Abstract terms which until now had been among the thinker's favourite mental toys – 'community,' 'individual,' 'responsibility,' 'moral leadership' and the like – assumed concrete shape. Wartime –

from rations to trench-digging, from fears of foreign invasion to anxieties over loved ones in uniform – was a universal experience in a way that the Depression was not. It forced its way into her personal environment and its collective experience onto her consciousness. The spartan in Dark seemed to welcome its challenges. If she was living ‘in the clouds’ at this time, as Devanny claimed,⁸ it was despite, not because of, the exertions of the citizen.

The disappearance of the artist and the emergence of the citizen were not unusual. The condition of ‘artistic paralysis’ was endemic among the little company. They donned a variety of cloaks from public servants to information officers, public historians to broadcasters. It was, as Dark herself admitted, ‘a case of working where one is most urgently needed.’⁹ Most published little if any fiction.

While the Muse was an early casualty of the war, duties and obligations attaching to their profession remained. Though the ‘divine spark’ would not be summoned at will, there were other ways for writers to share the burdens of wartime. Dark did not see it this way, consistently refusing to apply herself as a writer to the cause of literature, politics or country. The relationship between the politics of her art and the politics of her profession had vexed her before. This time the cut was clean and surgical.

Though out of action, the artist refused to relinquish her throne and its privileges. While the citizen laboured long hours, shared the intimacy of her home with strangers, placed ‘Varuna’ and its gardens at the service of her community, the artist brooded, removed and self-indulgent. Just how removed and self-indulgent becomes clear late in the period. The artist’s sole contribution to her society-at-war, *The Little Company* (1945) came belatedly, coinciding with the signing of the peace, and bore little relation to the collective experience of that society. The novel prompted even staunch supporters in the little company to wonder at the extent of her isolation from the realities of wartime.

For the artist, the war period was marked by sulks, tantrums and rationalisations. First, she blamed her historical novel: the mental strain brought about by the long and arduous period of writing;¹⁰ the ‘hullabaloo’ which had threatened the artist’s need for privacy and right to anonymity; even the novel’s success which had set unrealistic expectations for her future work.¹¹ Later, the list of scapegoats broadened to include the community at large for its lack of commitment to Australian writers and their work.

So long as the community as a whole is not perfectly sure and consistent in its attitude that writing is the writer’s *first* job, and that society must be adjusted to that fact, the

people's literature will suffer.¹²

Lamenting the lack of domestic help,¹³ she often despaired of finding time to write. Recounting to her American publisher in late 1942 '[t]he changes in our Australian way of life,' she noted that 'domestics are even more scarce than cigarettes!'¹⁴ His reply was laced with gentle mockery, assuring her that she seemed 'to be doing as well as could be expected without servants or cigarettes.'¹⁵

Above all, Dark blamed the war – which 'tends to make all one's thinking restless and chaotic'¹⁶ – for her artistic paralysis. 'There should be floods of stuff being produced, but there is something paralysing about all this waste and horror.'¹⁷ She also pointed to the shortage of paper and what she saw as the 'illogical use being made of such paper as is available' as responsible for 'stultifying the writer's war contribution.'¹⁸ Her American publisher's attempt in late 1942 to prick the artist's conscience by reminding her that 'regardless of the vicissitudes of war you have an obligation to your times'¹⁹ touched a raw nerve. She responded indignantly:

I'm quite painfully conscious of the obligation of all writers to their times – and it has made these two unproductive years rather nightmarish!²⁰

On the surface, the Darks' lifestyle seemed unfussed by the war. By then, her personal life had well established rhythms and patterns, many of which remained. 'Perfect day. Les here gardening,' she noted in her diary of 6 June 1943.²¹ To the casual observer of the household, the war appeared far away. 'Varuna' – described by colleague Kylie Tennant in 1941 as so 'idyllic a retreat' – remained the centrepiece of family and social life:²² homespun in feel but, as Dark admitted, 'luxurious' in style.²³ Like its mistress, the home had evolved into a well-integrated blend of the spartan and the extravagant, the practical and the aesthetic.



The new 'Varuna,' flash but not too flash!

A week-end visitor in 1944, Jean Devanny was captivated.

No foolish luxury in that home. Only every essential comfort, every modern convenience and electrical appliance, every cultural facility. There is beauty of soft furnishings and shining surfaces, of unpolished maple panelling. And everywhere flowers. Lounge room, sun rooms, living rooms, studies and hallways, all gay and redolent with flowers.²⁴

Gardening remained a main priority and source of relaxation. There was always 'yet another vast work' ahead and another round of elaborate plans and lively family discussions to precede it. Molly was kept abreast of developments through their regular correspondence. 'It is to be a kind of stone trough under the pine trees opposite the front door,' Dark explained of a major garden project in the winter of 1941, 'in which we plan to grow dwarf blossoming trees and small azaleas.'²⁵ There were also periodic escapes to the cave and elsewhere in the surrounding bushland, regular bouts of domesticity with afternoon-long sessions of jam- and preserves-making, and sewing bees. War intruded into these pursuits only as an inconvenience. 'I got a pattern for a divided skirt,' she wrote to Molly in late 1942,

it looks delightfully simple to make! – but on enquiring how many coupons I would have to give for the necessary material, I find I have to give one more [sic] than I would have had to give for a ready-made skirt.²⁶



The mistress of 'Varuna' all of a piece in her domestic environment.

Throughout, the Darks hosted week-end visitors, small dinners and afternoon tennis parties. War rationing may have affected their ability to entertain but no hint of it appears in the records. They also paid regular visits to Molly in Sydney, taking the opportunity to catch up with friends and professional associates, attend school reunions,²⁷ concerts,²⁸ literary gatherings and other social affairs.

Family holidays remained special treats for Eleanor, Eric and Mike, now in his early teens. In 1941, they vacationed in Wallacia, a small town at the foot of the Blue Mountains, where they stayed for a fortnight at a hotel which though 'comfortable' was 'very understaffed owing to the war.' No holiday was complete without a leisurely exploration of the countryside. 'We have had a rowing on the river twice,' she reported to Molly,

yesterday we took one for the whole day & rowed about 6 or 7 miles up to Bent's Basin, a very delightful spot, & the whole river very pretty & all to ourselves.²⁹

Beneath the smooth surface of this comfortable and serene life, however, lay anxiety. Unlike the Depression, war quickly assumed personal meaning and implications for this otherwise 'world-proof life.' Bim's decision of late 1939 to join the army recalled painful memories of another brother and another war.³⁰ Eric's decision of May 1942 to enlist in the Volunteer Defence Corps³¹ unsettled her further. She was devastated at the sight of him 'putting all the badges, stars & other oddments to his uniform' in preparation for a military parade. 'I had so prayed that I would never see him in a uniform again!'³²



Another brother – another war. Bim on home leave, c. 1942-43

A far more painful blow was contemplating an indefinite separation from Mike. The possibility of Japanese attack looming large in the second half of 1941, she and Eric decided to send him away to The Armidale School in New England where they hoped he would be in ‘comparative safety’ from ‘possible air raids.’³³ Mike spent almost four years at the boarding school, from early 1942 until the end of the third term of the 1946 academic year.³⁴ Though convinced of the wisdom of their decision, Dark was desolate. Again, it was the mother-child nexus that most undermined her emotionally. Of all the sacrifices of wartime, she confessed to her publisher in September 1942,

What I feel most is that we have had to send our boy 400 miles away to boarding school in the country, instead of to a Sydney school as we had planned.³⁵

By August 1941, the prospect of Mike’s departure in early 1942 was weighing heavily on her mind.³⁶ No sooner had he left than the countdown to school holidays began, particularly the long Christmas break when, as she wrote to Molly in September 1942, ‘I shall have Mike home for seven or eight weeks.’³⁷ Times together were bittersweet. Each farewell freshened the pain of separation. ‘The end of his holidays seems to be coming so near now,’ she complained in late January 1943, ‘& instead of being more resigned after a year I feel even more rebellious about his going so far away.’³⁸ Separation from her son plunged her into a cycle of emotional highs and lows. Long-awaited school holidays were followed by traumatic farewells at the station: ‘always such a gloomy and melancholy proceeding.’³⁹ The slightest lag in his routine letters plunged her into a panic – ‘imagining him laid up in

the sick room again'.⁴⁰ The letters themselves often left her depressed. She seized sudden opportunities to visit him. Indeed, she was so eager to see him that the reluctant public speaker leapt at an invitation by the headmaster of his school to give an address.⁴¹ Back in 'Varuna' from her visit and feeling 'rather forlorn,' she confessed to Molly yet again: 'I hate him being so far away.'⁴²

Underneath the mother's pinings and tearful farewells, lay a resilient character, forged through a childhood of losses and absences. Dark indulged her feelings only so much, shaping with Eric a purposeful life around the void. Eric – being Eric – ensured she felt neither bored nor unneeded. One of her 'two restless and energetic creatures' might be away,⁴³ but the other compensated with his enthusiasms and passions. Sent by Molly an old letter in which Dowell O'Reilly described young Eric as 'divinely in earnest,'⁴⁴ Eleanor retorted:

'Divinely in earnest' still suits Eric very well, though I'm not sure that "diabolically in earnest" wouldn't be even better. Anyhow – in earnest!⁴⁵

Eric Dark's journey 'from Right to Left' picked up pace during the war. Seeking an ever-wider audience for his message of political salvation, he addressed many diverse community groups from women doctors,⁴⁶ his wife's Women's Club and the F.A.W. in Sydney on the topic that had become his signature theme: the social and moral aspects of medicine. He was also engaging more directly with forces at the centre of Australian politics. Enraged by 'the latest security regulations' announced by the Federal Government in January 1941, he planned a meeting of the local A.L.P. branch 'to tell Chifley what his duty is.'⁴⁷

His *Medicine and the Social Order* (1943) constituted his most important political act of the war period.⁴⁸ Arguing that 'to-day, as always, the two arch-destroyers of health and life are poverty and war',⁴⁹ the book was intended as

an indictment of capitalism, and a plea for socialism as the only alternative to a recoil into a darker age than the world has ever seen.⁵⁰

Eleanor did not share her husband's passionate approach to socialism, and became increasingly alienated from the cause. In 1943, she confided in her private notebook to a certain disillusionment with the Communist Party which, although claiming 'the most advanced attitude towards the problem of the relationship between the sexes,' was yet to place 'the man-woman relationship upon what I should regard as a stable and satisfactory theoretical basis.'⁵¹ Her alienation extended to the Labor movement itself. Here too it appears she kept her own

counsel. An incident of 1942 seemed to encapsulate for her the arrogance of the Labor leadership. Aghast at remarks made recently to her by 'a man who is closely connected with the Australian Labor Movement' that 'the masses must be "manoeuvred into position",' she rose indignant in their defence.

Is it to be wondered at that I had an instant mental picture of the sheep-dog trials at the Sydney Show? The swift, alert, intelligent dog, manoeuvring the poor, silly, confused sheep into the pen – did we ever hear that process described as "leading" the sheep?⁵²

Still, Dark believed – or wanted to believe – in the commonality of her and Eric's political beliefs. In an interview towards the end of this period she remarked cryptically that 'the relationship between my novels and Eric's *Medicine and the Social Order* is very clear.'⁵³ The rationale behind these claims is that artist and doctor, though working in different fields with different tools, shared a common recognition of the principal disease ailing their society and a common commitment to its cure. There were indeed similarities between Eric's book and Eleanor's fiction of the late 1930s – in theme and treatment, lack of emotional restraint and intellectual rigour – but these could hardly have been what she meant. The Darks' socialism seemed to stem from a similar moral indignation and was often articulated through a similar rhetoric of repudiation of the evils of capitalism. Of far greater significance were the differences, particularly in the way doctor and artist interpreted their roles – active and contemplative, respectively – and the very different courses of action to which these led them. Thus, while Eric sought to contribute pieces to the 'jigsaw puzzle,'⁵⁴ his wife pondered on the evolving picture and its implications. Eric's commitment to the socialist struggle deepened with time. The doctor yielded to the socialist, his profession becoming another forum for his political activities.

In Eleanor's case this trend was reversed. She sought to distance herself from the struggle, using her profession as a principal excuse and shield from involvement. With her faith in the leadership waning, she retreated even further, leaving the Eric Darks of the writing profession to carry on the struggle without her. The vital sense of a shared purpose and destiny that had marked their relationship in earlier times was fading. The simple exchange of dedications – of *Medicine and the Social Order* 'To My Wife Eleanor Dark,' and of *The Little Company* to 'E.P.D.' – was between husband and wife, not comrades-in-arms.

Wartime and the war effort provided the couple other ways of sharing a sense of purpose and direction. Eleanor's pet war project is a case in point. In 1942, in co-operation with the general organiser of the

Children's Library Movement in Sydney, Dark embarked on her most substantial community project of the war years: the establishment of a Children's Library in Katoomba. She converted one of the '6 old garages in a dilapidated back-yard in the middle of the town' into the site for the library⁵⁵, and launched it in late July 1942.⁵⁶ A year later, the membership had climbed to almost seven hundred.⁵⁷ Eric emerges in a myriad of roles: as active member of the Library's Executive Committee,⁵⁸ an extra pair of hands in getting the new library site 'shipshape' for its launching,⁵⁹ a generous donor of 'a lovely collection of new books'⁶⁰ and a reliable contributor of the occasional and not inconsiderable cash gift to the Children's Library Movement.⁶¹

In return, Eleanor battled a growing number of his detractors, absorbing the brunt of the rumours circulating in Katoomba of communist links and their implications for his patriotism. She learned to ignore or spar with them as required; sometimes deflecting, sometimes returning the blows. Towards the end of the period, though weary of fighting a largely unseen enemy eroding her peace of mind and their standing in the community, she smoothed over yet another awkward moment. The occasion was a small gathering of society women Eric had just addressed on *Medicine and the Social Order*. Smitten by a remark made to him that he was 'a naughty wicked socialist,' Eleanor assured the lady in question that while he may be a socialist, she 'guaranteed he had no bombs in his pocket.'⁶²

The source of the rumours lay almost certainly within Katoomba where a campaign of harassment against her husband (and by association against her) was damaging their reputations. Even their work for the Children's Library was cast in a sinister mould. Eleanor sought to make light of an increasingly difficult situation.

The anticipated rumours are, I hear, current in Leura--the library run by the Friends of the Soviet Union, & used entirely for Communist propaganda!! No doubt financed by Moscow Gold!⁶³

Eric's work with the Volunteer Defence Corps, heading the branch responsible for locating suitable sites for guerrilla bases in the event of Japanese invasion of Australia, also came under suspicion.⁶⁴

Wartime also tapped noble instincts in the community, presenting immense possibilities to the nurturers and carers in society, Eleanor Dark among them. Her gestures of kindness and missions of mercy in the period were many and they appear spontaneous and heartfelt. News that Osmar White had been wounded in New Guinea sent her rushing to his mother's side.⁶⁵ A visit of late 1942 from a stranger in uniform – a

Private Karl Shapiro, an American poet-soldier stationed in a base near Katoomba awaiting orders to set off for New Guinea – led to an impromptu evening meal.⁶⁶ From that gesture of ‘Varuna’ hospitality developed a friendship that endured long after the American’s eighteen-month Australasian tour concluded in mid-1944. He was neither the first nor the last in these troubled times to be offered by Dark a ‘foothold in a strange land.’ But he came to occupy a special place that others did not in the life of Eleanor Dark, the nurturer and unemployed mother.

Indeed, Shapiro – spoiled, brilliant, demanding, charming, immature – provides a rare window into Dark’s intriguing emotional complexion: a view usually obscured by the woman’s typically cool exterior. An undercurrent of sexuality may have formed part of the warm peculiar friendship they forged in surprisingly little time, but was never, it seems, explicit. Barely a month after his first visit, he was invited to spend Christmas at ‘Varuna.’⁶⁷ No sooner had Shapiro arrived in New Guinea than Eleanor began sending him regular parcels containing stamps⁶⁸, books⁶⁹ and magazines,⁷⁰ and (after what he called his ‘brazen request for things to eat’)⁷¹ sweets and a home-made fruit cake for his birthday.⁷² Upon hearing that he had contracted malaria, she redoubled her attentions. ‘Eleanor, You *alarm* me by being alarmed at my sickness,’ he teased her from his hospital bed in a language and attitude of familiarity unique in Dark’s papers. ‘How dare you think that anything could happen to me and my superb *elan vital!*’⁷³ A week later, responding to yet another letter, he resumed the pose, ‘I see it pays to get malaria ... You should be a Red Cross nurse.’⁷⁴ Shapiro returned home to his Irish-American fiancée and to the Pulitzer Prize for *V-Letter and Other Poems* (1944) written during his Australasian tour. In 1945 he dedicated ‘News to Australia’ – a lengthy poem warning antipodeans to ‘hug their insularity’ or perish at the hands of so-called post-war progress – to Eric and Eleanor Dark.

A remarkable feature of this period is Dark’s growing excursions outside her world, actively seeking ways of making herself useful to her community. More in Eric’s aggressive style than her own, she targeted particular groups and causes. In this spirit, she consulted with the welfare office of a local hostel housing ‘munition girls’ for advice. The result was a series of tennis parties at ‘Varuna’ to provide the girls with some distraction and entertainment.⁷⁵ She also embarked on ‘a scheme to type letters for relatives of prisoners of war in Japanese hands’;⁷⁶ and together with Eric, organised a ‘communal vegetable garden.’⁷⁷

The possibility of bringing refugee children from Britain to Australia had been mooted early in the war. Dark had expressed an interest in the scheme, hoping ‘to take one on “for the duration.”’ This was one

contribution to the war effort which the pacifist Dark felt she 'could do with a whole heart.'⁷⁸ A few months later, it seems, she applied 'to have one of the English children who are being sent out here,' but nothing eventuated.⁷⁹ She pursued other avenues. In early 1942, she assumed full care of the young family of a Congregational Minister at Broken Hill, whose wife was soon due to deliver her fourth child. What Dark called fondly 'my three little charges' – a 19-month old baby, and his two sisters, of 5 and 7 years old – arrived in 'Varuna' late April⁸⁰ staying for several weeks. For one long accustomed to 'our luxurious ways,'⁸¹ assuming sole control over the little ones was no small feat. The baby had 'to be watched every waking moment,' but despite this upheaval to her ordered life Dark revelled in her temporary maternal role. 'Poor Baby,' she wrote to Molly during a particularly trying period when all three children were sick with colds, 'is also in the throes of it, but wonderfully good & sweet-tempered in spite of it.'⁸²

Coinciding in part with the 'three little charges' was her allocation of a quota of orphaned children to bath nightly at a local boarding house. This overlapping of duties prompted a frantic but exhilarated diary account:

Took children up to shops in morning, bought toothbrush for Margaret. Took them to park & for walk in aft. Home by 4:30. Bathed baby before tea – put him to bed. Did girls after tea, & then rushed off to Wykehurst where had 13 more to bathe! Fell into bed pretty exhausted.⁸³

The hitherto reluctant public speaker agreed to address various audiences on the subject of education. Dark's first address on the theme 'What do we want our children to learn?' was to Mike's school on Parents' Day December 1942.⁸⁴ Early the following year, she spoke on 'the difficulties and problems of women in adult education'⁸⁵ at the Conference on Adult Education organised by the Sydney University Women Graduates' Association.⁸⁶ In an *Australian Home Budget* interview of July 1945 entitled 'Women's Peacetime World,' Dark argued passionately for the urgent need 'for women to take their place in running world affairs.'⁸⁷ She saw children and women as vulnerable groups, their potential wasted by poor education and prejudice. For 'women' – and this is critical to an understanding of Dark's politics and her idiosyncratic brand of feminism – here as elsewhere read 'mothers.' It was as creators and nurturers of tomorrow's soldiers – and thus cannon fodder of tomorrow's wars – that Dark believed women were principally empowered to have a major voice in the affairs of their society.

Far from prompting a loosening of her rigid conception of the artist and her role in society, Dark's creative paralysis prompted if anything an entrenchment of it. Priorities which had once revolved around the artist remained, even if now they had nothing but a shell to encase them. While fellow writers involved themselves (out of financial necessity as well as a sense of duty) in critiques and reviews, radio broadcasts, literary panels, university guest-lectures, she remained on the sidelines. There was almost an element of defiance in the response: if she could not write, then she was not going to be part of the writing world at all. In solidarity with the artist, the professional writer also removed herself from that world, unavailable to requests for assistance from colleagues and others in the community.

In early 1940 Davison, then president of the Sydney Fellowship, invited her to be part of a proposed School of Literature that would offer courses on a broad spectrum of literary *genres*: novel, short story, literary reportage, poetry and drama.

Less a matter of "teaching people to write" than the forming a small centre where the right type of youngster can get what help more experienced writers can give.⁸⁸

The School might become 'a little island from where our present world can start again when the present blood tide begins to ebb.'⁸⁹ Dark declared she would be 'right out of my element in such an enterprise,' and would 'have nothing to say to them that could be of the slightest use to them – how could I when I am still groping myself!'⁹⁰ Her view of the artist as born – not made or taught – informed this response.

Invited in late 1941 to join a panel at a conference organised by the N.S.W. Aid Russia Committee,⁹¹ Dark refused. Though 'entirely in sympathy' with the aims of the conference, she explained, she had a 'very limited knowledge of the achievements in literature of the USSR' and was too busy with her own work to afford the necessary time for research and preparation. She also explained that 'talking is not my forte ... I can best contribute by sticking to my own job.'⁹²

Such a job did not include matters relating to her profession or the community as a whole. In January 1943 she was asked by a member of the Sydney Fellowship executive to join a group of 'established writers' to be commissioned by the Federal Government

to study war at the front and at the rear at first hand and write of what they see as the spirit moves them.

The aim was not to write 'an official history' but 'something far more personal': to provide the community with

a far more human, living picture of the Australian

people's contribution to the fight for freedom than is possible in any other way.

There would be no haste to publish: contributions could probably 'await the end of the war.'⁹³

Dark's response illustrates starkly the tensions between the artist's insistence on privileges and the neglect of responsibilities of her role. She thought the idea 'excellent' and 'should very much like to accept a nomination,' but had certain stipulations to make.

I couldn't *undertake* to write for current publication – though it's quite likely that the spirit would move me to do so. In fact I couldn't undertake to produce anything within any specified time; such a feeling of restriction would only, in my case, tend to produce inferior writing, so that unless I could be left entirely free to write what I liked, how I liked, and when I liked, I couldn't even consider it.⁹⁴

The Fellowship approached her a few years later to join a panel of judges in their short story competition.⁹⁵ A similar request, this time from the organisers of a proposed Australian Book of the Month Club, followed the next year. She rejected both invitations. To the Club organisers in particular she emphasised

that I am not prepared to act as a judge of books, having very little opinion of my own critical and analytical capacity.

She also rejected categorically the Club's 'idea of a research bureau to answer queries relating to Australian literature *and authors*.' 'Cut out the "and authors" and I'm all with you!,' she retorted, but

when the author as such begins to intrude into literary discussions, attention is liable to be deflected from the book, which is really all that should concern the public!⁹⁶

Dark's defence of the artist's right to privacy and anonymity remained consistent and vehement through the war. She not only refused invitations, but often – as in the case of the Book Club above – felt the need to underscore her feelings. Irritated at having been put through 'the ordeal of having another (photograph) taken,' she told her agent that: 'If I could arrange the literary world to my satisfaction, writers would never be photographed, and would be known by numbers instead of names.'⁹⁷ This attitude was consistent with her long-held views on the artist. Indeed, it was the logical outgrowth of those views. It was the artist who held the key not only to her ability to write but to

fulfil her responsibilities to society. Had she, on that basis, chosen to step aside altogether from the role it would have been one thing, but she did not.

Thus while the artist refused a public profile, she continued to demand public support. This emerges through the one theme on which the artist was prepared to expound at length in these years: namely, the continuing plight of the Australian writer. 'What Are Writers For,' a paper she prepared in 1942 at the request of the English Department at the University of Sydney;⁹⁸ 'Readers & Writers,' a luncheon address to the Book Club of the Women's Union (University of Sydney);⁹⁹ 'Drawing a Line Around it,' an article commissioned by the American literary magazine *The Writer*; as well as several ABC radio broadcasts dealt specifically with this theme.¹⁰⁰ Dark used these opportunities as a forum for her own grievances. The Australian writer, she insisted on one occasion, found it for economic and cultural reasons 'very difficult here to perform his proper function in society.' Australian writers were unable to make writing 'their real job in life' because, she argued, they were too often regarded as 'entertainers only – as trimmings on the social structure, instead of an integral part of it.' In such circumstances, it was 'hardly fair to expect the best from writers' in Australia.¹⁰¹

Beneath the angry rhetoric lay deep anxieties. First she simmered 'with rage and frustration'¹⁰² that her various attempts at 'experimental beginnings on another book'¹⁰³ led nowhere. Then she despaired of ever writing 'any subsequent books'¹⁰⁴, and was filled with self-pity at the thought 'that I used to be a writer once.'¹⁰⁵ The manuscript that eventually evolved into *The Little Company* did not begin to take shape until April 1943. Hopeful that, having amassed a manuscript of some 40,000 words 'without being torn up,' a novel might emerge, Dark informed her American agent of the development.¹⁰⁶ But her hopes proved premature.

The years of hoping that 'the wheels will begin to turn of their own accord'¹⁰⁷ witnessed a series of desperate measures. She turned to poetry again but again without success. She attempted but failed at a 'beginning' for the book that was chronologically to follow *The Timeless Land*.¹⁰⁸ In late 1942, she even contemplated writing non-fiction – 'a series of longish essays on topical questions revolving around Australia'¹⁰⁹ – but was dissuaded by her American publisher who saw no future for it 'in view of the way the war has gone.'¹¹⁰ It was not until early 1944 that the manuscript of her next novel was finally sent off to her British and American agents.

The idea behind *The Little Company* was prompted by James Putnam of Macmillan's New York, Dark's American publisher. Soon

after the completion of *The Timeless Land*, he suggested that she write 'something which would describe what is happening to Australia "under the impact of war."' ¹¹¹ Dark's response evolved in stages. In June 1943, it was to be 'a novel about present-day Australia – not much plot, mainly an attempt to show what a group of people think about and talk about in the last few years.' ¹¹² A few months later, the novel 'practically finished,' she considerably narrowed the scope to cover 'the years 1941-42 as they appear to one Australian family.' ¹¹³

In a confused and confusing way, *The Little Company* straddles three aspects of the impact of war on Australian society: social, professional and personal, or more specifically, the wider community, a small circle of writers, and the Massey family which includes two writers of this circle, Gilbert and Marty, brother and sister. The community provides the foil against which the writers are portrayed as sometimes victims, sometimes visionaries in their society. Their preoccupations and perspectives lend the story its centre of gravity. The 'one Australian family' – the Massey family – lends the story its moral weight.

In *The Little Company* the community exists mainly as an abstracted symbol of all that is petty, shallow and coarse about Australian society. On those rare and fleeting occasions when it assumes a human face, it is either poor and downtrodden, deserving of pity, or materialistic and pretentious, deserving of scorn. A secret companion of Marty's youth, Sally Dodd, reappears unexpectedly in Marty's adult life while shopping one day. Exhibiting her old 'habit of fatalistic acceptance,' looking 'battered and dishevelled,' Sally is a victim: 'Life has been shoving her around ever since she was born,' Marty sympathises, 'it's still shoving her.' Sally has

that curious suggestion of waiting detachment in her eyes
– the expression of poor women who look neither back
nor forward, but husband their resources for what each
passing moment may bring.

Sally has six children 'to provide for' and, as she confesses to Marty 'matter-of-factly,' had 'lost two when they was little.' ¹¹⁴ Miss Butters, Gilbert Massey's secretary, belongs to the category of materialistic and pretentious. She first appears in the story

resplendent in a new frock, her blonde hair elaborately
dressed, her lips brighter than any geranium, her finger-
nails so long that Gilbert often wondered how she typed,
and so vividly lacquered that he sometimes blinked as she
laid papers before him. ¹¹⁵

She personifies what Gilbert later attacks as ‘the cult of beauty’ which

mounted to a frenzy, wrenching our common-sense askew that the pockets of the clothes and cosmetic manufacturers might be filled.¹¹⁶

When in 1944 Dark argued that ‘the products of the writer’s creative impulse – books – are an interpretation to the people of what they are doing and why,’ she was surely not referring to the book she had just completed.¹¹⁷ Here the Australian community – ‘the people’ – remains little more than a faceless target for these writers. Community-criticism takes place at several levels, including as a principal cause of these writers’ artistic paralysis. As Elsa Kay, fellow writer and for a time Gilbert’s mistress, argues: ‘this feeling of paralysis’ is the

result of our having been – as writers, you know – kept at arm’s length by the community. We haven’t ever been made to feel that there’s a population demanding our products, just as it demands food or clothing. So that when life falls into chaos as it is now, there is no established bond between the public and its writers.¹¹⁸

The set of values supposedly underpinning Australian society also becomes a source of criticism. Marty’s contempt for the ‘pleasant people, kindly people’ of the middle classes is born of personal experience, of a ‘lifetime lived “up the line”’ where she has observed ‘the average life lived in those pretty homes.’ ‘An existence innocent enough,’ she feels, ‘in that it did not harm, or did it unwittingly--but guilty in that it did no good.’¹¹⁹ Refusing to think – ‘For who knows where thinking, once begun, will end?’ – these people avoid the implications of their actions: namely, that they have won their ‘own serenity at the cost of someone else’s.’¹²⁰

Gilbert, too, despairs of his fellow Australians and their ‘vast edifice of false values.’¹²¹ In ‘the last eighteen months,’ they have accepted with ‘open-mouthed, docile equanimity’ the censorship of their films, their plays, their books and their radio-talks. They have submitted ‘apparently without alarm to legislation which, at a stroke, threatened to deprive them of rights they had been battling to win since Magna Carta. They have even ‘contemplated, with every appearance of bovine incomprehension, attacks upon their freedom of speech and assembly.’¹²² ‘What else,’ he concludes,

could you expect of people nourished from birth on an immoral doctrine – every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost?¹²³

Dark's contemporary novels were typically of, about and for the educated middle-classes. *The Little Company* narrowed the focus further by fixing the perspective on the writing community: one defined as much by presences as absences, and embracing vulnerability and humility. These writers understood that 'the whole burden of the writer's art' was 'to hold himself poised, receptive, while words and emotions flowed together in him and fused.'¹²⁴ Even when the mysterious process bore results, it remained 'merely a minute contribution, possibly inept, possibly abortive, to a continuous human record.' But whatever the risks and pitfalls of their calling, it was still the highest form of writing. Creative writers here are also defined in distinction from others. Nick Massey, youngest brother of Gilbert and Marty, is a journalist and thus does not qualify as a creative writer.

He wrote nothing but "factual" stuff. Give him his data, his figures, and he had an article or a letter to the paper finished in no more time than it took him to tap it out on the typewriter.¹²⁵

Technique and output aside, an even more important distinction separating the journalist from the creative writer was the level of emotional investment demanded by their respective professions. As Gilbert realises,

It was Nick's good fortune, perhaps, that his profession did not demand of him that suffering should be personified, that imagination should not stop at a mass-concept, but go down with every insignificant individual into his own individual hell.¹²⁶

Even within the ranks of what Gilbert and Marty define as creative writers, certain distinctions still apply: between the technicians, on the one hand, and those like Marty, who understands that '[a]ny point's the perfect starting-point if you treat it properly';¹²⁷ between those who weigh up whether 'art should be divorced from propaganda' and those, like Gilbert, who simply accept the fact that 'it's there in all the best art, and always has been';¹²⁸ between creative writers, like Elsa Kay, who 'cared not a hoot about the world and its problems,'¹²⁹ and those like Gilbert and Marty who agonise endlessly about the world and its problems. The little company thus becomes increasingly little.

Conscious of their critical social role, yet defeated in their attempts to fulfil their obligations by their collective artistic paralysis, Gilbert, Marty and their colleagues grow obsessed with their condition. Even war takes second place to their obsession. Gilbert ponders the possible causes and implications of his 'creative paralysis,' debates with fellow-

victims such questions as: 'Do you really think it matters if we're all stuck?'¹³⁰ and 'Is anybody getting anything down on paper?'¹³¹ In time, Gilbert realises he is not to blame for his lack of productivity. This 'drying up of honest writing at its source,' he comes to believe, was the result of two principal factors: an unequal battle between 'the creative mind' and 'the repeated hammer-blows of destructiveness,' and an environment lacking in 'enough communal creative spirit to renew them.'¹³² Marty also eventually conquers her fears about her own condition. Desperate one day after having 'just torn up her eleventh false start,'¹³³ she realises it lay beyond her capacity to solve the problem. Artists deal 'with intangibles' and the 'Muse' cannot be coerced. Echoing Dark's long-held views on the matter, Marty maintained that the writer 'can't be driven by any outside agent.' He can only write 'in his own good time.'¹³⁴

The moral weight in *The Little Company* lies squarely with the Massey family, particularly Gilbert and Marty. Though frustrated by an artistic paralysis that renders them useless at such a critical time, they still manage to retain the vision and commitment that ultimately leads them to conquer it. Towards the end of the story, Marty, inspired by her chance meeting with Sally Dodd, begins a new novel. Gilbert has also started a novel on his literary mentor and idol, Scott Laughlin, a writer now dead. The last scene constitutes the moral climax of the story as Gilbert

went to his desk, pulled drawers open, gathered papers together, cleared a space, sat down. It felt like health after illness, safety after danger, eleventh-hour triumph.¹³⁵

The Little Company fails as entertainment, chronicle, thought, and art. It lacks action and vitality. Its narrative is weak; its characterisation poor; its characters unappealing. It is a story without a heart, whose hero – the writer Scott Laughlin – is, significantly, long since dead. A principal failure lies (as in the case of *Prelude to Christopher*) in the tensions and contradictions that exist between the moral qualities attributed to, and those reflected by, Gilbert and Marty.

Theirs are at various junctures of the story profoundly dubious moral choices. Appalled at his father's callous treatment of his tenants, Gilbert, now sole beneficiary of the Massey property holdings, determines to make amends. But he never does. He acknowledges the fact that 'those houses were still there, and now they belonged to him,'¹³⁶ even admits to himself 'the once-familiar, writhing effort of his mind to escape from a painful problem, to evade or postpone a decision almost impossibly difficult.'¹³⁷ Yet he never resolves the matter. The same applies in the case of his decision to plagiarise Elsa's idea for a

novel on Scott Laughlin. Concerned over the 'professional ethics' of the matter, he consults Marty who assures him that Elsa 'could no more write a book about that man than I could write one on relativity.' Thus rid of 'any scruples' on the matter, Gilbert decides to proceed with his novel remarking to Marty:

Elsa talked about it enough for me to know that if she does tackle it no one on earth would recognise the same story or the same character in her book and mine. So now I see them as different books. I'm going ahead.¹³⁸

Dark's opinion of her novel is unclear. Soon after its completion, she confessed to her publisher that she was 'very dissatisfied with it,' but then qualified the remark by admitting 'that is always my reaction.'¹³⁹ Comments to agents, publishers and friends suggest a definite lack of enthusiasm. Karl Shapiro's remarks to her of April 1944 that '[y]ou can't be fair in what you say about your new book,' and teasing her about being 'quite a reticent novelist,'¹⁴⁰ suggest she had at least some reservations. So too did her expressed relief to her American agent after reading 'a couple of batches of reviews' of her book that they were 'more favourable than I had expected.'¹⁴¹

Of her literary advisers, Dark's British publisher William Collins was by far the least impressed. Expressing 'grave doubts' as to the wisdom of shaping a story around a novelist and his family, he explained that 'in England some time ago, there was quite a vogue for novels about the Bloomsbury intellectuals of whom the public soon tired.' Content, however, was only one of his concerns. There was also, he said, 'an entire lack of momentum about the story' and 'too much reliance on the discussions between the characters for maintaining interest of the average reader.' Recent books and press attention had so focused on 'the ills of the world,' he said, 'that I think we are all rather impatient of it.' In the end, he not only refused to publish the novel but advised that her 'best interests would be served' by withdrawing it altogether.¹⁴² Irked by this outright rejection of her book, even if not altogether convinced of its merits, Dark pursued the matter with her agent, prompting a similar response. 'It is a book which holds interest for anyone connected with the writing world,' her agent explained, but

the greater part of the reading public in this country probably has never met an author and does not care very much what their difficulties are so long as they produce enough good books.¹⁴³

Left with no option but to withdraw her book 'so far as England is concerned,' she doggedly pursued its publication in Australia, as well as

in Canada and New Zealand.¹⁴⁴ She also gave her British publisher the ultimatum of 'having the title of THE LITTLE COMPANY included in future books in England' or losing her business. 'Much as I disliked the idea of leaving Collins,' she wrote to her British agent, 'I was feeling obdurate on the one point.'¹⁴⁵

Dark's American publisher's response to the book appeared at first strikingly different. In a note informing her that publication arrangements for the novel were complete, Macmillan's James Putnam took the opportunity to celebrate it as 'the most mature thing which you have done.' It was a book, he argued, 'which makes no facile gestures towards popularity, but it is a book of real worth for the serious reader.'¹⁴⁶ Such words, particularly after such a long creative drought, would have been manna from heaven to the artist. And they were not mere words. Macmillan's offered better royalties for *The Little Company* than for her previous novels.¹⁴⁷

Only once before had there been such a sharp contrast between Dark's British and American publishers. Then, in the case of *Prelude to Christopher*, it had been the British who had responded in the affirmative to the publication of her book. The Americans remained adamant that the book would not find a warm reception there. Now, the position was reversed. It was the Americans and the Australians who welcomed *The Little Company*. The reasons are open to speculation. One possible explanation may lie in the fact that for the British, war and wartime experiences bore a stark inescapable quality. The story of a group of Australian writers agonising throughout most of the war over their so-called artistic paralysis would have offered neither an appetising escape from nor a faithful rendering of their experiences of the war.

But the publishing saga of *The Little Company* did not end there. For reasons that remain unclear, Macmillan's James Putnam was not frank in expressing their views on the novel. It soon transpired that they had serious reservations about the book. Dark's American agent confessed that he and Macmillan's both thought the book had 'a strange weakness.' 'Did you ever really settle in your mind,' he asked,

whether this was a story about how the lives of a group of people can be unsettled by war conditions or whether it was a story of a man seeking to break out of a set of bonds which have been imposed on him by habit, convention, etc.

The book, he added, 'seemed first the one kind of story and then the other.' Familiar by now with his client's raw sensitivity about her writing, he expressed the faint hope that she would not think 'the above too harsh.'¹⁴⁸ Dark's response, prefaced by reassurances that she was

'not in the least bit touchy about "harsh" criticism,' was that she had tried to do

both the things you suggest, my feeling being that people's personal problems go on, no matter how they may be involved in much bigger ones; and that one cannot present either set as isolated, because they act and re-act on each other.¹⁴⁹

How to reconcile Macmillan's initial and later response to the book? And, in the light of their reservations, their offer of higher royalties than for her previous novels? Again we can only speculate. Did Macmillan feel a burden of responsibility for Putnam's suggestion that she write a book describing 'what is happening to Australia "under the impact of war"'? Perhaps so. More likely is that Macmillan was looking to its long-term investment in the author of *The Timeless Land*.

The same equivocal quality that marked the publishers' responses also marked many of the reviews. Indeed, no book of Dark's provoked such a sharp divergence of responses as did *The Little Company*. The fact did not escape her. As part of a life-long campaign to discredit literary criticism, Dark compiled a kind of mock display of reviews of her book: setting out in one column positive, in the other negative responses to it.¹⁵⁰ Even allowing for the normal divergence of views among critics, the contrasts seem stark. On the question of characterisation, for example, views ranged from 'wooden' to endowed 'with the spark of intuition.' On the relevance of the war to the story, one reviewer found it 'astonishingly remote,' another thought it made 'just the right impact.' The book's portrayal of Australian society, one reviewer argued, contributed nothing to 'a better understanding of Australia,' another maintained that 'the reader finishes with strong visual impressions of a country and civilisation entirely intelligible.'¹⁵¹

Generally, the novel fared satisfactorily. In America, while the book 'was inevitably somewhat handicapped by the fact that the war was so nearly over when it was published,' her publisher assured her it 'has not had a bad sale at all.'¹⁵² In Australia it did even better. Vindicating her insistence to Collins that they publish the book in Australia, the first edition of 6,000 copies was sold within a few months, and a reprint of another 2,000 was already in train by August 1945.¹⁵³

A surprisingly small number of her colleagues from the little company communicated with Dark about her book, partly due perhaps to the general loosening of bonds and relaxation of traditions within the group through these years. Prichard was the exception. Her enthusiasm for *The Little Company* was such that, as a member of the selection

panel, she proposed it as the Australian Book Society's first 'book of the Month.' In disagreement with her colleagues' choice of Sydney Baker's *The Australian Language* for the honour, Prichard argued that 'no other book published recently has the stature of 'Little Company' ... and this should be recognised.'¹⁵⁴ George Farwell, also of the far Left and then president of the (Sydney) Fellowship of Australian Writers, also expressed warm approbation. It had, he wrote to Dark, 'cheered me enormously to find that a writer has at last set down something of today's happenings – and made it literature.' On behalf of the Fellowship, he also extended a formal invitation to attend a dinner in her honour.¹⁵⁵

Most others of her circle responded differently. Devanny and Franklin had until now been among Dark's staunchest admirers of her work within the little company. They also seemed to hold a genuine warmth for Dark that transcended professional matters. Unlike Barnard, whose comments over the years were typically negative and sour, their heartfelt comments were usually encouraging. Yet neither wrote to Dark about her war novel. Their views appear elsewhere. Devanny confided her disappointment to a colleague.

Fancy wasting her lovely talent on such stuff as the mental and moral gropings of a petty bourgeois writer in days like these! It's being stuck in that beautiful home on top of a mountain.¹⁵⁶

Franklin also privately expressed concern over the book – 'a thin dissection of thin people' – but placed the blame elsewhere. Only 'this isolation while the world was so upheaved,' she argued, could give rise to such a book.¹⁵⁷

Barnard was the only one to confront the author directly. 'We're enough alike as writers,' she prefaced her comments, 'for me to feel an intimacy, a faint sense of involvement in your books, too.' Her *Phillip of Australia* and Dark's *The Timeless Land* had been, she said, 'kin & not kin,' and so were *The Little Company* and *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* which she and Eldershaw had recently completed. Launching into what she claimed was not literary criticism 'but something that can't be substantiated,' Barnard confessed she had read Dark's book 'with a sort of perturbation.' Barnard's main problem lay with the characters. It was 'impossible to care enough for them to really care what happens to them. They have attributes but no B.O. They are credible but not warm.'¹⁵⁸ The book 'leaves a smell of text books.' 'Timeless Land struck cold & this strikes colder,' she concluded.¹⁵⁹

Artistic questions aside, *The Little Company* remains significant for several reasons. It fuses two traditions of creative writing of its time: the

literature of war and the literature of the artist. The novel also occupies a distinctive place within Dark's literature. Attempting to recapture the collective consciousness of White Australian society at this critical time, as the country braced itself for the possibility of foreign invasion, Dark made generous use of contemporary newspaper headlines warning of dangers far and near. Just as the artist made use of extensive archival material in the writing of *The Timeless Land*, she now turned to contemporary sources to lend flavour and substance to her wartime novel. It is in the areas of form and technique – rather than content – that Dark developed as a writer. *The Little Company* shows the craftsman again experimenting with new tools.

For the historian of Eleanor Dark and Australian literary society of the war years generally, the novel also constitutes a key document. Clearly, Dark did not intend her book to be a satire, but a vindication of the Australian writer through the experience of war. Yet read at this distance – chronological and psychological – from the events described, the novel assumes increasingly and despite itself an ironical quality. Herein lies access to the consciousness and mentality of one Australian writer writing against the background of war, Nazism, and possible Japanese invasion of the Australian mainland. Yet the principal enemy that emerges from her book is her own community, its most lethal weapons, apathy and complacency. The heroes are neither soldiers nor civilians but a dead writer. Its moral climax takes place in the quiet of one writer's study as he sets pen to paper. *The Little Company* also holds up a useful, if refracted, mirror to the little company after which it was styled, where there existed a similar sense of a war within and without, an obsessive introspection and a sense of alienation.

War-time exposed as never before the fragile fabric of the little company. The years of fearing, as Davison remarked to Vance in early 1940 that 'before the year is out the world we are living in may not exist,'¹⁶⁰ told on this ageing little company of writers.¹⁶¹ Old hurts and resentments surfaced. Nettie, never reconciled to Prichard's priorities as a communist first and a writer second, showed it in barbed comments about her 'comrades' and 'jolly weekend parties.'¹⁶² Meanwhile, her and Vance's own private war worsened.¹⁶³

Ideological differences took a heavy toll. Devanny, worried that she might have alienated Franklin by suggesting that 'Britain could have bombed the Germans' – which appeared to have 'horrified' Franklin – wrote her a long letter of reconciliation. The very language she employed to make her point – 'my leader,' 'our workers' – and condescending remarks that 'we do realise the conflict in those who, not having followed the course of events so closely as ourselves, feel their

ideals blasted,' would have done little to assuage Franklin's feelings.¹⁶⁴ Franklin was not the only one to be annoyed by Devanny's crassness. Davison confessed to Nettie to being brought 'to the verge of hysteria' by Devanny. Her idea 'that you have only to read Karl Marx to the Wild Man from Borneo to make him fit for citizenship in modern society,' sounded to him too much 'like religious fundamentalists.'¹⁶⁵

The refugee question was sensitive. Since it first arose as a consequence of the Spanish Civil War, Nettie had been closely involved with it at theoretical and practical levels. Her passionate commitment to the cause of refugees was common knowledge in the little company. Despite (or perhaps because of it), Franklin chose to share with Nettie her views on the matter. The new arrivals, she contended, were 'engendering great bitterness' in the Australian community. Refugees only by name, they were affluent enough 'to buy for cash blocks of flat buildings which at a minimum would run well into four figures,' as well as 'all the provision and fruit shops.' In regard to Jewish refugees, 'hundreds' of whom she claimed to have met in her early days in the United States, they constituted a sexist force. Within a few years, Jewish males had acquired 'citizenship and votes and were industrious in opposing votes for the women of America.' She was all in favour of religious liberty, she assured her colleague, 'but the Jews go beyond religion and reduce inter-mingling with gentiles to miscegenation.' In a language that bespoke deeply felt prejudices, she concluded:

I am sick at the panorama of slaughtering all the blue-eyed fine-haired youth – German or British – and those slaving hordes of Islam and Mongol thought breeding and breeding.¹⁶⁶

On the question of the ethics of war the writers of the little company were most deeply and painfully split. War divided those with loved ones at the front and others, overriding hitherto close political affinities and threatening to rupture friendships. Only Barnard and Davison had no loved ones at risk. Eldershaw's brother had scarcely joined the army before he suffered a major collapse. Barnard explained to Nettie in late 1940 that it

literally broke his heart, burst it, and now if he lives he will probably never be able to do anything much again, even to climbing a flight of steps.¹⁶⁷

While her son Ric was in uniform, Prichard was 'just desolate.' 'He's twenty, a brilliant, sensitive boy, and what is war going to do to him.'¹⁶⁸ Franklin felt herself unable 'to rise against the anguishing desolation' confronting her. In addition to the death of her last surviving brother in 1942 – 'there once were seven of us' – she agonised over his

son's decision to join the 'bombers.' The boy was, she explained to Dark in September 1943, '[t]he only thing I have left.'¹⁶⁹ With daughter Aileen in England, the Palmers were living their own hell. News in mid-1940 of the discontinuance of air-mail services between Australia and Europe devastated Nettie. 'I think we're all in "for it" from now on,' she said to Vance.¹⁷⁰ Throughout, the Palmers never abandoned hopes of getting their daughter back safely to Australia. Uncharacteristically effusive, Vance wrote her in August 1942: 'How we'd love you to come home, even if it meant spending a fabulous sum for passage-money.'¹⁷¹

Nettie, in particular, seemed emotionally unhinged by her concerns over her daughter and unable to contemplate any discussions of an alternative to an all-out war against the Nazis. Davison and Barnard, two of her closest friends in the group, appeared genuinely shocked to hear that their advocacy of passive resistance had caused her such injury. Davison's suggestion of late 1940 that her anxieties about Aileen would be dispelled by a 'quick end to the war,' for it 'would mean that we would all take our share in facing what is coming' and 'might start the western world thinking in terms of non-violence' prompted a furious response.¹⁷² 'Your letter,' she chastened him, 'just staggered me & I can't bear it.' He refused to be intimidated into silence on such a critical issue. 'If our forceful friends the Germans came here,' he maintained,

I think it would be best to neither fight nor run away. It might be uncomfortable or even dangerous for a while – and some might even get killed – but I think the world would be in the way of discovering better methods of dealing with difficulties.¹⁷³

Barnard's difficulties with Nettie arose from her expressed sympathies for Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*, and his predilection for 'lost causes.' Non-violence, Barnard proclaimed, 'is my lost cause.' In the hope perhaps of placing the issue out of contention she declared she had 'not the faintest doubt but that you'd win on points if we embarked on a political discussion or that I would remain obstinately true to my (unbloody) blood.'¹⁷⁴ More often than was either necessary or wise, given Nettie's sensitivity on the matter, Barnard continued to harp on the question of pacificism. Nettie's response was quite unlike her emotional outburst after Davison's letter. She merely chose shelter from the friendship for a time. The flow of letters stopped. The few she wrote, Barnard remarked later to her, were 'reduced to armoured little notes.'¹⁷⁵

There was, however, a strong caring side to the little company. Indeed, had there not been, it is unlikely the group itself would have

survived the war. Dark seemed to harbour no ill feelings towards Barnard. Aware of her colleague's chronic ill health and difficult family circumstances, she once offered her the use of her brother Bim's cottage in the Blue Mountains.¹⁷⁶ She also made several unsuccessful attempts to lure Franklin to 'Varuna' for a week-end stay. She went 'so seldom' to Sydney, Dark explained, that 'perhaps Mahomet will come to the mountains?'¹⁷⁷ Franklin reciprocated in kind, assuring her that her 'shabby old hump' was 'openheartedly yours.'¹⁷⁸ Differences over Party matters had for some time seriously strained relations between Prichard and Devanny. Nonetheless Devanny clearly retained warm feelings for her comrade. 'I cant help feeling worried about Kath Prichard,' she wrote to Dark in early 1943. 'How I wish you could get her to look after herself!'¹⁷⁹

For all her abrasive and insensitive ways, there was another side to Barnard. 'She is a wonderful person, Marjorie,' Devanny wrote to Dark in early 1942.

I think myself lucky in having her friendship, which she has demonstrated in no mean way during the period of the last fourteen months, which has been to me a terrible ordeal, both physically and mentally.¹⁸⁰

In hospital in mid-1942 with a respiratory illness, Barnard was in turn treated to many kindnesses by her colleagues. 'Teenie (Eldershaw) is, as she has always been,' she said to Nettie,

my good angel and my sheet anchor. She comes every evening and she feeds me. She is so good. Frank (Dalby Davison) comes. He has so little time to himself yet he gives me some.¹⁸¹

Nettie, too, despite their *contretemps* over the question of war, retained a great affection for Barnard. 'One reason why I don't want to hurry home,' she explained to Vance at the conclusion of one of her lecturing tours, 'is that I must have a good talk with Marjorie. Marjorie needs an injection of self-confidence, & if she can get a little by telling me the story of her life, I'm all for it.'¹⁸²

Wartime had a kind of liberating effect on the little company. For a time, it rid the group of the tyranny of the artist, imposing different priorities and forcing its sights and guiding its discussions onto matters of common and urgent concern to the community at large. It replaced the language of politeness with that of honesty. Matters of life and death were involved. Wartime also shattered the illusion of a cohesive core of values, stripping the veneer of the artist from the group and exposing what remained as little more than a random collection of individuals whose principal bond was the same as that which linked them to fellow

Australians elsewhere: the experience of war. The gestures of warmth and kindness that were extended were between fellow sufferers not kindred spirits. If they shared a camaraderie at all, it was the camaraderie of the human spirit not of the divine spark.

War touched these writers not only in a personal but also in a creative and professional sense. Regardless of personal circumstances and literary achievements, and despite the fact that, as Barnard remarked to Dark in early 1942, '[t]he world was never more full of stories,'¹⁸³ they all shared a profound sense of despair at finding themselves at such a critical time devoid of artistic inspiration. One need only contrast the forty or so novels produced by the little company in the decade preceding the advent of the Second World War to the paltry output of the following decade to realise the scale of this paralysis.¹⁸⁴

Plunged as one into this artistic paralysis, writers of the little company turned to each other for encouragement. Aware of the obstacles placed by publishers and censors in the way of publication of Barnard and Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, Dark set aside her principled opposition to literary criticism, offering her colleague advice on her manuscript. 'I do appreciate the time you & Eric spent on it in a world like this,' Barnard thanked her.¹⁸⁵ Dark also lent support to Devanny, agreeing to be a referee for a C.L.F. fellowship application. Devanny informed her in late 1943 that 'the book which you, with true generosity, helped me to get a chance at' was in its planning stages.¹⁸⁶

The little company saved its greatest show of support and encouragement for the Palmers, whose exalted image of themselves as leaders of the little company needed careful tending in these barren times. Barnard was the most effusive of their admirers, referring to Vance in a letter to Nettie as 'Our Father Which Art in Australia.'¹⁸⁷ 'I've been thinking,' she wrote her in June 1942, 'you and Vance and one or two others (a very little few) have been holding up the fort for years & years, recalcitrantly, irreconcilably, patiently, persistently, caring all the year round, and building up the image.'¹⁸⁸ Franklin too, despite their many differences over the years, sent off little notes of encouragement to Nettie whom, as she wrote her in early 1945, she still considered her 'favourite literary professor.'¹⁸⁹ Hearing of Nettie's latest illness, Franklin urged her, for the sake of the writing profession, to look after herself. 'Think,' she said, 'if there were no more Nettie, what a ghostly blank it would leave in our firmament.'¹⁹⁰ The Palmers clearly felt they had earned such support. 'Do you realise,' Vance asked Nettie in 1941 during a visit to colleagues in Sydney, 'how hard I've tried to live up to the "good brother" legend in the past six weeks? I've given all I could spare of my time & listened to miles & miles of talk

about people I don't know much about.'¹⁹¹ Nettie was in no doubt that they had over the years attained influence. 'Your two parents,' she wrote reassuringly to Aileen in late 1943, 'happen to be more powerful than in years past, mostly by the effluxion of time and by the fact that the time has been passed in the city, where reputations are made.'¹⁹²

While these writers sought to reassure themselves and each other of their importance as writers, forces mounting within the expanding field of Australian literature were increasingly challenging this assumption. The gap left by their lack of productivity, the advent of a new generation of novelists, and exciting developments in Australian poetry, were all contributing factors. So were the very different perceptions on Australian literature expressed by new voices in the field.

An unrepentant critic of what she labelled in a *Meanjin* article of 1942, the 'warm little circles of mutual esteem'¹⁹³ operating within the Australian literary community was newcomer Kylie Tennant, twice winner of the S.H. Prior Memorial Prize, for *Tiburón* (1935), and for *The Battlers* (1941).¹⁹⁴ Entering into correspondence with an outraged Nettie over her *Meanjin* remarks, Tennant was only too happy to elaborate on her various points. The time had passed, she argued, for approaching books as '*Australian Literature – Special Consideration.*'

So much contemporary stuff seems to be still in this early stage of making us "conscious of our great heritage".¹⁹⁵

In 1944-45, the A.B.C. ran a series of radio broadcasts entitled 'Australian Literature' in which prominent novelists were interviewed. Dark was given the honour of featuring in the opening broadcast of the series, and chose the opportunity to unburden herself yet again on the question of the plight of the Australian writer. Australian writers, she argued, 'can't make writing their real job in life.' Thus, it seemed 'hardly fair to expect the best from writers, when it's only what's left over of their energy that they can use for writing.'¹⁹⁶ Colleagues interviewed later in the series painted a very different picture. As far as the demand for work was concerned, Alan Marshall argued, the Australian writer 'has never been better off.' Even allowing for war-related shortages of paper and bookbinders, 'Australian writers are in a better position than they ever were.'¹⁹⁷ Ion Idriess sounded an even more optimistic note. 'Writers need have no fear of the future, it is great as the untold possibilities of our continent.'¹⁹⁸

Where once they had dominated the field of serious creative writing, the little company now sounded embattled and embittered. Describing to Nettie her own interview for the 'Australian Literature series,' an incensed Franklin said she had 'inferred' from the interviewer 'that he or his clientele had had enough of writers who had done their best work,

and in that category, V.(Vance) and I and F.D.D. were mentioned. 'Be grannied!', she wrote in her typically picturesque language, 'I mean to do my best work at 84, like Verdi and others, and I hope Vance too.'¹⁹⁹

Yet to each other, at least, these writers also admitted a certain weariness. Remarking on the contemporary Australian literary scene in a letter to Nettie of April 1944, Davison confessed that he did not know 'the half of what is going on these days, and I used to keep up with things.' He was still able to 'keep track of the books,' he assured her, 'but it's the young poets who bewilder me.'²⁰⁰ By the second-half of 1942, Barnard's old enthusiasm for literature was fading. 'Books aren't what they were to me,' she confessed to Nettie, 'I no longer approach them hopefully & omnivorously but with wary (or is it weary) caution.'²⁰¹

Whatever the forces working outside the little company to undermine their prominence in Australian literature, the fact remains that war-time had proved an unbearable burden to these writers. Squandering various opportunities offered them by the war to substantiate their claim to cultural and moral leadership in their society, they had exposed themselves to criticism and ridicule.²⁰²

This point is reflected in what was the little company's major showpiece of these years, 'Australian Writers Speak,' a series of talks arranged by the Fellowship for the A.B.C. Featuring virtually every writer in the group, the series was eventually published in 1944, not long after one of the most trying periods in modern Australian history. A casual glance at topics discussed – Davison's 'What is literature'; Franklin's 'Is the writer involved in the political development of his country?'; Devanny's 'The worker's contribution to Australian literature'; the Palmers' 'It takes readers as well as writers to make a literature'; Barnard's 'Our literature'; Prichard's 'How has the Australian writer affected Australian life?'²⁰³ – highlights the in-bred qualities conspiring to marginalise even further the little company from the community as a whole. Choosing to impose on a national audience an agenda of issues remarkable only for its irrelevance to the lives and preoccupations of most Australians at this time, these writers exposed in a most public way their own irrelevance to their community. The *Meanjin* reviewer of 'Australian Writers Speak' (very likely the editor himself, Clem Christesen) took them to task on this score:

These writers are treating literature as a sort of form room game. It is the old disease. Here is no language for the people. Our writers still sit in their quiet billabong, out of the flood of history. They forget reality in the private

allusion, the subtle grammar. God in heaven, can they say no more to us over the National network, than this? Can no one momentarily lose his differentiated self in the great uprush of a common emotion? Where is the one who shall become the voice of this frightened and ignorantly infuriated people?²⁰⁴

The war period saw the beginning of the end of the little company. Like Gilbert Massey, they had as writers been sleepwalkers through one of Western society's most critical periods of this century, awakening too late to the changes taking place in Australian literature and the Australian literary field as a whole. A muted voice, the little company had now to contend with those who, like Kylie Tennant and Alan Marshall, had found war-time stimulating rather than paralysing to their writing.

The prominence of the novel itself, which through the late 1920s and 1930s had come to dominate the field of Australian creative writing, was now under challenge by a growing interest in poetry. Australian literature had not only diversified during the war, and expanded its scope, through radio broadcasts, university lecture series and the like, it had also grown from a kind of family concern into an industry. What had the little company to contribute, if anything, to this emerging new literary scene?

Writers like Dark, Davison and Prichard still had something to offer their country's literature, and would do so in years to come. But war-time had shattered their little company, as irreparably as it had shattered their claims as creators of the people's literature.

¹ Phrase borrowed from Anne Morrow Lindbergh's diaries: *War Within, and Without: Diaries and Letters, 1939-1944*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York and London, 1980.

² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Bruce Sutherland, student of Pennsylvania State College, 18.12.42, ML MSS 4545 24(25).

³ Eleanor Dark, untitled, unpublished manuscript, by its placing in her private scrapbook almost certainly written during the Second World War, ML MSS 4545 10(25).

⁴ Eleanor Dark, untitled, unpublished manuscript, n.d. but by its placing in private notebook, c. mid-'forties. ML MSS 4545 14(25).

⁵ Eleanor Dark, 'The Peril and the Solitude,' unpublished manuscript, by its place in her private scrapbook written during the Second World War, ML MSS 4545 10(25).

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- ⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 8.9.41, ML MSS 364/26:445.
- ⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 6.12.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁸ Quoted in C. Ferrier, *As Good as a Yarn with You*, p. 131. Letter from Jean Devanny to Frank Ryland, 15.8.45, NLA MS6238.
- ⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to H.S. Latham, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 13.2.43, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Mr John Green, Curtis Brown, London, 19.10.40, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 28.7.44, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹² Eleanor Dark, untitled, unpublished manuscript, 1944, pp. 75-76, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ¹³ Without permanent house staff since late 1942 due to the combined effects of a general shortage of labour and emergency regulations that made employing domestic help 'no longer a private matter but to be done, if at all, through manpower authorities.' Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, dated only 'Wednesday' but probably written in late July/early August 1942, in the possession of Michael Dark.
- ¹⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 7.9.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁵ Letter from James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), to Eleanor Dark, 20.10.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 14.4.41, ML MSS 364/26:443.
- ¹⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 8.9.41, ML MSS 364/26:445.
- ¹⁸ J. Devanny, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
- ¹⁹ Letter from James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), to Eleanor Dark, 20.10.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ²⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 10.12.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ²¹ Diary entry, 9.6.43, ML MSS 4545 18(25).

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- ²² Letter from Kylie Tennant to Eleanor Dark, 9.6.41, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ²³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, c. late May/early June 1942, 335A.
- ²⁴ J. Devanny, *op. cit.*, p. 246.
- ²⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 24.8.41, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ²⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 23.9.42, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ²⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 6.10.41, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 24.8.41, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ³⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. but, by its contents, most probably written in late 1939, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ³¹ Certificate of Discharge from Australian Military Forces of Sgt. Eric Payten Dark, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 7/23.
- ³² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 22.7.42, ML MSS 4545.
- ³³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 18.12.41, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ³⁴ Various school certificates of Michael Dark, The Armidale School, New England, New South Wales, ML MSS 4545 15/25 Part 1(2).
- ³⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. of New York, 7.9.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ³⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 24.8.41, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ³⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 23.9.42, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ³⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 25.1.43, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ³⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 25.1.43, in the possession of Michael Dark., Hazelbrook, N.S.W.

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- ⁴⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, c. 1942-1945, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁴¹ The suggested topic was education.
- ⁴² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 18.12.42, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁴³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 24.8.41, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁴⁴ Letter from Dowell O'Reilly to J. Le Gay Brereton, 3.11.11, ML MSS 4545 15(25) 3/173.
- ⁴⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 22.4.(42), in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁴⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 6.5.43, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁴⁷ His work as N.S.W. State Secretary of Fitzpatrick's Council for Civil Liberties, of which he was a vice-president, was one of many to which he lent vigorous, active support. Letter from Eric Payten Dark to Brian Fitzpatrick, 17.1.41, NLA MS 4965/1/1200-1201.
- ⁴⁸ It contained new and old material, including an enlarged version of a 1937 *Medical Journal of Australia* article, as well as pieces written in the early phase of war. Among them, 'Property and Health' (1939) and 'Some Medical Aspects of Crime' (1941).
- ⁴⁹ E.P. Dark, *Medicine and the Social Order*, Australasian Publishing Co., Second Impression, December 1943, p. 56.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Preface.
- ⁵¹ Eleanor Dark, 'The Woman Question,' unpublished manuscript, 1943, ML MSS 4545 14(25), pp. 71 – 73.
- ⁵² Eleanor Dark, 'Politics,' unpublished manuscript, 1942, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ⁵³ J. Devanny, *op. cit.*, p. 251.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, c. May/June 1942, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁵⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 22.7.42, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁵⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, c. 1943, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.

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- ⁵⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, c. late 1942/early 1943, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁵⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 22.7.42, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁶⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. but written sometime in 1943, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁶¹ FAW ML MSS 3008 3(14) K22108, Children's Library Movement, List of donations for year ending 1945. Eric: 25 pounds.
- ⁶² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Margaret Kent Hughes, 19.7.45, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 7/13.
- ⁶³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 7.10.42, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁶⁴ Roger Milliss, whose father Bruce was also battling against similarly faceless forces in Katoomba, claimed that Eric had been 'branded by a local anti-communist fanatic' as being 'part of a Red plot to prepare for a future Russian take-over.' Unpublished article by Warwick Blayden, 'Eric Payten Dark,' lodged with Springwood Library, N.S.W. on 8.10.89, Springwood Library, File entitled 'Eric Payten Dark'. Most of the information on which Blayden's article was based he gathered from a series of personal interviews with Eric Dark.
- ⁶⁵ White later wrote to thank her 'for looking Mother up immediately after the news that I had been hit. I know she worried considerably less for your visit.' Letter from Osmar White to Eleanor Dark, 9.9.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1, (Closed).
- ⁶⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, 4.10.42, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁶⁷ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 3.12.(42), NLA MS 4498, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁶⁸ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 11.11.43, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁶⁹ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 16.2.43, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁷⁰ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 8.11.42, in the possession of Michael Dark.
- ⁷¹ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 7.6.43, in the possession of Michael Dark.

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- ⁷² Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 11.11.43, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁷³ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 12.3.44, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁷⁴ Letter from Pvt. Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 22.3.44, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁷⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, c. 1942-1944, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁷⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. but written sometime between late 1942-1944.
- ⁷⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, n.d. but written c. late 1942/early 1943.
- ⁷⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, July 1940, ML MSS 4545 16(25), 6/293.
- ⁷⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Geoffrey Halliday, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 19.11.40, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁸⁰ Diary entry of 25.4.42, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁸¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, (late May-early June 1942), in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁸² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly, c.May/June 1942, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ⁸³ Diary entry of 28.4.42, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁸⁴ Eleanor Dark, 'What do we want our children to learn?,' address given on Parents' Day, 15.12.42, The Armidale School, Armidale, N.S.W., and published by Armidale Express Print as part of series entitled 'Addresses on Educational Problems.'
- ⁸⁵ Letter from Margaret Walkam, Honorary Secretary, Sydney University Women Graduates' Association, to Eleanor Dark, 7.3.43, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ⁸⁶ Letter from Margaret Walkam, Honorary Secretary, Sydney University Women Graduates' Association, to Eleanor Dark, 22.2.43, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ⁸⁷ Janet Ryall, 'Women's Peacetime World,' Australian Home Budget, July 1945.

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- ⁸⁸ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison, President, Fellowship of Australian Writers, to Eleanor Dark, 8.3.40, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁸⁹ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Eleanor Dark, 14.6.40, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ⁹⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Frank Dalby Davison, 23.6.40, NLA MS 1945/1/127.
- ⁹¹ FAW MLL MSS 2008 10(14) K22112.
- ⁹² Letter from Eleanor Dark to The Secretaries, N.S.W. Aid Russia Committee, 11.10.41, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ⁹³ Letter from George Ashton, Honorary Secretary, Fellowship of Australian Writers, to Eleanor Dark, 16.1.43, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ⁹⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to George Ashton, Honorary Secretary, Fellowship of Australian Writers, 20.1.43, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ⁹⁵ Letter from Helene Low, Honorary Secretary, Fellowship of Australian Writers, 13.9.44, ML SMS 4545 24(25).
- ⁹⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Mrs Handford, Committee of the Book Club, Women's Union, Sydney University 12.5.45, ML MSS 4545 24(25). 269A.
- ⁹⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nellie Sukerman, Curtis Brown Ltd., New York, 1.7.45 or 1.8.45 (check this), ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁹⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to R.G. Howarth, Department of English, The University of Sydney, 22.5.42, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ⁹⁹ Letter from Judith Watkins, Honorary Secretary, The Women's Union (Sydney), to Eleanor Dark, 20.6.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25). Dark noted on this letter her acceptance of their invitation.
- ¹⁰⁰ Interview by Mr Rees, 'Culture in Australia,' *Australia Speaks to America*, 1944, SP 300/1 Box 14, ABC Documents Archives. Interview by Mrs J. Moore, Broadcast in National Women's Session on 14.11.46, ST333 2/1 Box 1, ABC Documents Archives.
- ¹⁰¹ Interview by Ingram Smith with Eleanor Dark, part of series on 'Australian Literature,' 7.10.44, SP 300/1, Box 15, A.B.C. Documents Archives.
- ¹⁰² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 8.9.41, ML MSS 364/26:445.
- ¹⁰³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Mr J. Green, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 19.10.40, ML MSS 4545 22(25).

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- ¹⁰⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Mr William Collins, London, 6.12.41. ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁰⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 7.9.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁰⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miss Nellie Sukerman, Curtis Brown Ltd., (New York) , 9.4.43, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁰⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miss Juliet O’Hea, Curtis Brown Ltd., (London), 3.7.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁰⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Mr William Collins, London, 11.7.41, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁰⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 7.9.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹¹⁰ Letter from James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), to Eleanor Dark, 8.12.42, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹¹¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 5.3.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹¹² Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 18.6.43, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹¹³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 30.11.43, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹¹⁴ J. Devanny, *op. cit.*, pp. 253-254. This can’t be right. Check this and surrounding references.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
- ¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 250.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- ¹¹⁹ *bid.*, p. 97.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

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- ¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- ¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- ¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- ¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 316-317.
- ¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 319.
- ¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ¹³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-277.
- ¹³⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 5.3.44, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁴⁰ Letter from Pvt. Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 13.4.44, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, N.S.W.
- ¹⁴¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Alan Collins, Curtis Brown Ltd., New York, 30.7.45, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁴² Letter from William Collins, London, to Eleanor Dark, 26.6.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁴³ Letter from Juliet O'Hea, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 16.11.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁴⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 17.7.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁴⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Juliet O'Hea, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 14.12.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁴⁶ Letter from James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 30.6.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁴⁷ Cable from Curtis Brown Ltd., New York, to Eleanor Dark, 3.7.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁴⁸ Letter from Alan Collins, Curtis Brown Ltd., New York, 30.6.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁴⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Alan Collins, Curtis Brown Ltd., New York, 24.8.44, ML MSS 4545 24(25).

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- ¹⁵⁰ Note: Dark enclosed her composite of the literary critiques of her book in a letter to her American publisher. Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 17.10.45, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁵¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York), 17.10.45, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁵² Letter from James Putnam, The Macmillan Co. (New York) to Eleanor Dark, 25.8.45, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁵³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Thelma Moscrop, Curtis Brown Ltd., London, 1.8.45, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁵⁴ Circular letter from Miles Franklin (in her capacity as co-ordinator of the panel of judges of the Australian Book Society) to Katharine Susannah Prichard, Nettie Palmer, R.G. Howarth and Clem Christesen, c. early October 1945, NLA MS 1174/1/6846.
- ¹⁵⁵ Letter from George Farwell, President, (Sydney) F.A.W., to Eleanor Dark, 10.7.45, NLA MS 4998, file 2 (Closed).
- ¹⁵⁶ Quoted in C. Ferrier, *As Good as a Yarn with You*, p. 131. Letter from Jean Devanny to Frank Ryland, 15.8.45, NLA MS6238.
- ¹⁵⁷ Quoted in C. Ferrier, *As Good as a Yarn with You*, p. 131. Letter from Miles Franklin to Dymphna Cusack, 8.12.45, ML MS 364/30/117.
- ¹⁵⁸ Criticisms of the characterisation were widespread. It gave rise to an exchange between her biographer and her husband many decades later. In *Eleanor Dark*, Grove Day declared himself out of sympathy with all the characters in *The Little Company*, a challenge which Eric Dark by then ninety-years-old and still fencing with his wife's critics could not resist. One-by-one, in a letter to Day, he offered brief but considered views on each major character. 'These are recent opinions,' he explained, 'as after reading your critique I reread the book with much pleasure.' Letter from Eric Dark to A. Grove Day, 17.2.79, NLA MS 4685 #?
- ¹⁵⁹ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, 25.8.45, NLA MS 4998, file 2 (Closed).
- ¹⁶⁰ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Vance Palmer, 11.2.40, NLA MS 1174/1/5716-21.
- ¹⁶¹ For a time, Barnard went on an emotional rampage, offending close friends with unnecessarily hurtful remarks. In a letter to Vance

Palmer, whom she knew to be an old and close friend of the Melbourne poet Furnley Maurice, she confessed to finding the poet 'a wart on the face of Australian letters. Yes, I'm happy to say I hate him and wish there was something I could do about it.' Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Vance Palmer, 8.6.41, NLA MS 1174/1/5962-63.

- ¹⁶² Letter from Nettie Palmer to Vance Palmer, 14.(9).(42), NLA MS 1174/1/6223-25.
- ¹⁶³ Nettie's busy lecturing tours meant frequent often long absences from home. Her communications with her husband reveal a curious mixture of devotion and resentment. 'Wish I could wash – & iron you,' she wrote pathetically on one occasion. On another occasion, she feigned emotional independence in the hope perhaps of kindling a spark of jealousy. 'I have been more than sensible:,' she assured him, 'I have been sensible, sensitive, sensual, sensuous, enjoying myself as if I had nothing else to do. (Letter from Nettie Palmer to Vance Palmer, 1.9.42, NLA MS 1174/1/6172-74.) Vance's protestations – 'how much I need you, matie, and how much I depend on you, not only day by day, but spiritually forever' – were clearly not what was required. (Letter from Vance Palmer to Nettie Palmer, (1943), NLA MS 1174/1/6275.)
- ¹⁶⁴ Letter from Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin, 22.9.39, ML MSS 364/32, CY 1174, 0065.
- ¹⁶⁵ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Nettie Palmer, 10.5.39, NLA MS 1174/1/55, 27.
- ¹⁶⁶ Letter from Miles Franklin to Nettie Palmer, 31.5.40, NLA MS 1174/1/5771.
- ¹⁶⁷ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 30.11.40, NLA MS 1174/1/5852-53.
- ¹⁶⁸ Letter from Katharine Susannah Prichard to Mary Alice Evatt, Evatt Papers, M.A. Evatt Files, Correspondence 2, Flinders University of South Australia.
- ¹⁶⁹ Letter from Miles Franklin to Eleanor Dark, 6.9.(43), NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁷⁰ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Vance Palmer, 12.6.(43), NLA MS 1174/1/5775.
- ¹⁷¹ Letter from Vance Palmer to Aileen Palmer, in London, 20.8.42, NLA MS 1174/1/6157-58.

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- ¹⁷² Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Nettie Palmer, (1940) NLA MS 1174/1/5916.
- ¹⁷³ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Nettie Palmer, (1940) NLA MS 1174/1/5917 – 18.
- ¹⁷⁴ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 29.4.38, NLA MS 1174/1/5380 – 80a.
- ¹⁷⁵ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 10.11.40, NLA MS 1174/1/5834.
- ¹⁷⁶ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, 9.5.44, NLA MS 4998, file 2 (Closed).
- ¹⁷⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 8.9.41, ML MSS 364/26:445.
- ¹⁷⁸ Letter from Miles Franklin to Eleanor Dark, 8.10.41, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁷⁹ Letter from Jean Devanny to Eleanor Dark, 24.3.43, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁸⁰ Letter from Jean Devanny to Eleanor Dark, 19.1.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁸¹ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 14.7.42, NLA MS 1174/1/6131-32.
- ¹⁸² Letter from Nettie Palmer to Vance Palmer, 14.(10).(42), NLA MS 1174/1/6223-25.
- ¹⁸³ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, 22.3.42, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁸⁴ A gap of a decade separated the publication of Vance Palmer's *Legend for Sanderson* (1937) from his next novel, *Cyclone* (1947), as it did Barnard Eldershaw's *Plaque with Laurel* (1937) from their next and last collaborative effort, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947). Between Davison's *Caribbean Interlude* (1936) and *Dusty* (1946), appeared only a collection of short stories, *Woman at the Mill* (1940); and some eleven years elapsed between Franklin's *Pioneers on Parade* (1939) (written in collaboration with Dymphna Cusack) and her next fictional work, *Prelude to Waking* (1950). Prichard's sole novel of the war years, *Moon of Desire* (1941) was written principally, the author admitted, to attract 'some film magnate'; an aim she thought 'damnable' but justified given her dwindling finances. There was a gap of almost a decade between her two

serious works of the years surrounding the Second World War, *Intimate Strangers* (1937) and *The Roaring Nineties* (1946). Devanny produced two forgettable works of fiction: *The Killing of Jacqueline Love* (1942) and *Roll Back the Night* (1945).

- ¹⁸⁵ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Eleanor Dark, 9.7.44, NLA MS 4998, file 2 (Closed).
- ¹⁸⁶ Letter from Jean Devanny to Eleanor Dark, 20.11.43, NLA MS 4998, file 1 (Closed).
- ¹⁸⁷ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 15.8.40, NLA MS 1174/1/5840 – 65
- ¹⁸⁸ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 15/16.6.42, NLAMS 1174/1/6113-14.
- ¹⁸⁹ Letter from Miles Franklin to Nettie Palmer, 14.3.45, NLA MS 1174/1/6718.
- ¹⁹⁰ Letter from Miles Franklin to Nettie Palmer, 14.3.45, FNLA MS 1174/1/6718.
- ¹⁹¹ Letter from Vance Palmer to Nettie Palmer, (late Aug.) 1941, NLA MS 1174/1/6015.
- ¹⁹² Letter from Nettie Palmer to Aileen Palmer, (c. late 1943), NLA MS 1174/1/5430.
- ¹⁹³ *Meanjin*, 'Letter to Tom Collins.'
- ¹⁹⁴ Tennant's writings of the 'thirties treated distinctly working-class themes of deprivation and employment during the Depression years. Unlike Prichard and Devanny, her literature of social protest stemmed from personal convictions and philosophy concerned with what Spender labelled 'the chaos of existence' and 'the individual acts of courage and kindness' that rise to meet that chaos. See Dale Spender, 'Afterword,' in Eldershaw (ed.), *The Peaceful Army*, p. 140.
- ¹⁹⁵ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Vance Palmer, (Sept/Oct 1942), NLA MS 1174/1/617779.
- ¹⁹⁶ Interview by Ingram Smith with Eleanor Dark, 7.10.44, 'Australian Literature' series, SP 300/1/ Box 15, A.B.C. Documents Archives.
- ¹⁹⁷ Interview by Ingram Smith with Alan Marshall, 1944, 'Australian Literature' Series, SP 300/1, Box 16, Australian Archives (N.S.W.) Series.

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- ¹⁹⁸ Interview by Ingram Smith with Ion Idriess, 14.10.44, 'Australian Literature' Series, SP 300/1, Box 16, Australian Archives (N.S.W.) Series.
- ¹⁹⁹ Letter from Miles Franklin to Nettie Palmer, 28.3.45, NLA MS 1174/1/6736-38.
- ²⁰⁰ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Nettie Palmer, 13.4.44, NLA MS 1174/1/6539.
- ²⁰¹ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 26.7.42, NLA MS 1174/1/6144.
- ²⁰² Brooks et al suggest that by the early 1950s serious writers – such as Dark and others in the little company – 'were no longer the voice of the culture.' The fact is they never were. That honour – and burden – belonged to the more popular writers, such as Ion Idriess, whose natural empathies with ordinary Australians endeared them to much wider readerships than the little company as a whole ever achieved. Brooks & Clark, *Eleanor Dark*, p. 400.
- ²⁰³ *Australian Writers Speak: Literature and Life in Australia*, Angus and Robertson Ltd., Sydney, 1944, Contents.
- ²⁰⁴ Unnamed reviewer, 'Australian Writers--Speak!' Review and Criticism, *Meanjin Papers*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Winter 1943.

Chapter Seven.

'Filled with forebodings': the immediate post-war years, 1945-1949

We take our politics as we take most things--good-humouredly. Only rarely do election campaigns become heated, and when polling-day arrives Australia turns up at the booths with its tennis racquet under its arm or its golf clubs slung across its shoulder, and records its vote on the way to more pressing engagements.¹

The leisurely pace which kept us going once may not serve now that we are desperately involved in what H.G. Wells called the race between education and disaster. Optimism will never be anything but an asset unless it slides into fatuous complacency.²

The immediate post-war years collapsed Eleanor Dark's hopes of a return to normality in family life, of a close bonding of writer and community, and of a New Order of economic parity and social harmony. Like her compatriots, whose carefree approach to politics she celebrated in 'Australia and the Australians,' she had fallen victim to a kind of 'fatuous complacency' towards the end of war. In late 1944, victory still uncertain, Nettie Palmer yielded for a moment to despair:

such setbacks and agonising delays: Greece, Brussels.
Where do we stand? What are we to hope for?³

A few months later, victory suddenly within reach, Vance Palmer painted a strikingly different scenario.

The news that's been coming through is great. Allies apparently marching through Western Germany without opposition!⁴

Spirits soared. There was now a future for which to plan. It was time to build rather than destroy. For many, Dark included, it was the dawn of a New Order in human society. Little by little through the war Dark had fleshed out her own 'blueprint of a better and saner social organisation.'⁵ By 1945, it included major reforms in education, health⁶ and the environment.⁷ Hers was a cocky confidence that assumed the New Order was a matter of 'when' not 'if.'

But not for long. Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced a new consciousness in radical circles, and filled Dark with 'forebodings.' Eric quoted Tennyson: "Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers."⁸ The

romantic anticipation of peace⁹ – to ‘seize the moment and the means’¹⁰ – soured into ‘a general distilled sense of fear.’¹¹ A sombre Dalby Davison wondered ‘how long will the peace last?’¹² Dark greeted V-P Day flatly,

“Official” news of peace came through, so decided as professional duty to go down & observe doings in Syd.¹³

Two months later, she noted wryly that ‘the peace as yet hardly seems more peaceful.’¹⁴

Soon wartime tensions between an American-led Western Alliance and Soviet Russia erupted in Europe and later in Asia. A ‘balance of terror’ was established in 1949 with the Soviets’ explosion of an atom bomb. Developments at home resonated with the global tensions. Barely a year after the end of war, believers in socialism were questioning publicly Labor’s commitment ‘to create a socialist society.’¹⁵ The Left’s campaign to bring the Party to heel escalated, with open accusations of abandoning its principles and becoming the “left wing” capitalist party and not a socialist party at all.¹⁶ In his Postscript to *Who Are The Reds?* (1946) Eric Dark struck his own note of dismay at the ill will of ‘employers (who) had no intention of co-operating to bring in the “New Order.”’¹⁷ For the Left, Chifley’s decision in the winter of 1949 to use troops to break the coalminers’ strike was the ultimate outrage. Two months before Labor’s defeat at the polls in December 1949, Dark was despondent:

Hope Aust. Democracy doesn’t fall in bits about us--there seems to be some large cracks appearing, but after all with the earth shaking under our feet as it is what can you expect?¹⁸

Feeling the burden of her years on body, mind and Muse, Dark had to dig deep into dwindling resources to withstand the onslaughts awaiting her and rouse herself to the challenges they posed. Whereas before, her ‘world-proof life’ had shielded her from her society-in-crisis, Dark was now exposed. Home- and community-life, once complementary halves of a charmed personal world, had fallen victim to Cold War politics. Hate mail and threatening calls, rumours of their so-called subversive activities eventually made the Darks’ life in Katoomba untenable. She had to endure false accusations in the Parliament and the media. Professionally, the picture was also bleak. The little company was no more: its members scattered and dispirited, its *esprit de corps* fractured, its sense of mission spent. Late in the period, a brilliant spark appeared. *Storm of Time* (1948), second volume of her trilogy, received high and almost universal acclaim, prompting one critic to claim it stood

‘within measurable distance of Tolstoy’s War and Peace for epic sweep and massive grandeur.’¹⁹ By then Dark had more pressing priorities. Consumed by visions of Heaven and Hell – a New Order and a nuclear holocaust – and engaged in a desperate final bid to rescue her world-in-crisis, she appeared oblivious to the novel’s great success. Time was running out on ‘the race between education and disaster.’



The author with the completed manuscript of Storm Time (1948) – ‘The Monster’ stood some 350,000 words tall.

Dark’s personal world remained the key to her well-being and ‘Varuna,’ its centrepiece. In appearance at least, the family home continued to defy the traumas and tremors shaking that world. The Darks’ silver wedding anniversary in 1947 marked a milestone of an extraordinarily successful partnership. ‘E. & I’²⁰ recurs so often in the diaries that it assumes a *persona* of its own. The spectre of nuclear war

united the Darks more at an ethical than a political level. Increasingly, they found themselves advancing similar causes. They attended and hosted discussion groups, and were fellow classmates in Russian language lessons. They shared membership and executive positions in the Fellowship, the Council for Civil Liberties, the Australia-Russia Society and others.

Life was not always earnest, and with Mike back from boarding school, old rhythms of family life returned, like impromptu bushwalks, stays at 'Jerrikellimi,' and annual bush-holidays. In 1948 the family went on a 'six months walkabout' ambling through all four corners of the continent. To Eleanor it was spiritual refreshment in the timeless land.

I shall always be thankful that I didn't die without seeing something – even if only a tourist's eye-view – of the Northern Territory and that fabulous country round Alice Springs.²¹

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RG.IHI COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA. N.44364Z 20
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COMMONWEALTH INVESTIGATION SERVICE,
6TH FLOOR, MERCANTILE MUTUAL BUILDING
117 PITT STREET,
SYDNEY. Service.

5th November, 1948.
8 NOV 1948
Reg. No. C/90588D

Director,
CANBERRA.

DR. E. P. DARK - ELEANOR DARK.

It is reliably reported that the abovenamed persons are at present on holidays. They are said to have recently visited Central Australia and the Rocket Range Area in which vicinity they may still be. No further information is available.

The connexions of Dr. and Mrs. Dark will be well known to the Directorate.

Forwarded herewith are dossiers Nos. 820 and 821 which have been prepared in regard to Dr. and Mrs. Dark respectively.


R. WILLIAMS,
Deputy Director.

The sinister



*The friendly – with colleague Katharine
Susannah Prichard in Perth, September 1948.*

But cracks were appearing in Dark's personal world. Eric, who turned sixty in 1949²², was no longer the robust mountaineer and his enthusiasms often outran his energies. For the first time, his health became a theme of his wife's diaries.²³ She also grew increasingly worried about herself: of feeling 'tired & mentally collapsed,'²⁴ 'too tired to do more than crawl around for essentials'²⁵. These notations became so frequent that her diaries sometimes sag from their weight. Suddenly sensitive to the fact and effects of ageing – '44th birthday – & feeling it!,' she recorded on 26 August 1945²⁶ – she developed a kind of ailing mentality. Bouts of self-pity were countered by bouts of self-reproach. Minor incidents became major dramas. One day, she offered her gardener a cup of tea but:

Still thinking about work – left his tea on table for nearly an hour! Made him fresh – & then left kettle on – empty, burnt it out. Felt tired & mentally collapsed after these contretemps.²⁷

Increasingly vulnerable at multiple points, Dark appeared sometimes on the brink of emotional collapse.

In January 1948 came the news that Molly had thrown herself from cliffs near Watson's Bay.²⁸ The burden of grief lay with both Eleanor and Bim. The death wrenched from them for a second time a 'mother' who had come to rival Eleanor McCulloch in their affections. The suicide compounded Eleanor's pain, haunting her with fears she may have contributed through neglect or insensitivity.²⁹ Molly left a vast void. Typically cautious and circumspect, Dark now became markedly so.

Dark, the mother, also faced a difficult time. The teenager she had begrudgingly packed off to boarding school in 1941 had returned home, after five years, a young man. One side of her celebrated Mike's rites of passage to adulthood: his first "girl friend"³⁰, 'driving licence'³¹, Leaving Certificate³². Another resisted confronting their long-term implications. By early 1948, he had secured his first "job" as builder's labourer.' A year later, restless and seduced by Eric Lowe's offer to help him run his new farm in Montville, Queensland, Mike left home for good.³³ A decade ago – when ten-year-old Mike sought permission to overnight with friends in a cave – the devoted mother had braced herself for 'the inevitable moment when I must steel myself into letting him go off camping without us!'³⁴ She did so again, only this time it was permanent.

In January 1946 mysterious phone calls (sometimes late at night) signalled the start of the campaigns of harassment of Eric that eventually prompted the Darks to abandon their home of almost thirty years. The 'tyranny of the doctor's phone' suddenly assumed new and more sinister dimensions. Two cryptic diary entries hint at their fact and effect. 'More 'phone trouble after we went to bed, but got to sleep finally about 10.'³⁵ Next day: 'Still feeling tired after all alarms & excursions so to bed early again.'³⁶ A year later, hate mail (post-marked locally and inter-state and bearing such messages as "'LYNCH" LAW FOR COMMUNISTS'³⁷ and 'FEAR RSL'³⁸) reached 'Varuna' addressed to 'DR DARK (COMMUNIST), KATOOMBA, NSW'³⁹. CIB files reveal they were under surveillance during their 'walkabout.'⁴⁰ A report that they had 'recently visited Central Australia and the Rocket Range Area in which vicinity they may still be' prompted an investigation by Adelaide Branch⁴¹ which found 'no trace of a visit.'⁴²

Community antagonism towards them had a history. But what before had been isolated random incidents, now seemed a semi-official

campaign of slander. They had become increasingly and closely identified with a cluster of Katoomba 'mountain Reds'⁴³ that included Bruce Milliss and Charles Davidson, card-carrying members of the CPA. Eric, not a member, flaunted his communist sympathies in other ways. Already by 1945, he had emerged a leading figure of the radical camp of the local ALP Branch. That the vendettas which eventually stripped Eleanor and Eric of their reputations were essentially ideological, not personal, did not lessen their bitterness. Some fellow Katoombans seem to have forgotten three decades' worth of contributions to community life, including most recently their wartime initiatives.⁴⁴ Even these good works were now being soiled by unsubstantiated claims about the 'real' motives behind Eleanor's efforts on behalf of the Children's Library and Eric's Volunteer Defence Corps. (VDC) work,⁴⁵ not long ago warmly commended by the organisation's High Command.⁴⁶

In the end the onslaught proved overwhelming. The decision to leave (initially for an indefinite period of time) was not made lightly:

I wonder if we're mad to start upheavals now, if we'll become Misplaced Persons & never get back to Varuna at all!⁴⁷

This was not the first time that Eric's political zeal disturbed the peace of his wife's personal world. But this time it shattered it.

Since their marriage Eric had been the emotional axis around which her life revolved. His 'firmness' made her 'circle just.' But more than ever before, he now played a paradoxical role: as principal stabilising and destabilising force in his wife's life. The campaigns of personal harassment – the anonymous callers, senders of threatening mail, initiators of outrageous often libellous rumours circulating in Katoomba – shook them both. Though he dismissed his tormentors as 'ratbags,' for the first time the Military Cross winner confessed to fear. He felt they 'hated' him, 'particularly the Movement – the Catholic Action'⁴⁸ whose *raison d'être* through this period was to counter and head off the supposedly increasing influence of communism in the trade union movement and the A.L.P. His wife shared his fears⁴⁹ and his risks.

Eleanor was very worried at that time if I got a call for somebody out [sic] who was a lonely case, a person I didn't know, she insisted on coming with me.⁵⁰

The 'Eric factor' permeates Dark's papers as comprehensively as it permeated her life. It infiltrated her mailbox and disturbed her sleep, pursued her on family holidays and poisoned community life, even long-standing friendships. It affected her physically and psychologically. As early as 1946, news items on Eric began including

references to Eleanor, often in passing⁵¹ but not always. Some were trite and inoffensive.⁵² Others were personal, like those prompted by media speculation that Foreign Affairs Minister Evatt's alleged nomination of Eric to the diplomatic post of Minister in Moscow was mainly due to her friendship with Mary Alice and to Evatt's respect for her work.⁵³ The rumours⁵⁴ distressed her, even if there was truth in them. But the idea of living overseas for a time held no lure for her. Eric was keen, but as he later confessed, 'Eleanor would have hated it.'⁵⁵

The apogee of this trend of public intrusion came a year later in what she later called 'the Hullabaloo in Parl 1947.' A file bearing that name testifies to her considerable involvement in claims by J.P. Abbott, M.H.R. (Country Party) in the Parliament accusing her and Eric of being among the 'chief communist operatives' in the Katoomba A.L.P Branch. It was bad enough to have Eric unjustly accused. In her case, Abbott's charges were doubly false. In a curt letter to 'The Editor' (published alongside Eric's) of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph* of 27 April 1947 she stated categorically that not only had she 'never performed any "underground" work for the Communists or anyone else,' she had not 'and never have been a member of the ALP or of any other political party.'⁵⁶

The dramatic reversal in the fortunes of Dark's 'world-proof life' – largely, it would seem, through no fault of her own – makes it tempting to cast her in the role of victim. The wife feared for her husband; the individual for what his politics were doing to her world. But in both cases she had options.

The domestic woman, caught in her husband's conflict, still had choices. Eric was her priority. Sometimes overwhelmed by his 'restless' energies, she was also in awe of them and had embraced them long ago as part and parcel of the man. It was not he who had changed but the times. By 1946, Cold War politics had turned the 'naughty wicked socialist' of 1944 into a security risk. Her decision to stand by him was typical and unequivocal. By his side when Eric was called to remote places late at night for medical emergencies, Eleanor evidently went prepared for more than verbal combat: taking with her, Eric recalled shortly before his death, a long piece of lead piping which she hid inside her muff.⁵⁷ 'If they start,' he recalled her reassurances, 'I'll finish it.' Eric never doubted her intentions or good aim. 'There'd have been a lot of cracked heads if they'd attacked me.'⁵⁸ In 1946, she appealed publicly on his behalf

as the wife of the author' of *Who Are The Reds?* – for his right to express a political conviction that had literally

forced itself upon a mind which gave it no other encouragement than to hold open, stubbornly, the door of intellectual honesty.

She urged his readers to give it 'careful and unprejudiced attention.'⁵⁹ Security agents heeded her call – at least in part – duly noting her intervention.⁶⁰

Eleanor's support was much more than that of the loyal wife or public advocate of free speech. She also had her own interests and investments in her society-in-crisis, even if extricating her quiet circumspect politics from the shadow of Eric's brash politics was not always easy. An appreciation of major distinctions (sometimes clashes) between them and the strategies she evolved to deal with them is critical if her dilemma – and her agency – of these years is to be properly understood.

Negotiating between loyalties to her own principles on the one hand, and to her husband and colleagues of the extreme Left on the other, was not new to Eleanor Dark. Indeed, it was a feature of her public years. But never before had she and fellow radicals deemed the stakes to be so high, nor the forces ranged against them so large and threatening. The political had become inescapably personal, serious and sinister. Even if her political philosophy differed sharply from Eric's and colleagues' of the extreme Left – hers, the politics of individual morality; theirs, the politics of collective action – this was no time to break ranks in public. She opted for self-censorship.

Her private notebook, begun in the early 1940s as a way of rehearsing random thoughts, now became her secret outlet, her private confidante. Here she was safe to air her inconvenient views, without risk of compromising Eric's political position – or her own. Here she reassured herself that their differences were of degree, not kind:

It is necessary that there should be, in every generation, some whose temperament and habit of thought inclines them to work for the present and the immediate future; and others whose natural tendency is to do, say or make something whose full effects may not be felt for fifty or a hundred years. It often happens, unfortunately, that these two kinds of people grow impatient with each other, not realising or not choosing to admit, that they are complementary, and neither kind more or less important than the other.⁶¹

Here she also created a safe space for her ever more trenchant and critical views of the Left, including of their ultimate model itself of the good society, Soviet Russia. Like Eric, she too kept 'the door of

intellectual honesty' open, though it did not always reveal the same 'truths' to each of them. Aware of the opprobrium visited on Koestler and others for their public denunciations of Soviet Communism,⁶² Dark checked her own recalcitrant thoughts, and sought comfort in the fact that 'between theory and practice there is always a gap.'

Repeat the worst danger confronting Communists, Socialists, and all "Leftists" is tendency to identify the concept of socialism (an abstraction) with the U.S.S.R. (a geographical reality).⁶³

She now kept a critical distance from both Right and Left, insisting that 'no party has the monopoly of truth and virtue,' and charged them both with the potential to choke the life from Australian democracy. It was 'nonsensical,' she argued in 1949,

for the political Right' [to predict the downfall of democracy], which could only come to pass under Communism, and equally nonsensical for the Left to declare that it could only happen under Capitalism.⁶⁴

Dark's most devastating views had to do with affairs within the Left. There were matters, most particularly Soviet policy towards writers and women, about which she felt passionately. In what was perhaps a private gesture of defence of Koestler and the growing band of returnees from Soviet Communism, she argued that the communists were too sensitive to criticism. Instead of questioning their attitude to writers 'who have fallen foul of them,' they merely assumed the 'writer is to blame,' dismissing him as a 'failure.' How many serious creative writers in the world, she wondered, were members of the Communist Party, and how many 'having joined, have subsequently left it'? She urged 'a dispassionate, self critical attempt to find reason' for this trend. Artists may have 'something to teach' communists.⁶⁵ A political system that sought to silence its creative writers for expressing unpopular political views had no hopes of winning Eleanor Dark's sympathies.

Her views of fellow radicals within her own circles were also hardening. Her contacts with them were rare (and mostly associated with Eric) and usually a source of irritation. (A diary entry of late 1945 offers the flavour. 'To Commos meeting in Soldiers Hall – v. bad!'⁶⁶) And the gap widened. The professional writer and lover of words resented the tendency, 'not peculiar to Marxists' but generally apparent in 'the disciples of any "new" religion or cult,' towards obscure and dense language. As early as 1941, she had unburdened herself on this matter.

They treat the really very simple principle of "dialectics"

as if it were a mystery only to be understood by tormenting the brain with such phrases as the “interpenetration of opposites” and “the negation of the negation”.⁶⁷

Distancing herself from ‘all people’ (communists included) ‘whose lives and thoughts are governed by a dogma – whether political, religious or plain crackpot,’ she warned they

are in constant danger of deceiving *themselves*. Degree of self-deception would, of course, vary with individuals, but could very well reduce an entirely well-meaning person to a state of “moral corruption”.⁶⁸

Was this ‘entirely well-meaning person’ Eric? One thing is clear: Eleanor was disassociating herself from such ‘individuals,’ even if she dared not do so publicly.

I dislike jargon; I dislike dogma; I dislike rhetoric; I dislike “conforming”; I dislike reckless generalising; I dislike tactics and manoeuvres.⁶⁹

Eleanor’s private notebook reveals as much of her estrangement from Eric’s increasingly radical politics as her resolve to protect him – and their partnership of over a quarter of a century – from that knowledge. It served its purpose well. It allowed her to ‘speak her mind’ without hurting Eric privately or publicly, absorbing the brunt of her anxieties and angers at fellow socialists without appearing disloyal. Here she could lead a kind of double life: a comrade-in-arms to Eric and other fellow radicals in public, a rebel in private.

Dark had her own profound commitment to, and stake in, the New Order, ‘a better and saner social organisation.’⁷⁰ Through the war, her ‘blueprint’ of the good society evolved and sharpened. By 1940, she was imagining its foundations and contours: urging the need to see ‘Nature as an ally in our material life’⁷¹; later making education and health (‘the two most important of the social services’) its centrepiece ‘with first call on all the resources of the nation’⁷²; and calling for the ‘*future* system’ to correct gender-based imbalances at home and elsewhere, so that

the washing of nappies is quite as much father’s concern as mother’s, and the paying of the domestic bills as much mother’s concern as father’s.⁷³

The New Order, she hoped, would also yield a cultural harvest and reaffirmation of ‘the necessity’ for ‘an ethical basis to all human organisation.’⁷⁴

Meanwhile, from friends in Europe and the States, Dark heard

increasingly depressing news and forecasts: with peace had come not the New Order but a new order of chaos. A London friend told of a 'red purge.'⁷⁵ Karl Shapiro's woeful messages suggested a sickness at the heart of American society and its values. The leader of Western democracy was in moral decline.⁷⁶

The class struggle has become the greed struggle in this country. There are millions of new millionaires whose absence from the middleclass has created a vacuum into which the proletariat has been sucked.⁷⁷

In 'News to Australia,' a long poem he dedicated to Eleanor and Eric Dark, Shapiro urged disengagement and a deliberate policy of isolationism by Australia from the West.⁷⁸ Dark heard but dared not heed his impassioned call to

Befriend your insularity, be far,
Hug the antipodes, survive.

If anything, the loss of heart of fellow artists strengthened her resolve to remain in the struggle. As late as 1949, she was urging fellow Australians towards closer engagement with the world beyond their borders.

Love for our country remains natural and right, but is no longer enough; we must learn, like the rest of humanity, that "the world is our village".⁷⁹

In five years she had travelled far from her carefree mood of 'Australia and the Australians' and celebration of a politically casual carefree Australia on polling-day

'with its tennis racquet under its arm or its golf clubs slung across its shoulder on the way to more pressing engagements.'⁸⁰

By 1949, with what she termed 'this ideological cleavage in our world'⁸¹ assuming fearful proportions, Dark signed a desperate pact with the gods. She would trade her hopes of a New Order now for the possibility of one in the future. For the present,

I should not look to it to produce Utopia, nor even, within many, many generations, a society free from intolerance, greed, malice, injustice, lust for power or any other human failing. I should merely expect it to minimise the conditions which artificially stimulate these unpleasant human qualities, and hold this rocking world in some kind of equilibrium while we get ourselves enlightened.⁸²

With kindred spirits of the little company, Dark faced professional as well as political trials. Far from becoming respected elders in post-war

reconstruction Australia, many found themselves marginalised by new forces and priorities set in motion by a new breed of Australian writer, reader and literary entrepreneur. The wider community remained uninterested in their offerings of high culture. Meanwhile, instruments of power they had created and nurtured through earlier decades were either in decline, like the Fellowship, or changing guard, like the C.L.F.

Earlier exertions to make government a partner in the literary enterprise now came to haunt them. The State was assuming an increasingly intrusive role in literary affairs. Government assistance, courted by these writers in the mid-1930s and deemed critical to the development of Australian literature, came at a heavy price to the integrity of creative writing. The dark side of the politics of State patronage was being felt by those who like Clem Christesen, editor of *Meanjin*, refused to heed directives to keep their work 'strictly literary,' in fact a euphemism for conservative. *Meanjin's* dilemma was essentially that of little literary magazines generally, whose moral lifeblood was their independence and autonomy, but whose daily bread rested on conservative politicians who wanted good returns for their financial support.

Censorship was nothing new to the Australian writer. But the savagery with which officials were now prepared to enforce their will, as in the case of Robert Close's *Love Me Sailor*, (1945), shocked the writing community.⁸³ The way officialdom dealt with Close carried a warning which other writers ignored at their own peril. Nation-wide protests organised by sympathetic colleagues revealed cracks in the solidarity of writers, particularly the Fellowship. Not everyone disagreed, it turned out, with the government action. An executive member of the South Australian Branch declared the penalties too lax. The Fellowship's impotence in the face of this challenge to its appeal for Branch cooperation bespoke its general loss of standing even among its own members.

The literary scene was not altogether bleak. Exciting developments were taking place in the fields of writing, literary criticism, publishing and teaching. In unguarded moments, writers of the little company acknowledged even welcomed the fact. By mid-1945, Barnard wrote 'I can't keep up with what is coming out. Fine crop of poetry.'⁸⁴ More than just a new medium, a new approach to writing and the relationship between art and society was being forged. While many of the new leading figures in poetry like James McAuley were politically conservative, others like Judith Wright were not, and some, like Alec Hope and Douglas Stewart, maintained art had 'no place in political movements.' The 'literature of commitment' that emerged in this period

stemmed from radically different premises to what might be termed the 'literature of conscience' characteristic of the little company. The kind of 'serious' socio-political literature associated with the group generally belonged to the consciousness of a generation also in decline. Radicalism had lost its hold on prominent literary circles. If the personal had become political for Dark's generation of radical writers, the political was now increasingly being subsumed within the personal.

The revival of interest in poetry and in drama (in a strong push to establish a National Theatre) came not at the expense of other media. Good, even outstanding, novels emerged from writers 'serious' and popular, old and young. Patrick White's work stirred interest; Kylie Tennant, Alan Marshall and Dymphna Cusack were all producing. Though the little company's stranglehold on serious literature had gone, most were still writing. Some like Barnard, Eldershaw, Franklin and Devanny were turning to non-fiction. Those who stayed with fiction were producing fine works.⁸⁵

Australian literature was not so much changing as expanding and diversifying. The very definition of literature was broadening to include other forms of writing, such as biography and journalism. Growth and expansion were evident not only in terms of writing but of the industry and market that supported it. The publishing industry reflected and contributed to these developments. New Penguin paperback editions reached a wider audience and the trend towards home editions of American or British publications (prompted by wartime conditions and consolidated in this post-war period) favoured the local market. Literary criticism was expanding to embrace new forms and perspectives as well as academic and journalistic approaches.

While such opening up of the national literature to the Australian community had lain at the centre of the little company's mission of earlier years, they did not celebrate the achievement. For a generation, they had jealously controlled the future of an Australian literature, fulfilled their duties more in the style of a family business than a literary industry. Many did not relinquish that control easily or graciously. Yielding to a new generation of custodians of the literary flame proved difficult. Barnard reassured Nettie that 'the only literary club of any value was that of your friends & correspondents.'⁸⁶ Davison struck at both generations of writers framing his own.

The 90s tended to produce romantic writers who had emptied themselves by the time they were thirty and then either drowned themselves in grog or went out very picturesquely and hanged themselves with a stockwhip.

In these times it looks as if it is the Old Guard who will do the job ... almost as if this age – as distinct from the 90s – is too frosty for the youngsters, and needs writers rooted further back.⁸⁷

Literary criticism was another contested area. The Palmers, Barnard and Davison retained a toehold in the field and were not very tolerant of those they saw as usurping their power or questioning their talents. Many resented academia's involvement in their domain. Franklin took 'a very poor view of any doctorates or degrees in literature.'⁸⁸ It was partly resistance to change, partly inability to let go. The crumbling of their little empire of influence also soured some who resented newcomers as the dying resent vultures, particularly where commercial considerations were involved. Writing was an industry now, albeit a fledgling one. But those who had nurtured it to this stage (or felt they had) were not necessarily going to benefit most from it financially. When Colin Roderick, an enterprising young academic working on an anthology of Australian short stories, approached Franklin for assistance, she refused, affronted that he would capitalise on the labours of those who had 'impoverished themselves in establishing an indigenous revolution.'⁸⁹

Old targets of abuse like journalists were not spared. Few welcomed the alliance forged between the Fellowship and the Australian Journalists' Association of late 1945. Barnard pronounced the arrangement 'pernicious because journalism and writing have nothing in common.'⁹⁰ Davison agreed, seeing 'no connection between journalism and literature except that they both use paper and ink.'⁹¹

These were mostly the rages of the impotent or near impotent. Aware their paths were diverging, some in the little company made their farewells, intentionally or otherwise. Dark's 1948 'walkabout' saw her social calendar full in virtually every capital city they visited. She lunched with Clem Christesen⁹² in Brisbane, met with Prichard and Henrietta Drake Brockman in Perth.⁹³ She visited Melbourne twice, meeting with the Palmers, Davison and Eldershaw.⁹⁴ Later, suspecting perhaps this might be their last communication, the typically cool Dark indulged in a little nostalgia in her salute to Franklin, her one real kindred spirit in the group.

Often I feel I should like to see you again – but I have you in my heart and in my bookshelves anyhow.⁹⁵

Others reflected a sense of the impending death of a generation and an era. Barnard mused that

We are probably the last people who will be reminded of our childhood by candles--they'll just make the next lot

think of strikes.⁹⁶

Dark in turn mourned the passing of the age of leisure writing. 'One regrets – for that writing had a solidity, integrity & value which we shall be the poorer for losing; if lose it we must.'

The clock ticks for everyone alike, if the writer has no time to write as he once did, neither does the reader have time to read a kind of writing which belonged to another age.⁹⁷

The writers themselves were showing their age. Nettie Palmer's heart deteriorated.⁹⁸ Vance was hospitalised several times. As old age redirected their attention inward, the fires of political commitment smouldered. Davison confessed feeling

less and less inclined to take up the banner of Exelsior, and more and more inclined to go at things quietly and indirectly.⁹⁹

There was also a trend to 'set the record straight' by publishing small monographs about each other.¹⁰⁰ Their value far transcends curiosity, for in these works writers of the little company were setting the framework of future historical debate on themselves and their contemporaries. It was a critical contribution to the record and a mighty weapon of control.

As the group's professional and political influence faded, personal dimensions assumed even greater importance. Davison's ties with the Palmers strengthened. There were 'no patches of doubtful ground between us,' he confessed to his mother.¹⁰¹ '[T]hey are the daily bread, the others are just cakes and ale – but very good cakes and ale.'¹⁰² Other bonds loosened, like those between Barnard and Eldershaw; and some were severed forever, such as that of Barnard and Davison. Meanwhile, old feuds continued to fester. Franklin's public rebuke of Vance Palmer's abridged edition of *Such is Life* a decade before was neither forgotten nor forgiven. The revenge came in the form of Davison's 'Letter to Joseph Furphy' – a 'long-awaited chance to pay back some old scores'¹⁰³ – published in *Meanjin* with Vance's consent. The Palmers meanwhile adopted a benevolent pose. Lest Franklin¹⁰⁴ should think 'we hold a grudge against her,' Vance encouraged Nettie to visit her in Sydney.¹⁰⁵

Historians such as Drusilla Modjeska and Susan McKernan have tended to neglect this last chapter of the little company. Yet the group's absence from the literary landscape of these years played a major role in shaping the new contours of that landscape. Besides (as Dark's story shows) while the unit itself faded, not so its members. Some – like

Prichard, Davison¹⁰⁶ and Dark herself – remained forces in their own right for decades. Tracing these individual strands reveals hidden aspects of the broad collective fabric and throws new light on the whole. A positive feature suddenly assumes a sinister character. Modjeska's 'network of emotional support' suddenly seems more like a tyranny of peer pressure. It is no mere coincidence that with the demise of their group, some broke dramatically out of the mould of their earlier literature: Dark to write her first humorous piece;¹⁰⁷ Davison, a study in human sexuality.¹⁰⁸ It is not only the diversity but also the quality of the work written in the absence of the group that is striking. Writers of the 'thirties may have welcomed the network of comrades-in-arms in the alien environment that was Australian literary society at that time, but this does not mean that the network and the group that epitomised it were necessarily assets, either to their individual development or that of Australian literature generally. Just as Eric Dark both helped and hindered his wife's literary ambitions, so did the little company play a profoundly ambivalent role in the literary lives of its members.

The disintegration of the little company constitutes a critical factor in the story of Dark's writing life. The group was never prominent in that life but fulfilled vital roles nonetheless. It was her refuge in and from literary society. It stood between her and mainstream Australian society. It confirmed her self-conception as an artist. It helped shape and sustain her sense of mission as writer in society. Now as in the first half of the private years, Dark found herself in a fluid impersonal professional environment in which she had no anchor, no 'home.'

Her response was to shape around her a new sense of belonging, setting aside her old mission for Australian literature in favour of Wells' 'race between education and disaster.' Stripped of their rhetoric, the two missions shared basic features. Both assumed a master-disciple relationship: the first between artist and community ('the people,' readers), the second between educators and community ('the masses,' voters). Both were premised on similar misconceptions of broad community perception not merely of a crisis but one that matched the nature and magnitude of that perceived by the radical intelligentsia, and – as misguidedly – of the community's willingness to submit itself to the prescriptions and teachings of the highbrows of their society. As Dark eventually realised, the relationship between intellectuals and the masses was no less problematic and alien a concept in the Australian context than that of the artist and the wider community.

Caught up in the panic and excitement of the 'moment,' Dark did not see these parallels. Instead, she braced herself against the coming storm. The struggle to save 'our chaotic world' from extinction, she argued in

post-bomb 1945, demanded constant alertness against the enemy without and within:

unless we are consciously prepared to do daily battle against such emotions – we find ourselves in a state of rage, irritation, frustration, depression, cynicism, disillusionment, suspicion or hatred; or even in a mood which includes all of these, and comes close to despair.¹⁰⁹

Since first adopting the role and responsibilities of the ‘serious writer,’ Dark had been preparing herself for this moment. There was something theatrical about her conception and analysis: ‘the whole of our way of life is at stake.’ It was mass education or nuclear warfare, enlightenment or devastation.

Only those she called ‘the intellectually and spiritually privileged’ in the community (as opposed to ‘the materially privileged’ whose values had become ‘as perverted as the underprivileged’¹¹⁰) possessed the necessary gifts and credentials to rescue society from the precipice and provide it with ‘the bread of thought.’¹¹¹ In this select group she included ‘most of the scientists, the scholars and the artists’ in the community. The burden to educate the mass of voters fell on them, to convince ‘millions of ordinary men and women’ that ‘the ideological war can and must be contained and resolved in its proper battleground, which is the human mind.’¹¹² The masses required urgently ‘the bread of thought’ which only the ‘natural leaders of society’ could dispense.¹¹³ Education would enlighten and empower them to utilise their voting power wisely. Mass education (which Dark defined as the training of the native intelligence) was the only antidote for mass culture.

The advocacy of education was not new to Dark. Throughout the war, she had had ‘a few brickbats to throw at the education system.’¹¹⁴ But now there were new elements. The bomb raised the stakes dramatically: ‘we live in a world (that) may blow up at any moment.’¹¹⁵ Internationalism, always implicit in her art and politics, now surfaced in the image of the ‘global village.’

Her new advocacy of democracy was more problematic for one who had earlier confessed to ‘no real attachment to (the) notion of majority rule.’¹¹⁶ By late 1945, more than a right, democracy seemed a responsibility.

So long as we continue to demand a democracy, we continue to assert faith in ourselves and our fellow citizens; if democracy does not mean that, it means nothing.¹¹⁷

Dark was not alone in making these attitudinal somersaults. Fellow radical intellectuals elsewhere in Australia and Europe, once also antipathetic to the idea and fact of 'the masses,' were joining the 'race between education and disaster.' Expediency overcame principle, the spectre of nuclear war warmed them to the 'notion of majority rule.'¹¹⁸ In Dark's critique of her society, the masses now quietly slipped out of their 'thirties and early 'forties skins – as the coarse mindless deadweight of society – into the equally ill-fitting one of saviours of society. An attempt in 1945 to analyse the reasons for and implications of the estrangement of the masses from 'education and culture' led her to conclude the fault lay squarely with the 'privileged classes' (as distinct from the 'intellectually and spiritually privileged' in which she included herself.)¹¹⁹ Their monopoly and misuse of the good things of life had, in her view, alienated the masses who

the more they learned to mistrust and resent this class, the more there grew in them an obscure, unconfessed mistrust and resentment of those intellectual and spiritual possessions which (along with material possessions) were denied to them.¹²⁰

Dark's exclusion of herself and her like from her stern critique of the 'privileged classes' was no more extraordinary than her diagnosis of the crisis and its cure. Within her conception of the 'moment,' one followed logically from the other.

She had other changes of heart. The long suffering writer who for decades had complained of community neglect of serious literature now found virtue in that neglect. Unlike European writers, placed on pedestals by their compatriots, Australian writers had been fortunate to receive no such adulation: 'public indifference' may have caused the Australian writer 'a great deal of frustration,' but it had also kept him 'well (we might also say ruthlessly) integrated with his community.'¹²¹ The understudy of Christopher Brennan's elitist views on art now insisted unproblematically that for literature to serve its rightful role in society it had to be both popular and good.

Had the crisis really brought about such dramatic reversals of positions? Dark's capacity for self-deception was considerable. Stripped of her new populist rhetoric and humble feel, the 'serious' writer remained fixed in her old mindset. Barely a month before the conclusion of war, Dark was still claiming her right to work in obscurity: writers should 'be known by numbers instead of names!'¹²² Beneath the new Dark of collective action and hectic activity, lay the Dark of old. Solitary and brooding, the writer continued to operate as an individual.

Her new sense of urgency for 'the race between education and

disaster' brought few new initiatives and directions from Dark, the 'serious' writer. Invited to present papers at various forums, grant interviews, give radio broadcasts on issues ranging from literature to education, politics to culture, the few she accepted fell largely into two stock-in-trade categories: women's¹²³ and children's education¹²⁴, and the writer's plight. A rare public intervention on behalf of her profession (and fellow writer Robert Close) was prompted by censorship. While her memberships of organisations grew, these remained mostly nominal.

While some plunged into Party politics and organisation, Dark became increasingly estranged even from the Fellowship and writers' circles. Though she gave considerably more speeches and interviews than she would have preferred, she also rejected many invitations. She tried to combat, but did not always succeed in overcoming, her distaste for public life and the limelight.¹²⁵

There were two main exceptions to this rule: her work with the local Council for Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA)¹²⁶, a precursor to the Arts Council, and local Discussion Groups. It is on the strength of her involvement in these movements that the 'serious writer's contributions to Wells' 'race' are seen at their best advantage. The two projects shared important similarities. Orchestrated by radical intellectuals and aimed at reaching the unenlightened in the community, both involved collective action and operated at grass-roots level. Both also cast her in the role of the educator.

Despite her exertions, Dark's heart was not in these activities. The role of educator or grass-roots community worker did not suit her temperament or gifts any more than others she had attempted in earlier 'moments' of her public years. Through them all, she had remained (in fact and to herself) first and foremost the writer. As such, she placed the written word at the centre of the global crisis, and made 'professional users of words' bear principal responsibility for solving it, by harnessing their gifts to the cause of educating the masses to assume their full democratic rights and responsibilities.

The writer fully acknowledged her bias, at least to herself.

It is natural that each individual, in viewing our chaotic world, should find his attention held by those aspects of chaos which are illuminated for him by his own specialised interests. As a writer, then, I have found myself more and more aghast at the abuse of words; more and more convinced that it undermines the very foundations of our civilisation.¹²⁷

It is as a writer that Dark's contributions to her world-in-crisis must

ultimately be assessed. If quantity alone were the measure, these would seem considerable. It is no coincidence that the novel she named 'The Monster' – the 350,000 words-long *Storm of Time* – should emerge in this period. But the act of writing alone was not going to advance the 'race'. It required a mass audience. Dark appeared to recognise the fact that 'there should be only one aim for the man who feels he has a valuable idea to contribute to humanity's progress – to communicate it.'¹²⁸ Yet the fact that most of her writings addressed an audience-of-one – herself – was no accident.

Principal evidence lies in her private notebook, her main escape valve of this period. Here, in addition to confessing her irritations with the mannerisms of Marxist intellectuals, and her alienation from Soviet Russia, lie revelations of extra-sensory perceptions and detailed accounts of sudden visitations from ghostlike and other-worldly creatures. Entries follow no clear pattern of chronology or theme; their tone varies drastically from intimate to clinical, first-person to narrator. The notebook appears to have been part of the individual's – not the writer's – survival kit of this period; neither meant for publication nor concerned with professional matters.

Indeed, except for 'The Monster,' most of her writings were not intended for public consumption. Of those that were, few were published, and these neither addressed nor reached popular audiences.

Apart from her novel, Dark published three pieces between 1945 and 1949. The aim of 'Drawing a Line around It' (1946)¹²⁹ was to offer the apprentice the benefit of an established writer's perspective. In the same year appeared 'Water in Moko Creek,' her one piece of short fiction of the period. Finally, Dark contributed a lengthy introduction to *This Land of Ours: Australia* (1949), a collection of verse and prose works by prominent cultural figures. Each of these three pieces underscores a basic inability rather than unwillingness to communicate her message to the 'masses.'

'Drawing a Line around It' constituted the artist's updated manifesto. Art had remained an essentially mysterious force to her, and this article reflected it in the romantic and often obscure terms in which she framed her message. The young writer must be 'in a perpetual ferment of wanting to write,' for it is 'the urgency of the desire' that 'will shape the expression.' The main creative burden of art was 'done invisibly.' The finished piece – 'the arrangement of words, notes, forms or colors' – was 'merely "drawing a line around" something that already exists.' The good writer, she affirmed as in olden days, was born, not taught; unconcerned with such things as good technique, 'an impressive vocabulary,' knowledge of old masterpieces and market demands. She

advised her young readers to forget about ‘fashions in writing’ and focus on ‘the cultivation of a healthy arrogance, a bold policy of innovation rather than emulation.’¹³⁰

‘This Land of Ours’ carried a quickening urgency. Dark urged fellow Australians towards an internationalist state of mind, and to ‘do it quickly, for the race between education and disaster is on.’ In ‘a world shrunk by modern communications, and crying out for co-operation,’ it was not distinctions but commonalities between nationalities that should be emphasised. ‘Love for our country remains natural and right,’ she concluded, but they were ‘no longer enough; we must learn, like the rest of humanity, that “the world is our village.”’¹³¹ Dark’s piece jarred in its earnest tone and dire predictions. While other pieces addressed the Australia ‘with its tennis racquet under its arm’ on polling-day she had evoked in her 1944,¹³² here she addressed an Australia sobered, like her, by the advent of the bomb. The ‘serious’ writer continued to be bedevilled by such basic questions as audience, pitch and timing of her message. As in the Depression, when she chose to feed her readers a steady diet of gloom – for their own good – so now.

In ‘Water in Moko Creek’¹³³ Dark appears at first to have reverted to long abandoned practices of pre-public years of writing short fiction and, by the journal she chose, courting if not the popular reader then certainly the broader market. But here again, it is more appearance than fact. It was as a ‘serious writer’ for political reasons that she attempted to reach a wide audience, and she missed the mark. The piece struck a sombre note clearly intended to educate and enlighten. Set ‘in these dreadful days of bullied and coerced humanity,’ it is not the tale itself – of a man and a woman on an afternoon’s bushwalk – but its heavy inspirational message that spoil it. Rugged and adventuresome, as one with their spiritual selves, the couple symbolise human qualities ‘perilously close’ to extinction. Dark was yet to recognise the need to entertain as much as enlighten her readers.

Storm of Time constitutes the artist’s most substantial response to her society-in-crisis. Embracing issues and concerns central to her developing critique of her own society and her role as artist-cum-educator, the book was (and was intended to be) Dark’s main offering to her troubled times. Setback after setback bedevilled its production, and only its author’s unwavering commitment saved it from being consigned to the rubbish bin. There are no echoes here of the cries of ‘artistic paralysis’ heard throughout the writing of *The Little Company*; nor of the ambivalence of purpose or lack of direction that characterised the writing of *The Timeless Land*. Dark’s original plan for her second volume of the trilogy, set out in some detail in October 1945, was that it

would

cover nine years, and the regimes of the three Governors who followed Phillip – culminating in the Rum Rebellion which deposed Governor Bligh, of ‘Bounty’ fame.¹³⁴

She followed the plan religiously. The book covers ‘exactly nine years – from Jan. 26, 1799 to Jan. 26, 1808.’¹³⁵

Distractions and interruptions form part of the writer’s burden, but Dark had never confronted them in this scale of magnitude or relentlessness: from ‘the Eric factor’ and community tensions, to personal traumas, failing health and eroding privacy. Factors inherent in her chosen medium and period contributed another set of problems, making the tasks of research and writing laborious drawn-out processes. It was the saga and challenge of the long-distance runner. Access to historical sources proved more difficult than with the earlier volume. As the colony grew in size and complexity so did the factor of difficulty in acquiring and mastering the available material. While her personal library had held a considerable proportion of the sources used for *The Timeless Land*, not so now. Access to most of the historical material, housed mostly in the Mitchell Library, was often difficult. Barely a year into its writing, she was already complaining that the manuscript had ‘been cooled off and warmed up again a thousand times over.’¹³⁶ The problem only intensified as home and community life deteriorated. The book, she said, had ‘a hoodoo on it from the beginning.’¹³⁷ It had been a

Monster ... not only in number of words and poundage of paper, but as an old man of the sea on my back for four years and a fiendish consumer of time and energy--which alas hasn’t been over-plentiful.¹³⁸

The stress told in several ways. Her tendency towards overwriting, first apparent in *The Timeless Land*, resurfaced. Never altogether reconciled to historical fiction-writing, she now blamed this for what she called ‘this disease of verbosity’ which she claimed ‘doesn’t seem to afflict me in others!’¹³⁹ By so diagnosing the problem, she seemed to exonerate herself of responsibility. Despite publishers’ warnings of rising publishing costs and dwindling paper stocks, the manuscript kept growing. Though Dark pronounced herself ‘dismayed’ by its ‘inordinate length’ – 247,000 words three-quarters of the way through – the book finished at an extraordinary 350,000 words. Pressed to ‘do all the cutting that you can’¹⁴⁰, she retorted that ‘a book has a logical length which can’t be argued with.’¹⁴¹ When negotiations reached a stalemate, she refused to budge. She was ‘quite decided,’ she emphasised to Collins, ‘against doing any further cutting.’ Her response to a similar request by Macmillans, her American publishers, was equally adamant:

'it will have to go as it is or not at all.'¹⁴² Collins accommodated her intransigence, Macmillans did not. The search began anew for an American publisher.

Meanwhile, desperate finally to shed the burden of her book and set out on her long 'walkabout' holiday, she offended her British agent by engaging in direct negotiations over terms of contract with her Australian publishers. It was unprofessional and uncharacteristic behaviour which she recognised in a letter of appeasement to the aggrieved agent. Even the title was difficult. Dark's first suggestion – 'MR. MARSDEN'S CURE OF SOULS' – was rejected by her publishers, despite her representations on its behalf that 'it embraces everything--the country itself and all the colonial community.'¹⁴³ Eventually, she found it in a verse of fellow writer Leonard Mann who, informed of the fact, pronounced himself 'very pleased' with her choice.¹⁴⁴

From the start, the pressures on *Storm of Time* were great. Some emanated from without, some from within. Would it, as Devanny wondered in 1945, rise to the 'Olympian heights' set by 'her historical masterpiece'; meet its impeccable standards of scholarship? Dark's choice of the Rum Rebellion as focal point of her story was significant. She was entering into a debate with a history. Bligh was an icon of Left historians, who conveniently forgot the Governor's imperial connections and read into his defiance of Macarthur's politics of greed the early awakenings of a socialist consciousness in the young colony. Evatt's *The Rum Rebellion* (1938) had only recently contributed to the debate. What would be her contribution?

Once cloaked in dignity and promise, the timeless land now has itself become a contested field in the struggle for control over the colony's natural resources. In the growing inequalities between the small settlers and large pastoralists lay echoes of class struggles raging elsewhere in Europe, and foreshadowings of those to erupt later in Australia. The demise of Aboriginal culture, more implied than confirmed here, allows the focus to be fixed firmly on the White tribe, and the collapse of the moral foundations underpinning its culture and values. 'Progress' in the colony had consolidated a new underclass dispossessed like the Blacks of their birthrights to a life of purpose on their own terms. The colony's social and political canvas had grown considerably broader and more complex. The population no longer divided simply between convicts and gaolers, but also between smaller settlers and big pastoralists, and ultimately between different visions of the colony's future: Governor Bligh's benevolent autocracy and Macarthur's pre-capitalism.

There were two distinct and conflicting interests in the colony – that of the whole community and that of ‘a few private individuals who, obeying nothing but their own avarice, were well on the way to establishing themselves as large landowners.’¹⁴⁵

Priorities had altered dramatically. The battle for physical survival won, the struggle now was for political and economic supremacy. ‘There was discipline then, chaos now.’¹⁴⁶

The wolves which had threatened it then had been abstractions--ignorance, violence, immorality --... But gradually ... as the wealthy grew more arrogant and rapacious, he began to see the wolves in the shape of men.¹⁴⁷

For all her grumblings, once immersed in her task Dark warmed to the possibilities that the historical setting offered to extend her story in space and time, and link local to global, colonial to contemporary Australian society. Important parallels existed between Australian society of the 1810s – ‘unstable, emotionally overcharged’¹⁴⁸ – and the late 1940s. Of both it could be said that: ‘Revolt was in the air of this distant land as it was in the air of the great world outside.’ In the case of the first, it was Ireland, France and England; the second, the Western Alliance against Soviet Russia. In that sense, it could also be argued, both held the essence of their times. ‘Here was the great world in miniature, and very close.’¹⁴⁹

But *Storm of Time* ultimately belongs to the artist, as did *The Timeless Land*. If in the allegory that is Dark’s recreation of the Rum Rebellion, distinctions between history and fiction, past and present mostly disappear, it is thanks to the artful weaving of these various parts into the fabric of her story. History remained a tool of the artist who, without compromising the essential ‘facts’ of her story, sought to lift these into what she regarded as a higher realm of ‘truth.’ It was the artist’s ‘duty,’ she believed, to relate particular ‘facts’ to the ‘universal experience,’ and ‘contemporary reality’ to ‘the permanent reality of all times, all places and all people.’¹⁵⁰ In the context of *Storm of Time*, it meant turning ‘nothing but a modest brick house, a worried elderly man, and a flag, flapping in the sun’¹⁵¹ into a kernel of timeless and universal human society – ‘everywhere--not only *now*, but long ago, and far, far into the future.’¹⁵²

The artist who conceived this ambitious task was at the height of her confidence in her powers. Her skills and her thinking had matured. The episode of the Rum Rebellion is a storyteller’s dream: full of drama, intrigue, action and colourful personalities locked in mortal combat. Herein, much more than in the earlier story of European settlement in

Australia, lay the stuff of popular literature. Bligh and Macarthur, both bigger-than-life characters, seemed made for it. But writing mainly for entertainment to a mass audience was not among Dark's priorities. She had 'serious' plans for her book. Over the years she had thought through matters relating to the craft, ethics and politics of her writing. *Storm of Time* absorbed the benefits and the burdens of many of these.

Characterisation remained a critical aspect and here as elsewhere one finds the best and worst of Dark's creative abilities. Humphrey McQueen's point that 'she could never draw a creditable capitalist'¹⁵³ is right in regard to her earlier novels: particularly, the grotesque and unredeemable Gormley in *Sun Across the Sky*, and the callous and cruel Arthur Sellman in *Waterway*. But it does not apply to the quintessential capitalist in *Storm of Time*: John Macarthur. Dark's Macarthur is a compelling and delicately drawn character; much more so, curiously enough, than her Bligh, with whose social instincts (particularly, in the context of his defence of the Hawkesbury small settlers) she largely sympathised. Though little warmed to Macarthur, she was intrigued by his character and challenged as an artist. As much for ethical as aesthetic reasons, she had come some way since her heavy-handed treatment of the capitalist as villain of the story. Art, she was affirming by the early 1940s, had a primary life-affirming role to play in society:

a sentence which can suggest the merest flicker of good, however deeply buried, in an evil man ... may seem, in the heat of its moment, to violate contemporary reality, but will bring it closer to the permanent reality of all times, all places and all people.¹⁵⁴

Her portrait of Macarthur shows the philosophy at work: his 'patient, scheming, tenacious brain'¹⁵⁵ set against his 'warm and undisturbed benevolence'¹⁵⁶ when in 'the bosom of his family';¹⁵⁷ the public figure – 'a military officer, not only by profession, but by nature. Life was a war' – balanced by the private man – 'the devoted husband, the indulgent father.'¹⁵⁸ A sharp but fair critic of her work, G.A. Wilkes highlighted this development in *Storm of Time*, celebrating her recognition that all situations are not 'plain black versus plain white,' and that 'human beings are all a mixture of good and bad.'¹⁵⁹

But the task of the artist extended to the creation of imagined historical figures. Dark did this to great effect in *The Timeless Land*, compensating for voids in the historical material in which no representative voices were heard from inarticulate but key sectors of the community such as Aborigines, convicts and small settlers. Now another critical void appeared: from within the colony itself: the colony and thus

her story lacked a hero. For all their theatrical qualities, neither Macarthur nor Bligh could fill Phillip's heroic mould, or so Dark seemed to think. Both were difficult and deeply flawed individuals. The patron saint of the small farmer could be tyrannical and often displayed an irascible side. Macarthur was the sort to inspire great fear or admiration but more for his ruthlessness than nobility of character. To find her hero on this bleak political stage Dark resorted to her imagination, one flavoured perhaps by a pride in her own Irish heritage.

Phillip's time had passed. The colony no longer needed someone to believe it could survive, but to ensure the survival had been worthwhile. It required a freedom fighter whose vision was allied to action. From the effete benevolent visionary that is her Phillip, she turned to a rough-and-ready ruffian serving a life sentence 'for raisin' the devil in old Ireland.'¹⁶⁰ The task of the first had been to build the foundations of a colony, the task of the second was to dismantle them. Thus from celebrating the man of peace and visionary of tomorrow's Australia, she now celebrated the revolutionary of today's Australia.

Finn, an escaped Irish convict, is the antithesis of respectability and the forces it represents. Unlike Phillip, the man of contemplation, Finn is a man of volatile action. He is a hero from below, symbol and consciousness of the oppressed classes. Finn symbolises the universal struggle of the people against oppression, the true spirit of revolution against the combined forces represented by Bligh and Macarthur: British Empire and Western capitalism, respectively.

Finn is unique in the canon of Dark's literature of social conscience. Jack Saunders of *Waterway* was set in the heroic mould but he did not escape Dark's prejudices against his class, and he too (like the cultural environment from which he stemmed) was denied the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of Finn. Finn embodies at once the revolutionary conscience and the essential qualities of the enlightened individual as Dark understood them. He operates as a symbol of the twin themes of captivity and escape. The embodiment of the condition of one and the instinct of the other, he carries the main burden of both through the story. Indeed, in some ways he constitutes an improvement on Phillip. For while Phillip lacks Finn's magnetism and forceful presence, the convict shares some of the Governor's best qualities. He too has a vast and curious intellect, a fierce love of books and profound respect for the world of learning.¹⁶¹ He 'made friends with the natives.'¹⁶² His sights and vision encompass the essentials of life. His tales are 'of events, of places, of policies, of beliefs, of courage and treachery, of ignorance, cruelty, and hope.'¹⁶³ He too knows instinctively to channel his energies to the sources rather than symptoms of evil:

Finn's hatred passed over individuals almost lightly, to fix itself like a blazing ray upon something wider. In the revenge he sought violence was not an end, but merely an incident.¹⁶⁴

For all his remarkable traits (or perhaps because of them) Finn, like Kavanagh, the earlier great tragic hero after whom he is broadly fashioned, never comes to life. Dark may have conquered her excesses towards her villains but not towards her heroes. The romantic in her swamped Finn (as Kavanagh before him) with superlatives and virtues which ironically dehumanised him. Descriptions of his compelling traits of character, his

sense of fun still alive beneath the grimness bred of suffering, a ready wit, an appreciation of the comical which brought him close to these gay savages¹⁶⁵

could not overcome the problem. In the end it was not a matter of description but character portrayal. Romantic excesses aside, there was a deeper problem. In the character of Finn, the artist overreached not so much her creative abilities as her narrow store of life experiences and human types. Once again the artist's 'world-proof life' proved an obstacle to her work.

In fairness to the commitment of the artist-cum-educator of these years, *Storm of Time* also testifies to a new willingness to explore sensitive and uncharted aspects of her work. Nowhere is this development more apparent than in her approach to the relationship between art and politics, a constant source of tension within both the author and her work throughout the public years, and unconflicted and unresolved until now.

Storm of Time had, as Wilkes recognised, a certain tradition of 'serious' writing to uphold, in which 'social organisation is scrutinised, to the discomfort of the privileged classes.'¹⁶⁶ This 'persistence of the strain of social criticism'¹⁶⁷ in Dark's work is not only apparent throughout her literature of the public years but indeed a defining feature of it. *Storm of Time* continues faithfully in the tradition, resonating with Dark's social and political concerns old and new. Here as in *The Timeless Land* she sought for effect to enter the collective mind of the poor and oppressed, drawing upon stock-in-trade subversive images of a world-turned-upside-down.

The lower classes are seized by fantastic notions--
fathered in France, of course--of a state in which the poor
shall become rich, all shall wear silk and eat venison,
there shall be neither rents, tithes nor taxes.¹⁶⁸

There are also inescapable echoes of her 'race between education and disaster' agenda, most notably in her sustained focus on the theme of education which she treats in the context of the clash between the oppressed – Blacks, convicts and ex-convicts, women and children, the workers generally – and oppressor classes – White invaders, military, large landowners – in the colony. A principal means of subjugation, education here holds the key to the condition of captivity as well as the means of escape from that captivity of the masses. Education in *Storm of Time* becomes a potent political weapon in its potential to subvert the established order by enlightening and thus empowering the masses. The oppressor classes fear it for the same reasons that the oppressed classes hunger for it. It is a leveller.

The learning instinct is portrayed as innate. Like Finn, Tom Towns, another escaped convict in the bush, finds himself drawn to

the call of learning, and it still called, even here in primordial forests; he had guessed – hardly more – that there was treasure buried in his mind, and he still thirsted to seek for it, even here among Stone Age savages; he had dreamed himself a quiet man, living studiously, and the dream still haunted him, even now when he knew himself an outlaw and a murderer.¹⁶⁹

Dilboong, young Aboriginal servant girl, is drawn to the world of learning – European-style – by her fascination with the written word. Her own culture might hold no parallels to it, but she 'understood magic very well, and of all the magic which the white people performed, none seemed so wonderful to her as that which they produced by making small marks' such as those being taught the younger son in the family.¹⁷⁰ Dilboong's painstaking efforts are well repaid. The experience is electrifying. It was 'an achievement which had cost her so much courage.'¹⁷¹ Stephen Mannion, master of the house, sees it differently. Incensed at the sight of a letter she has written – 'Dilboong wrote this?' – he blames his son's tutor for encouraging her in this vein.

Mr Harvey, I think you know my views concerning the natives – I have spoken of them often enough. It is fatal to encourage in them tastes and leanings above their station...¹⁷²

The suggestion is clear. Mannion has a stake in keeping the young Black servant girl ignorant.

Political overtones are louder here than anywhere else in her creative literature. And it is not changes in degree but of kind in the artist's treatment of the political that make *Storm of Time* a unique novel in Dark's canon, and attest to her commitment to make her literature

contribute to the 'race between education and disaster.' The principal difference between this and earlier writings was that now the political emerged from within the texture of the work: inextricable from the individual's experience of the human condition. Beyond party politics, politics of profession or art, lay the politics of individual experience: the root of all things political. Its power lay as much in its quotidian as in its inescapable character.

Here for the first time lay not simply a critique of society but a rendition of society underpinned by the assumption of the personal as political, and thus ultimately that the personal *is* political. This critical leap suddenly endowed an individual character's experience with socio-political meaning. In the forces oppressing Finn lie not merely one man's plight but the seeds of all class oppression. The same, except in terms of gender oppression, is implied in the case of Conor, heroine of the story. Taken a step further, this leap in Dark's location of the political as residing inescapably within the life experience of every individual achieved two major ends: it charged each individual with responsibility for their society, and it energised the masses as the ultimate political force in society.

The story's sympathies, once spread generously to include Phillip, natives, convicts and the timeless land, are now concentrated on the novel's two principal symbols of universal oppression: one for the working classes, the other for womanhood. Finn and Conor Mannion – hardened convict and young educated lady of means – appear at face value to share little in common. Yet for all their differences – in experience and expectation of life – beneath their respectively destitute and comfortable lives both are victims of values and prejudices underpinning Australian colonial society of the 1810s. They embody and expand the themes of captivity and escape first developed in *The Timeless Land*. The cause and solution of their captivity may appear personal but, as both come to realise, the roots of the cause and the ultimate solution are societal.

It is hardly coincidental that in developing these themes Dark should resort to the imagery, language and moral philosophy of the quintessential revolutionary poet of Industrial England, William Blake. Echoes of these resonate throughout *Storm of Time*. But it is only Finn and Conor whose minds and hearts harbour the essential wisdom and moral outrage that typify these verses. Finn

thought of liberty which could strike shackles not only
from his own feet, but from the feet of all men
everywhere. And he thought of shackles not only made of

iron, but of others, invisible, which held men's minds
imprisoned¹⁷³

carry inescapable links with 'London,' in particular

In every cry of every Man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

Conor's cry of

Tell me, Sir, in a place such as this, where there is so
much land, and it produces so abundantly--why should
there be poverty?¹⁷⁴

in turn recalls 'Holy Thursday,' particularly

Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?
Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!¹⁷⁵

The transition from Andrew Prentice of *Timeless Land* to Finn underscores this point. Finn is no mere extension of Prentice, although both are escaped convicts. Prentice's ultimate escape from his oppressors constitutes a personal triumph. Finn internalises and ultimately escapes his condition in a broad political sense. The character of Mark Harvey, inoffensive tutor to a wealthy pastoral family, sharpens by contrast Finn's moral toughness and enlightened vision. Harvey's escape from untenable working conditions is personal and thus selfish. He is

not concerned with ending suffering, unkindness, or
tyranny, but merely with tearing himself free of them, and
in this he was not conscious of evasion.¹⁷⁶

Conor is in the tradition of Dark's female heroines dating from Valerie in *Slow Dawning*: of the professional classes, beautiful, poised, morally courageous, strong tempered, unconventional of thought and thus potentially subversive. Conor is 'possessed of a degree of curiosity about places and places which was, to say the least, unusual in a young lady.' Like Linda Hendon of *Prelude to Christopher* and most heroines after her, Conor's revelations and concerns over the condition of womanhood arise through her role as woman-as-mother. Pregnant with her first child, she

only knew that in these last months with the child quickening in her body, dissatisfaction with herself had grown till it was a perpetual torment. She was a woman, and about to be a mother, but she had never escaped from her childhood. It was the task of everyone she had ever known to raise walls about her. For her protection – yes, of course, for her protection. Protection--from what? These walls, she thought, do not only protect me--they shut out my view. I'm safe. But I can't see. What is outside?¹⁷⁷

Her enforced condition of helplessness leads Conor to realise her need to be educated so that she might better her role as a mother by contributing to the political affairs of her society. Her quest for knowledge has a history by now, as does her husband's disapproval of that quest. As her fiancé, Stephen Mannion had had cause to admonish her. If not in the tone then certainly in the spirit with which he had responded to Dilboong's pursuit of learning, he had sought to discourage her. 'You are unwittingly trespassing into the realm of colonial politics, my love.'¹⁷⁸ Conor, however, is no helpless servant but the story's heroine, and she responds accordingly. Asked by her fiancé to cease questioning him on serious matters for she has 'no knowledge of the world,' she disingenuously replies with devastating logic:

I am most conscious of that but how am I to correct my ignorance if I do not ask questions? And of whom should I ask them, if not of you?¹⁷⁹

In an unpublished piece, Dark challenged Arthur Koestler's claims that 'during his period as a Communist Party member he "spoil" his books by being Communist first and a writer second.'

It may be natural that those who are not artists should make the mistake of supposing that art and propaganda are irreconcilable, but that artists themselves should do it is almost incredible.

As if she herself had not been bedevilled by the relationship between art and politics, she now pronounced confidently that

What is commonly said to be the 'dilemma' of the present day artist – his compulsion to choose between becoming, in effect, a glorified pamphleteer for some cause, or retreating to an ivory tower – is no dilemma at all. He will be a propagandist, malgre lui, for whatever he happens to believe.¹⁸⁰

Historian, artist and social critic each displayed impressive

confidence and maturity in their handling of the material. At home and overseas, for its scholarship and aesthetic value, as a major contribution to the *genre* and to the history of the period, *Storm of Time* received the enthusiastic reception it deserved. Macmillan, which according to Dark's American literary agent had played 'the game of caution to an idiotic degree,'¹⁸¹ lived to regret their decision to decline the manuscript for its undue length.¹⁸² By late 1949 a new American publisher (Whittlesey House, Division of McGraw Hill) had been found. All three editions – Collins' Australian, in late 1948; Collins' British in 1949 and Whittlesey House's in 1950 – enjoyed considerable if not mass success.

Storm of Time prompted warm responses from colleagues. Both communist writers from the little company were delighted. Prichard called it 'a fine piece of work,'¹⁸³ and Devanny 'her best work,' placing her 'as leading woman writer in the world today.'¹⁸⁴ Franklin, eloquently silent about *The Little Company*, was now among the first to congratulate her. 'Eleanor, my pet,' she began,

You've done a tremendous thing. What a piece of work!
It took courage and industry and brains to keep all the
threads straight and the historical information in
perspective. This, following on *The Timeless Land*, is an
achievement which surely lifts you to the majorest
Australian novelist.¹⁸⁵

'Miss May' praised her 'attitude of mind to all that was evil and false and cruel in the minds and actions of the privileged people of that time.'¹⁸⁶ Eric Lowe was ecstatic.

It is grand and worth any hell you might have gone
through in writing it. No one could possibly question it as
being the finest work yet produced by an Australian.¹⁸⁷

Fellow writers abroad were equally enthusiastic. Shapiro thought it exceeded the standards set by *The Timeless Land*¹⁸⁸ and others agreed. Eric Muspratt called it 'probably the best book to come out of Australia ... a work beyond words of praise.'¹⁸⁹ Alan Villiers wrote to her American publishers that he had learned more in that book about my own country than I'd ever learned before.

What a thrilling and most moving story! Mrs Dark can
handle it, too --grippingly told.¹⁹⁰

Almost universally, literary critics agreed. The Melbourne *Herald* pronounced it 'undoubtedly the most distinguished novel by an Australian published since the war.'¹⁹¹ The *Age* called it 'an historical work of first rate importance,'¹⁹² and *Farrago*, a 'first-class historical novel – by world standards.'¹⁹³ It was recommended by the U.S. Book-

of-the-Month Club, its reviewer predicting it was 'very likely to be famous.'¹⁹⁴ The Melbourne *Argus* critic paid it a most extravagant compliment, arguing it lay 'within measurable distance of Tolstoy's War and Peace for epic sweep and massive grandeur.'¹⁹⁵ Wilkes treated *Storm of Time* as a link in a chain yet unfinished. The second volume, he said, constituted a 'progression' on the earlier one.¹⁹⁶ Unwilling to pronounce definitively on her literary achievements as yet, he hoped this latest development might be 'prophetic.'¹⁹⁷

The novel was in some respects a *tour de force* and was universally acknowledged as such, but it failed the standards set it by its own author as an offering to her society-in-crisis. Ultimately, Dark offered her novel not for its historical, aesthetic or even political value, but as a contribution to the education of the masses. *Storm of Time* could only succeed in this respect by achieving wide popularity, and the formula for blending good and popular literature continued to elude her. She had first sought it in *The Timeless Land* and now here, consciously or unconsciously attempting at these two critical junctures of her world-in-crisis to reach a wider audience. In both cases she had succeeded only in part. Both novels addressed a broader audience than usual: the educated rather than only the radical intellectuals among the educated. But they still fell far short of being popular books in the market sense.

The fault lay not in the execution but in the conception. *Storm of Time* assumed a breadth of knowledge – of Australian and European nineteenth-century history and contemporary Western society – on the part of the reader which, by definition, no popular reader possessed. While one need not necessarily have read the earlier volume, without it the period stands rootless. The question of medium remained. Was the historical novel the best means to her particular ends? Was a mass audience expected to follow the parallels and allegories that obliquely composed her critique of her society? In *Storm of Time*, Dark was still writing to the converted, educating the educated.

Through the late 1940s, Dark's personal, professional and work circumstances had been increasingly difficult: with 'Varuna' under siege, the little company disintegrating, and her creative spirit curtailed by the historian's priorities and the educator's commitment to the 'race.' Mostly, however, it was her interpretation of and identification with the role of the artist-cum-educator in apocalyptic times which undermined her sense of achievement by setting demands and expectations she could not meet. A pattern developed through the public years of crisis-reading and role-playing, and the immediate post-war years constituted its apotheosis. In the end, it was not the calamity of a nuclear holocaust, but the overwhelming victory of 'Menzies & Co.' in late 1949, which

finally devastated Dark's hopes for her society and for her role as artist-cum-saviour of it.



Eleanor with her two 'restless creatures' at the end of the 'public years'

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- ¹ Eleanor Dark, 'Australia and the Australians,' *Australia Week-End Book 3*, 1944, pp. 9-19, p. 17.
 - ² Eleanor Dark, 'This Land of Ours,' in George Farwell and Frank H. Johnston (eds.), *This Land of Ours: Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1949, pp. 11-15, p.15.
 - ³ Letter from Nettie Palmer to Aileen Palmer, England, 24.12.44, NLA MS 1174/1/6678.
 - ⁴ Letter from Vance Palmer to Aileen Palmer, England, 30.3.45, NLA MS 1174/1/6739.
 - ⁵ Dark, 'Man and Nature,' unpublished manuscript, 1940, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
 - ⁶ Dark, 'What do we want our children to learn?,' *op. cit.*
 - ⁷ Dark, 'Man and Nature,' *op. cit.*
 - ⁸ Diary entry of 7.8.45, ML MS 4545 18(25).
 - ⁹ Emotively captured in a *Meanjin* editorial – 'that whatever the world will be when the war ends, the world will be different.' Originally in

editorial, *Meanjin*, no. 1, 1945, in Jenny Lee, Philip Mead and Gerald Murnane (eds.), *The Temperament of Generations*, Meanjin/MUP, 1990, pp. 46-47.

- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Stephen Alomes, Mark Dober and Donna Hellier, 'The social context of postwar conservatism,' pp. 1-28, in Ann Curthoys and John Merritts (eds.), *Australia's First Cold War 1945 – 53: Vol. 1 Society, Communism and Culture*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 8.
- ¹² Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to his mother, 'Sunday morning 1945' (during peace celebrations), NLA MS 1945/1/331-334:332.
- ¹³ Diary entry of 15.8.45, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Juliet O'Hea, Curtis Brown, London, 16.10.45, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁵ Originally in C. Christesen, 'Elections in Australia,' *Meanjin*, no. 2, 1946, in Lee *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
- ¹⁶ Originally in J.F. Cairns, 'Wot, No Socialism?,' *Meanjin*, no. 2, 1947. *Ibid.*, p. 43-44.
- ¹⁷ E.P. Dark, *Who Are the Reds?*.
- ¹⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Brian Fitzpatrick, 27.10.49, NLA MS 4965/2/163.
- ¹⁹ *Argus*, Melbourne, 30.10.48.
- ²⁰ Short-hand term for 'Eric and I.'
- ²¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 13.11.48, ML MSS 364/26/475.
- ²² Diary entry of 23.6.49, recording the fact of Eric's birthday. ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²³ Diary entry of 25.6.49, ML MSS 4545 18(25). Notes that he 'strained his back again & had to go up to surgery for some inductotherm.'
- ²⁴ Diary entry of 18.4.45, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²⁵ Diary entry of 11.1.50, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²⁶ Diary entry of 26.8.45, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²⁷ Diary entry of 18.4.45, ML MSS 4545 18(45).

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- ²⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 27.1.48, NLA MS 1174/1/7371-73.
- ²⁹ Sounding defensive on the matter in a letter to Nettie Palmer some weeks after the event, Dark emphasised – perhaps more to herself than to her colleague – that it had been because she respected Molly’s ‘determined independence’ – ‘something with which I felt so much sympathy myself’ – that she had chosen to content herself ‘with persuading her to come to us for occasional visits, & going down as often as I could for a few days with her.’ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 27.1.48, NLA MS 1174/1/7371-73. Her sense of guilt seems wholly unfounded. Since Molly’s arrival from Ireland in 1917 to marry Dowell, they had shared a warm relationship as the fact and substance of their correspondence – numbering well over a hundred and written over a span of twenty years – richly attests. Evidence of Dark’s devotion abounds: asking Molly to be her son’s godmother, dedicating a novel to her. Molly was in very select company when Eleanor chose to dedicate one of her novels – *Waterway* – to her, an honour reserved only for Eric before her – in the case of *Prelude to Christopher* and later in the case of *The Little Company* – and for Michael – *The Timeless Land* – and his first wife, Ann – *Lantana Lane*. Only the previous year, she had nursed her through an eye operation, tending to her every need. But these points are academic. The roots of the mature step-daughter’s guilt lay most likely beyond fact and reason: entangled with those of Pixie and her natural mother.
- ³⁰ Diary entry of 1.2.45, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ³¹ Diary entry of 10.1.47, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ³² Diary entry of 13.1.48, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ³³ Note by Eleanor on file, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 7/113, 30.5.50, reads: ‘Tuesday. Mike left to join E.L. at Montville. Set out in The Bomb, accompanied by Smoky (the dog) at 3 p.m.’
- ³⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O’Reilly, c. July/August 1939, in the possession of Michael Dark, Hazelbrook, NSW
- ³⁵ Diary entry of 15.1.46, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ³⁶ Diary entry of 16.1.46, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ³⁷ Letter from unknown author, 11.7.47, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ³⁸ Letter from unknown author, 13.8.47, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ³⁹ Interview with Eric Dark by Blayden, *op. cit.*, p.15.

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- ⁴⁰ Eric's and Eleanor's CIB (later ASIO) files testify to the fact that they were under surveillance during these holidays.
- ⁴¹ Memo marked 'Secret' from R. Williams, Deputy Director, Commonwealth Investigation Service, Sydney, to Director, Canberra, 5.11.48, Australian Archives ACT CRS A6119, Item 82.
- ⁴² E. Hattam (Deputy Director) Attorney – Generals Department, Investigation Service, Adelaide Branch, to Director CIB, Canberra, 10.11.48, Australian Archives ACT CRS A6119, Item 82. But for two incidents the Darks may never have known they were being followed. In Adelaide, two men accosted Mike while demanding 'the truth' about his parents' travel. The second incident – recorded cryptically in Dark's diary as 'two suitcases mysteriously astray, but discovered before sailing at 5:30' – happened as the family prepared to board ship in Tasmania for Melbourne. Although its precise circumstances remain unclear, its links with the earlier incident appear most likely. The Darks would have drawn a similar conclusion. Diary entry of 12.11.48, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁴³ Milliss, *Serpent's Tooth*, p. 138.
- ⁴⁴ For example, the Children's Library, vegetable communal gardens, Oslo Lunch Canteens (this system of providing children with cheap yet nutritious meals originated in Oslo, Norway). *Blue Mountains Advertiser*, 4 May 1945. From Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60. The rumours were that Eric was 'part of a Red plot to prepare for a future Russian takeover!,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 August 1987.
- ⁴⁶ For 'discovering and recording many "alternative crossings of natural obstacles."' *Ibid.*, Originally from Australian War Memorial records, 54 1008/1/6.
- ⁴⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Margaret Kent Hughes, (c. Sept. – Nov. 1948) ML MSS 4545 16(25) 7/121.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with Eric Dark by Blayden, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.
- ⁴⁹ The diaries contain several cryptic references in 1947 to accompanying Eric on medical visits. It is a measure of those fears that Dark's diaries, so eloquent in other ways of her state of mind and emotion at this time, should be so circumspect on the matter.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Eric Dark by Blayden, *op. cit.*, p.15.

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- ⁵¹ See, for example, *Examiner*, Tasmania 6.4.46, *Advertiser*, Wagga 6.4.46, *Telegraph*, Sydney 7.4.46, *West Australian*, 7.4.46, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.4.46, and *Melbourne Sun*, 8.4.46.
- ⁵² The *Melbourne Herald* focused attention on her so-called political background, arguing that she had been ‘born to both literature and politics’ and had grown to take ‘Labor for granted as her natural creed.’ ‘Dark Lady’s Husband,’ in *Melbourne Herald*, 13.3.46.
- ⁵³ Arthur Calwell argued that Evatt’s proposed appointment of Eric had been intended to honour Eleanor. Arthur Calwell, *Be Just and Fear Not*, Melbourne, 1972. Some thirty-seven years after the event, Eric was asked in an interview for his own account of the facts. ‘Bert Evatt wanted it,’ he declared without qualification. ‘Bert want(ed) me to go with Eleanor to show that there were cultured people in Australia.’ Interview with Eric Dark by Enid Schaffer, ‘Varuna,’ April-May 1987, tapes held in the Blue Mountains City Library.
- ⁵⁴ Calwell, *op. cit.*, p. 199; quoted in Burgmann, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- ⁵⁵ Boyd, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.
- ⁵⁶ Final draft letter addressed to ‘The Editor,’ with copies marked as sent to *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph*, 27.4.47, ML MSS 4545 24(25), in parcel entitled by Eleanor ‘Hullabaloo in Parl 1947.’
- ⁵⁷ Interview with E.P. Dark by Marivic Wyndham at ‘Varuna,’ in 9.9.1986. Eric Dark also told Enid Schaffer of this in an interview at ‘Varuna,’ 7.4.87.
- ⁵⁸ Interview with E.P. Dark by Schaffer, *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁹ Eleanor Dark, Foreword, in E.P. Dark, *Who Are the Reds?*
- ⁶⁰ Australian Archives ACT CRS A6119, Item 82.
- ⁶¹ Dark, ‘Political Parties.’
- ⁶² Katharine Susannah Prichard’s ‘Koestler, The Irresponsible’ (*Meanjin Papers*, vol. 4, no. 3, spring 1945, No. 3, pp. 176-180) written in response to Arthur Koestler’s earlier piece ‘The Intelligentsia’ (in *Meanjin Papers*, vol. 4, no. 1, autumn 1945, pp. 39-50) suggests the rawness of this issue, and the brutal terms of the debate. Koestler admitted the irresponsibility of his generation of Left intellectuals – ‘the intelligentsia of the Pink Decade’ – but blamed it ultimately on the fact and theory of communism – Soviet Russia and Orthodox Marxism – for denying Left intellectuals the

conditions of 'independent thought' and 'the burden and bliss of responsibility' to make their contributions. It was 'that semiasiatic dictatorship' that condemned his generation to 'barrenness and futility.' In her defence of the high intellectual standards of the Soviet party leadership, Prichard attacked 'the malice and hysteria' she claimed underlay Koestler's 'illogical conclusions,' calling him 'the creature of an irresponsible and decadent individualism,' and among 'the pretenders to intellectual superiority.' His 'method of reasoning ... so slippery and shifty.' Richard H. Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed*, 1987, Gateway Edition (first published in 1949) contains essays from key figures of the Western intelligentsia (Koestler included) who in the late 1940s made the journey back – some to no man's land – from communism. Other 'unconverts' include Ignazio Silone, Richard Wright, Andre Gide, Louis Fischer and Stephen Spender.

- ⁶³ Dark, 'The Communist Party,' unpublished manuscript, Jan. 1946, p. 102, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ⁶⁴ Dark, 'Political Parties.'
- ⁶⁵ Dark, 'The Communist Party.'
- ⁶⁶ Diary entry of 6.10.45, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁶⁷ Dark, untitled, relating to Marxists' misuse of language, Feb. 1941, p. 1, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ⁶⁸ Dark, 'The Communist Party.'
- ⁶⁹ Dark, 'Political Parties.'
- ⁷⁰ Dark, 'Man and Nature.'
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² Dark, 'What do we want our children to learn?,' *op. cit.*
- ⁷³ Dark, 'The Woman Question.'
- ⁷⁴ Dark, 'Prejudice and the misuse of the language – the connection between language and thought,' 1941, pp. 42-50. ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ⁷⁵ Letter from Mary Wood to Eleanor and Eric Dark from London, 28.3.48. NLA MS 4998, file 2.
- ⁷⁶ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor and Eric Dark, 27.11.47. NLA MS 4998, file 2. Washington, he wrote, was 'a terrible kind of capital ... We ran into the usual anti-Semitism while apartment hunting but we recovered after all our friends expressed the proper

horror. Nevertheless it was impossible to find a place in a non-Jewish neighbourhood.' Both sides of Atlantic were suffering from war symptoms: Europe, from scarcities; the U.S. from excesses. Shapiro grew increasingly trenchant as the sharp edge of American anti-Semitism bruised the returned soldier as much as the Jew; while the 'national orgy' of food and material goods while Europe starved 'disgusted' the aesthete as well as the humanist.

⁷⁷ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor and Eric Dark from Connecticut, U.S.A., 24.5.46. NLA MS 4998, file 2.

⁷⁸ Karl Shapiro, 'News to Australia,' *The New Republic*, June 3, 1946, pp. 808-809. The poem contains eleven verses and 150 lines. Its theme is the spiritual and moral decline of America. Thus he urged Australia to 'remain at the periphery of the Western Problem/ learn to diminish pace./ Receive our events through bad communications./ Misunderstand us, learn of us less/ ... May distance forbid the tourist, the salesman,/ The screaming comedian, the book of the week,/ The shine of accessories that rusts the man./ Remaining palpable and small of growth/ With interior thought that fingers the unknown,/ Befriend your insularity, be far./ Hug the antipodes, survive.'

⁷⁹ Dark, 'This Land of Ours,' p. 15.

⁸⁰ Dark, 'Australia and the Australians,' p. 19.

⁸¹ Dark, 'Political Parties.'

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Robert Close's *Love Me Sailor* (1945) provoked the most vicious application of State censorship laws ever imposed on an author in Australia. Declared guilty of 'obscene libel,' Close was sentenced to three months in jail and fined 100 pounds. Though freed on appeal, the episode affected him physically and psychologically. The book, which dealt with 'the voyage of a windjammer and the chaos caused on board ship by its sole passenger, a neurotic nymphomaniac,' was well received. Its first edition sold out within a few weeks. Before a second edition was considered, the novel was banned and Close (and his publishers Georgian House) were charged with 'obscene libel.'

⁸⁴ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 3.5.45, NLA MS 1174/1/6754-56.

⁸⁵ Leonard Mann's writing, Davison opined, was going 'very well lately, probably doing his best work.' (Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to his mother, 14.7.46, NLA MS 1945/1/550-553:551.)

Taking stock of his own individual circumstances in mid-1946, Davison was also well satisfied. His most recent novel *Dusty* was soon to be published in America, and in Australia he was expecting 'a new edition of *Children of the Dark People* (sic) at the end of the month, a new *Man-shy* (sic) in September, and *Dusty* (sic) in October. Not so bad!' (Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to his mother, 3.8.46, NLA MS 1945/1/578-581:579) He declared himself 'very fortunate that my literary life is moving, I am not up against anything, as writers sometimes find themselves. No sensational successes, but at least steady development, and my books continuing to find their way to remain in print--that is particularly gratifying.' (Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to his mother, 24.2.46, NLA MS 1945/1/433-437:437). Meanwhile, others in the group were incubating future works: Vance Palmer his *Golconda*, and Nettie her *Fourteen Years*, Henry Handel Richardson and *The Dandenongs*.

- ⁸⁶ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 19.2.49, NLA MS 1174/1/7607.
- ⁸⁷ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Vance Palmer, 6.9.46, NLA MS 1174/1/7044 – 46
- ⁸⁸ Letter from Miles Franklin to Vance Palmer, 25.11.44, NLA MS 1174/1/6656.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁰ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Jean Devanny, 25.11.45, NLA MS 1174/1/6906-07.
- ⁹¹ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to his mother, 'Monday morning,' (c.24-25 Sept. 1946), NLA MS 1945/1/605-607: 607.
- ⁹² Diary entry of 21.6.48, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁹³ See various diary entries of second-half of September 1948, ML MSS 4545 18(45).
- ⁹⁴ See various diary entries of 19.10.48 and 17.11.48, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁹⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 13.4.50, ML MSS 364/26/479.
- ⁹⁶ Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 15.10.45, NLA MS 1174/1/6855.
- ⁹⁷ Draft typed manuscript, untitled and unpublished, on the role of the author in modern society, n.d., ML MSS 4545 19(25).

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- ⁹⁸ Letter from Vance Palmer to Aileen Palmer, in England, 30.3.45, NLA MS 1174/1/6739.
- ⁹⁹ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to his mother, 21.7.46, NLA MS 1945/1/559-562:560.
- ¹⁰⁰ Davison and Barnard each wrote of Vance Palmer; Palmer, in turn, of Eldershaw. In a radio talk, he spoke at length of Franklin. Nettie Palmer wrote in 1947 in *Book News* of Leonard Mann and Barnard of Franklin. In *Walkabout*, Nettie Palmer wrote of Eldershaw and Eldershaw of Mann.
- ¹⁰¹ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to his mother, 8.6.47, NLA MS 1945/1/800-805: 802.
- ¹⁰² Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to his mother, 24.2.46, NLA MS 1945/1/433-437: 437.
- ¹⁰³ Letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Vance Palmer, 2.2.47, NLA MS 1174/1/7104.
- ¹⁰⁴ Franklin was no victim and over the years had done her share of scheming and dissembling. In this instance, she behaved the more maturely. Three years before Davison resurrected the matter of Furphy's text, she had tried to give it honourable burial: openly acknowledging to Palmer their irreconcilable differences while reaffirming basic commonalities 'on most other concepts of Australian integrity.' Letter from Miles Franklin to Vance Palmer, 12.11.44, NLA MS 1174/1/6651.
- ¹⁰⁵ Letter from Vance Palmer to Nettie Palmer, 'Saturday afternoon' (July) 1947, NLA MS 1174/1/7190.
- ¹⁰⁶ Davison, in particular, the only writer of children's literature in the group – *Man-Shy* (1931), *Children of the Dark People* (1936) and *Dusty* (1946) – enjoyed great and long-standing popular success.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Lantana Lane*.
- ¹⁰⁸ Davison, *The White Thorn tree* (1968).
- ¹⁰⁹ Dark, 'Many Speaking,' typed draft, unpublished essay, 1945, ML MS 4545 10(25).
- ¹¹⁰ Dark, 'Taste and Culture,' typed draft, unpublished essay, (c. late 1940s), ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ¹¹¹ *Ibid*.
- ¹¹² Dark, 'Many Speaking.'
- ¹¹³ Dark, 'Taste and Culture.'

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- ¹¹⁴ She spoke of the need for education reforms in Australia at various forums in the war years: such as at Parents' Day at The Armidale School (Dark, 'What do we want our children to learn?', *op. cit.*, p.9) and at an Adult Education Conference, 'Education and Domesticity,' paper presented at Conference, Women Graduates' Association, University of Sydney, 17.4.43.).
- ¹¹⁵ Dark, 'Magic Wands,' typed draft manuscript, n.d. (but by contents, an immediate post-war piece), ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ¹¹⁶ Dark, untitled typed draft manuscript, on the crowd, 1941, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ¹¹⁷ Dark, 'Many Speaking.'
- ¹¹⁸ John Carey's study of the impact of 'the phenomenon of mass culture' on British literary intellectuals (*The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939*, Faber and Faber, 1992) explores British intellectual tradition of hostility towards the masses in the period 1880-1939. The tone and terms of reference of the tradition, he argued, had been laid by the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset in his seminal book, published in 1930 in English as *The Revolt of the Masses*. Those whose 'hostile reaction' to the rise of the masses, arguments and strategies of containment he explored included such leading figures of British literary society as W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, E.M. Forster and H.G. Wells himself.
- ¹¹⁹ Dark's consistent use of the third person plural – 'they' and 'them' – throughout her essay makes her position as outsider perfectly clear.
- ¹²⁰ Dark, 'Taste and Culture.'
- ¹²¹ Untitled and unpublished essay comparing European and Australian approaches to their artists, (c.1946), ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ¹²² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Nellie Sukerman, Curtis Brown, New York, 1.7.45, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹²³ In an interview of mid-1945, Dark urged women to seek education, so that from being a 'dead weight in public affairs' they might become full-fledged citizens of a democracy. Ryall, *op. cit.*
- ¹²⁴ She gave a radio broadcast to help commemorate Children's Book Week (Interview with Dark by Moore, *op. cit.*) and spoke on various occasions on behalf of the Children's Library Movement. (Diary entry of 28.9.45, ML MSS 4545 18(25).)

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- ¹²⁵ Invited to speak at the 1949 Congress of Writers for Peace – its aim ‘to combat the too prevalent view that another war is inevitable’ – Dark initially agreed but for unknown reasons later pulled out. A paper entitled ‘Women and Peace’ was most likely her intended speech. Letter from Rev. Victor James and Rev. F.J. Hartley, Hon. Secs. of the Australia Peace Council, to Secretary, Sydney FAW, 9.11.49, names Eleanor Dark among six of ‘Australia’s leading writers’ scheduled to speak ‘on the subject of peace’ at the Congress. ML MS 2008 10(14) K22/12.
- ¹²⁶ Dorothy Helmrich, ‘CEMA,’ *Australian Woman’s Digest*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1944.
- ¹²⁷ Dark, ‘Many Speaking.’
- ¹²⁸ Dark, untitled draft typed manuscript, on the art of communication, 1945, p. 1, in private notebook, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ¹²⁹ The article was written at the invitation of *The Writer*, a respected Boston literary journal.
- ¹³⁰ Dark, ‘Drawing a Line Around It,’ *The Writer*, Vol. 59, No. 10, October 1946, pp. 323-325.
- ¹³¹ Dark, ‘This Land of Ours,’ pp. 11-15.
- ¹³² Dark, ‘Australia and the Australians,’ p. 17.
- ¹³³ Eleanor Dark, ‘Water in Moko Creek,’ *Australia* 2 March 1946, pp. 17-18, 21.
- ¹³⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co., New York, 17.10.45, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹³⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miss Spiller, Curtis Brown, New York, 20.9.49, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹³⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co., New York, 20.9.46, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹³⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co., New York, 27.9.47, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹³⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Jean Devanny, 26.12.48, JC JD/CORP(P)29. (quoted in Ferrier, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-210).
- ¹³⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co., New York, 30.11.47, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁴⁰ Letter from James Putnam, The Macmillan Co., New York, to Eleanor Dark, 19.11.47, ML MSS 4545 22(25).

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- ¹⁴¹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to James Putnam, The Macmillan Co., New York, 30.11.47, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁴² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Graham Watson, Curtis Brown, London, 4.6.48, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁴³ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 3.3.48, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁴⁴ Letter from Leonard Mann to Eleanor Dark, 9.7.48, NLA MS 4998, file 2).
- ¹⁴⁵ Dark, *Storm of Time*, Collins, London-Sydney, 1948, p. 68.
- ¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- ¹⁵⁰ Dark, 'Characterisation in Novels,' unpublished typed draft manuscript, (c. 1942-44), ML MSS 14(25).
- ¹⁵¹ Dark, *Storm of Time*, p. 116.
- ¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- ¹⁵³ McQueen, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵⁴ Dark, draft typed manuscript, untitled, on the ethical function of art (c. 1942-43), pp. 61-65, ML MSS 4545 14(25).
- ¹⁵⁵ Dark, *Storm of Time*, p. 34.
- ¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵⁹ Wilkes, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-148.
- ¹⁶⁰ Dark, *Storm of Time*, p. 110.
- ¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 368.
- ¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 362.
- ¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 363.
- ¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 362.
- ¹⁶⁶ Wilkes, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁶⁸ Dark, *Storm of Time*, p. 72.
- ¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- ¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 353.
- ¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- ¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 472.
- ¹⁷⁵ William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1992. First published in 1789-1794, pp. 33-34.
- ¹⁷⁶ Dark, *Storm of Time*, p. 349.
- ¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202 – 203.
- ¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- ¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- ¹⁸⁰ Dark, draft manuscript, untitled, on the responsibilities of the artist, n.d., (late 1940s-early 1950s), pp. 10 ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ¹⁸¹ Letter from Naomi Burton, Curtis Brown, New York, to Eleanor Dark, 31.1.49, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁸² Letter from James Putnam, The Macmillan Co., New York, to Eleanor Dark, 28.7.48, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁸³ Letter from Katharine Susannah Prichard to Miles Franklin, 17.11.48, ML 364/21/ 355-57.
- ¹⁸⁴ Letter from Jean Devanny to Alex Bookluck, Hon. Sec., Sydney FAW, 22.1.51, ML MS 2008 10(14) K22112.
- ¹⁸⁵ Letter from Miles Franklin to Eleanor Dark, 7.11.48, NLA MS 4998, file 2.
- ¹⁸⁶ Letter from 'Miss May' to Pixie, 9.6.49, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁸⁷ Letter from Eric Lowe to Eleanor Dark, 22.4.49, NLA MS 4998, file 2.
- ¹⁸⁸ Letter from Karl Shapiro to Eleanor Dark, 16.3.49, NLA MS 4998, file 2.
- ¹⁸⁹ Letter from Eric Muspratt to Eleanor Dark, 14.3.49, NLA MS 4998, file 2.

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- ¹⁹⁰ Copy of letter from Alan Villiers, Wales, to Sonia Levinthal, Whittlesey House, McGraw Hill, New York, 25.2.50, ML MS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁹¹ Melbourne *Herald*, 30.10.48.
- ¹⁹² Melbourne *Age*, 29.10.48.
- ¹⁹³ *Farrago* (Melbourne), 23.3.50.
- ¹⁹⁴ Henry Seidel Canby, *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, February 1950, p. 7.
- ¹⁹⁵ *Argus* (Melbourne), 30.10.48.
- ¹⁹⁶ Wilkes, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-148.
- ¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter Eight.

The apotheosis of ‘a world-proof life’: the Montville Years, the ‘fifties

We have lived round the corner from the world, with not even a signpost to betray our whereabouts.¹

Dark spoke too soon when, in late 1949, she remarked on her ‘very stationary and uneventful life.’² A year later, her personal world was turning upside down. She wrote of being ‘rather in an upheaval--my husband has sold his practice and we have let the Katoomba home for at least a year.’ During 1950-1953, the family moved house five times. Throughout the decade, she and Eric typically spent their summers in Katoomba, and their winters in the North. From May 1950, when Eric Lowe ‘incited’ her to buy a macadamia farm called ‘Bopplenut’ in Montville³ – a small village on the Blackall Range, seventy miles north of Brisbane – until December 1960, when a family crisis erupted and Montville suddenly vanished from her world, her life approached something of a nomadic character.



The timeless land as farm country: tamed and cultivated, European in look and feel

For all this sense of dislocation, the stereotypical image of the creative artist-in-retreat, as evoked for example in *Meanjin* – ‘disconsolate and obscure,’ ‘materially insecure beyond the traditional

poverty of his kind,' unable to 'console himself with spiritual optimisms or with apocalyptic visions'⁴ – is alien to Eleanor Dark. Beneath the ruffled surface of her life, lay intact its solid foundations of thirty years. Recent trials had, if anything, strengthened the partnership of 'E & I.' A strong financial and emotional security continued to underpin her life, thus the ease with which the roots of the old life transplanted, established themselves and flourished in Montville soil.

The 1950s seem dramatically different to what preceded them, but the appearance is deceptive. Neither the life nor the individual really changed in the Montville years. 'Bopplenut' was essentially 'Varuna' writ rural. The doctor's wife did not turn into a farmer's wife, nor the intellectual into an agricultural worker. They simply 'went bush' for a time, as did also the writer and her work.

The 1950s enclose what might be called her literature of 'sanity and sunlight.' Its epitome was *Lantana Lane* (1959), a witty account of her life in the Lane, as she and fellow farmers called the 'mile-long strip of glassy bitumen' that was their home, workplace and playground 'round the corner from the world' of Cold War politics, mass culture and Big Government. But here again the appearance is deceptive. *Lantana Lane* was no 'pineapple soufflé,' as one critic described it.⁵ Beneath its frothy exterior lay serious commentaries about Australian society and a sadness for a dying dinkum Aussie way of life. Critics seized on its 'laughter'⁶ and 'surprisingly light relief' – particularly after her 'series of heavily significant novels'⁷ – but these were mainly changes in form and surface meaning. Dark had not abandoned 'serious' writing, but had finally found a palatable way of delivering her 'serious' message, now devoid of its radicalism, but not of the writer's sense of alienation from her society and its values.

Dark's 'world-proof life' remained her guard as well as her captor, and continued to stand between her and adversity, and between her and her society. What Dark called 'our Queensland experiment' succeeded beyond all expectations. Originally allotted a maximum of five years, it extended virtually to the whole of the decade. Even after selling their farmhouse in 1957, she and Eric maintained a toehold in Montville, staying there in caravans or with Mike. Life, she conceded, had 'become more strenuous instead of more leisured' since their move north, but for 'all its harassments' something beckoned her to stay. 'I like the life and should have many regrets at leaving it.'⁸ She might never have done so of her own accord.



The chosen few: Eleanor and her new 'little company' of fellow farmers at the Lane

Even more so than usual, her papers yield very little of developments at home and abroad,⁹ but the main reason was psychological not physical distance. Dark's was an almost perverse attempt to underplay big events, squeezing them between the mundane and the trite of life at the Lane. The death of the British monarch is one example.

As usual in morning. Heard news of King's death after breakfast. E. helping Mike on his shed in aft --- three of us went down to L.P. in afternoon, late, to inspect his paw-paws.¹⁰

More pointed is an entry of early 1952.

Usual chores about house & orchard. Began whitewashing under the house. Mike went in to Montville for the mail. *Heard news of Chif's death.* Doing some writing every morning.¹¹

A year later, amused at the 'excitement' prompted by the forthcoming Senate elections, the life-long supporter of the ALP thought it 'quite funny to see how assiduously Menzies & Evatt are wooing Queensland!'¹² This disinterest in politics was nothing new, but her willingness to acknowledge the fact, even flaunt it in her literature, was. The radical was abandoning the barricades. In place of her politics of commitment was now the hobby-farmer's explicit exaltation in the politics of apathy. A quintessential scene of *Lantana Lane* evokes a

sense of the new order.

Henry went to sleep in his chair with an open book on his knee, and Sue went to sleep in hers with some knitting on her lap, and the nine o'clock voice of the ABC composedly reporting the sensations and disasters of the past twelve hours, fell upon two pairs of happily deaf ears.¹³

Historians have mostly neglected the Montville years; the little debate has largely been centred on the Darks' departure from Katoomba. Was it forced or voluntary? Was it essentially personal or political? Modjeska¹⁴, Day and McQueen, Brooks and Clark have generally concurred with Garner's view that 'harassed for their politics' the Darks 'were obliged to leave Katoomba.'¹⁵ John Dark disagreed. His parents left for Montville 'to get away from the cold Katoomba winters and to spend time near their son, Mike, who was then farming there.'¹⁶ Both versions are feasible and reconcilable. Katoomba repelled while Montville seduced the Darks. The presence of Eric Lowe and much more so of Mike were powerful magnets drawing them north, but also provided them with a reason for leaving, instead of appearing simply political refugees or social outcasts. This debate in any event misses the critical point about the Montville years: that in leaving Katoomba, Eleanor was taking 'home' with her.

The Montville years were the apotheosis of Eleanor Dark's 'world-proof life.' Events of the late 1940s had served, if anything, to strengthen and expand it. Through most of the 1950s 'home' embraced the distance between Katoomba and Montville. Commuting between two States and climates, she was also commuting between separate and distinct timeframes: Australia before and after the advent of the Cold War, 'Menzies & Co.' and mass culture. Despite such contrasts, her twin home towns shared important features in common, including a sense of being once removed from the world-in-crisis. Originating from Katoomba or Montville, Dark's diaries of the 1950s retain an air of unreality. But it is not the unreality of one out of touch with the world, but of one pretending she was. The artist was reasserting herself over the radical.

The 1950s began as it ended: in chaos. But in between lay the Montville years, a time of 'sanity and sunlight' in the midst of the worst of the Cold War.

The 1950s began inauspiciously, with Eric's expulsion from the RSL in early January following on the heels of his expulsion from the ALP and the cancellation of his repatriation work. Soon after, he visited

Sydney with the view to selling the practice. The future looked uncertain. Where would she and Eric go? What would they do? What further ambushes awaited them? Old friends commiserated, some like Brian Fitzpatrick and the Evatts themselves were still trying to assimilate the implications of the advent of 'Menzie & Co.' and of the virulent anti-communism loose in their society. Like radical intellectuals elsewhere, they nursed each others' wounds while bracing themselves for worse to come. The uncertainty taxed Eleanor. Eric, though, undaunted by recent setbacks, maintained a full schedule of activities, even if now without the usual component of political and professional appointments.

But Pixie O'Reilly was no stranger to adversity, nor the adult Eleanor to the luxury of escape. By July 1950, Dark was already glimpsing the contours of a new life.

I have bought a small citrus farm up there and hope that writing will combine quite pleasantly with some not too demanding farming.¹⁷

In mid-July 1950, she visited Eric Lowe to inspect a farmhouse near his for sale.¹⁸ She approved, and arrangements to finance the purchase of 'Bopplenut' were concluded within days of her return from Queensland, facilitated by the sale of Eric's practice.

In August preparations began to get 'Varuna' and grounds ready for a December departure. The move physically taxed fifty-year old Eleanor and sixty-two year old Eric, but also generated its own momentum, and with remarkable efficiency, the house was duly packed and suitable tenants sought.¹⁹ Clipped and racy of tone, the diaries of late November-early December tell of 'frenzied' plans to pack and set out to Montville via Sydney²⁰: 'Chores & packing – house in turmoil. Alternating indoors & outdoor work.'²¹ The decision to leave seemed to release her psychologically from captivity.

News of their departure may also have served to soften community attitudes towards them. Touching gestures were exchanged. Eleanor resumed something of a community life, and thoughtful neighbours whom the Cold War had sent underground now resurfaced.²² In the days leading up to their departure, a succession of neighbours ensured that a continuous supply of warm meals reached the Darks' table.²³ There was a poignancy to these last-minute exchanges of tokens of goodwill. Across the gulf of Cold War politics, a conservative community and two of its leading resident radicals had attempted to rekindle in a small fleeting way the old spirit of Katoomba.



Eric at work at 'Bopplenut'

The Darks' departure from their home town of thirty years was low-key. As inconspicuously as they drove away from 'Varuna,' they arrived a few hours later at their small rented Wollstonecraft flat in Sydney. Eleanor (probably more than Eric) seemed to invest the act of leaving Katoomba with symbolic meaning, a crossing of a threshold. In Sydney for the next six months, a mere four hours' drive away, she resisted returning to the old home town even on casual visits.²⁴

Sydney was the bridge between the two worlds: an interim period to revive the spirits, deal with unfinished business, prepare for the eventuality of a long hibernation ahead. The first task was to make themselves at home in their new urban environment, which they did with minimum fuss. Their smooth transition from semi-rural to urban living, home to rented accommodation, and from expansive home grounds to confined quarters of a city flat testifies to the resilience of the two individuals and of their partnership of almost three decades. Within a day of arrival, the couple had settled into a new routine, arranging banking and paper delivery needs and laying in 'some stores for holiday period.' A few days later, the efficiency-conscious couple set out to town in separate modes of public transport – 'E. by bus, & I to compare relative merits by train.'²⁵

Eleanor enjoyed but did not altogether approve of the city of her birth as she now found it. The thirty years since the reluctant office-typist had been repelled by the sights, sounds and smells of urban Australia had not attenuated her original reaction. Exploratory trips into the Sydney of her childhood proved disappointing. A sentimental journey to Turrumurra, in which she 'explored for house I used to live in at age of 3-5,' and visited 'nearby "Lovers Leap"' depressed her: 'very

changed & spoiled.' Such experiences prompted the usual barbs at so-called 'progress' – Bobbin Head was, she remarked sarcastically, "'improved" out of recognition.'²⁶ Such reactions confirmed her in her own mind as a rural dweller.

Eleanor spent considerable time at the Mitchell Library, researching material for the remaining volume of her trilogy. The project was among the few responsibilities from the public years she retained, albeit begrudgingly. Her decision to see it through bespeaks more of her professionalism than of any lingering sense of commitment to the cultural mission once shared with the little company. She persevered with her story of the Macquarie period until finally completed in 1953.

Dark appeared the ghost of the intense conscience-driven figure of the late 1940s. Not even censorship – her old *bete noire* – could stir her anger. She was done with politics. Her last gesture towards the politics of her profession came in late 1950. It involved fellow writer Frank Hardy, whose book *Power Without Glory* had prompted a libel action.²⁷ Hardy's was her last battle cry, prompted more by habit than conviction. She entertained the author and his wife,²⁸ but it was pointedly a personal not political gesture. Even as she signed a Fellowship petition in Hardy's defence, she did so hopelessly. 'In making protests,' she wrote to Franklin, 'I really don't think it matters whether there are Communists associated with them or not.'

The present situation seems to be that anyone who doesn't see eye to eye with Menzies & Co. is a "Communist" anyhow.²⁹

Dark was not alone in abandoning the barricades. Franklin too sensed a collective loss of agency, warning a colleague spearheading the Fellowship protest that associating controversial figures like Dark and Prichard with the Hardy case could prove counterproductive.³⁰ But the language and spirit of despondency were not alien to Franklin. While half of her often seemed on the verge of despair, the other (even if more for personal than political reasons) needed little persuasion to lend her name and energies to worthy causes. Dark's, on the other hand, was a wholesale rejection of the political option. Her despair over the uselessness of their efforts seems genuine and was consistent with her instincts throughout. But it was also convenient, helping to allay a sense of guilt at leaving old comrades at such a time to fend for themselves. It was one less bit of baggage to cart north.

Cold War politics embroiled most in the little company. Standish Keon, Labor member for Yarra, who in 1955 would lead a Catholic Action splinter group to form the Anti-Communist Labor Party, launched an attack on the CLF in late August 1952 in the Parliament. He

made Vance Palmer and Flora Eldershaw, both long-standing members of the Fund's Advisory Board, key targets.³¹ Supported by W.C. Wentworth, Liberal member for Mackellar, who claimed that at least a third of authors supported by the Fund were either communists or linked with communists, Keon accused Palmer and Eldershaw of being communist sympathisers, and the Fund generally of promoting the views and work of writers of the Left.³²

By 1953, the CLF Board had been purged of so-called radical members, including Palmer and Eldershaw.³³ The changes, a surviving member of the old Board confided to the Palmers two years later, had 'fairly effectively isolated' the Left in Australian literature. The new members had meant

less interest in what one may call the "social" aspects of our literature, & more concentration on the purely literary ones.³⁴

By then, the Royal Commission on Espionage was well under way.

But the Right did not have a monopoly on viciousness. Character assassinations, it appears, took place on both sides of the political divide. Some in the literary community were holding their own inquisition. Rumours (often no less unsubstantiated than those making the rounds of Parliament and the media) circulated about the 'real' allegiances of certain personalities.³⁵ Studies of this period generally focus on the wrongs and excesses committed by Cold Warriors of the Right against writers. The need remains for a similar approach to the activities, mostly behind-the-scenes, of Cold Warriors of the Left within the literary community.

In leaving Sydney, Dark was in effect bidding farewell to this world of suspicion and intrigue. How conscious was this parting of the ways? How much did she know of that world then and later? It is hard to know. The Montville years draw a thick curtain on the world-beyond-Montville generally and the Cold War in particular. One thing is clear: it was not for lack of information. Montville was not really 'round the corner from the world.' Eric's political writings of the 1950s – prolific and informed – make this fact amply clear.

On arrival in Montville, Mike and the Lowes – core group of old happier Katoomba days – awaited them. After a cozy family dinner, she and Eric retired to 'Bopplenut,' only a few minutes' walk from the Lowes' farm. The seamlessness of the transition from one to another home set the tone and pattern for the Montville years as a whole, in which familiarity and a sense of belonging were the norm. The 'cozy, family atmosphere' that marks *Lantana Lane* and underpins the sense of

'homecoming' had its genesis here.

Montville was in many ways familiar country. Its physical landscape was a mixture of Katoomba and Jerrikellimi, a blend of Coolami's ancestral country and the timeless land. Like Katoomba, Montville was 'a little town perched on the edge of a tremendous view.'³⁶ Situated twelve hundred feet above sea level, the Blackall Range dominated Montville as the Blue Mountains dominated Katoomba. Both were set in quiet rustic surroundings with ready access to the city. Like Sydney to Katoomba, so Nambour to Montville: near enough for a day's outing, major shopping expeditions, visits to doctors and other specialists, yet sufficiently removed so as not to intrude urban anxieties into the cozy rhythms of life at the Lane.

Everything pointed to Montville as the growing shoot, and to Katoomba as the deadwood, of her personal and professional lives. Montville was 'green,' 'fertile, well-watered' country. Unlike Katoomba's extremes, its winters were at best 'chilly,' its summer nights 'never oppressive.' In its soil grew 'almost anything stuck into – or even dropped upon – the ground,' lending the landscape a generous if chaotic character. Its harvests were plentiful. Pineapple was a principal crop, and bananas, tomatoes, strawberries, avocados, beans, passion fruit, macadamia nuts all thrived in the area, as did 'the ubiquitous lantana.'³⁷ A brief drive away lay the popular surfing beaches of Maroochydore and Mooloolaba, and a little further, Caloundra and Noosa Heads.

Themes of decay and vitality also run through the respective social landscapes of her two 'homes.' Clan gatherings with the two boys happened mostly in the north, either in Montville or *en route* in Coffs Harbour where John and family lived for a time.³⁸ Return trips to the old home town proved depressing. Katoomba was no longer the centre of gravity of family life and now held mostly broken friendships and the voids of hounded fellow radicals like Bruce Milliss. Its ageing genteel population offered a stark contrast to the robust little band of farmers awaiting her in the Lane. The pull north grew stronger when in late 1954 Mike married and started a family in Montville.

For all its drawbacks, Katoomba played an important – complementary – role in Dark's ability to embrace Montville and assimilate it as part of 'home.' For one thing, it made less attractive aspects of village life bearable. Montville's unintellectual culture is a case in point. Dark could well afford to dismiss its importance because it was not a permanent problem. 'Our Brisbane Library,' she explained to a friend,

sends us pretty lightweight novels, and a remarkable

assortment of Memoirs by the Duchess of this and the Countess of that with illustrations showing groups of aristocratic Edwardians posed in front of the Stately Homes of England.

In Katoomba, she sniffed, 'we do a little better.'³⁹

The same applied to the tyranny of the small town which the half-time hobby-farmer at the Lane dismissed, and in some cases even celebrated. There was another side – intrusive and invasive – to the 'cozy, family atmosphere in the Lane.' It did not escape her, but she noted it affectionately rather than disapprovingly.

There are no secrets in the Lane. There are conventions, however, one of which is that you do not appear to know your neighbours' business, but civilly wait until they see fit to inform you of it.⁴⁰

This sense of community, based on the patterns of farming, was one that Dark idealised without ever being dependent upon it. The gossip of the womenfolk that had once irked her about small town life, no longer fussed her. Montville's tradition of 'no fences,' which once would have signified intrusions and transgressions into her personal space, she interpreted as evidence of communal trust and loyalty. Behind Eleanor of Montville's magnanimity rested above all the privacy and 'luxurious ways' enjoyed by Eleanor of Katoomba in the other half of the year.

Montville did not always need the prop of Katoomba to entice her. The life and world it embraced touched many chords in Eleanor Dark: from the austere practical woman to the incurable romantic, the homemaker to the professional writer, the intellectual to the bush dweller. Dark went to Montville in search of rest and recuperation, and had the move only fulfilled these expectations it would have served its purpose admirably. But life in the Lane proved more than just a safe place to nurse her wounds and steady her nerves. In time, she developed an affinity with the place that rivalled and in some ways transcended thirty-year old bonds with Katoomba.

The 'sanity and sunlight' of Montville bred healthy growth in major aspects of her life. The matriarch saw her family double in size, and Ann, her new daughter-in-law, became the daughter she had never had. (Dark's decision to dedicate *Lantana Lane* to her bespeaks of her affection.) Together, Ann and the two granddaughters brought a welcome feminine dimension to family life. Their collaborative work in the farm added a business dimension to her already rich partnership with Eric. Her journey North breathed new life and direction into her writing. The writer diversified in form and content, venturing into new fields and

courting new audiences. Humour, wicked and unforced, rescued her stale 'serious' literature. Throughout, the artist was playing out a most prized role, casting herself as the collective voice of her new society, the corroborree-maker of Montville's small White tribe of farmers. Perhaps the writing of a 'people's literature' was not beyond her reach after all.



The artist as hobby-farmer

Montville dominated Eleanor Dark's 1950s in symbolic and practical ways. As the years progressed, the journey North increasingly assumed the feel of a homecoming. All her paths – intellectual, political, personal, creative – had led her to it, or so she liked to believe. It represented at once a lost paradise, the good society, a pilgrimage 'home,' a return to basics. It held the centre of her family, community and social life. In *Lantana Lane*, it constitutes the final destination of the chosen few summoned 'home' by an ancient call. Home and call both centered on the land. Even here she was on familiar ground.

Dark's fascination with the land had a history. Bush Australia had beckoned her before. The bushward process and instinct are evidenced throughout her adult life, beginning with the move from Sydney to Katoomba, and punctuated by regular trips from Katoomba to 'Jerrikellimi' through the 1930s and 1940s. Throughout, the bush remained the antithesis of and antidote to her society-in-crisis, 'civilisation,' 'people' generally. Now new meanings were grafted as she pursued lost dreams in a lost Australia, as one of 'a bunch of unrepentant anachronisms assembled in *Lantana Lane*.'⁴¹

Dark's turn to the land at this time also followed a larger pattern.

Others of her generation of radicals-in-retreat were doing likewise. The push inland to the 'essence' of Australia and the celebration of small town life in opposition to modernity were major features of a broad movement that included fellow radicals, bureaucrats and other would-be social reconstructionists in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁴² It included colleagues of the little company. Eldershaw spent long periods in 'Glenisla,' the family farm.

Cooking *and* washing up for sheep-dippers etc., feeding myriads of animals & fowls ... picking buckets and baskets of apricots & preserving some & dispatching them all over the place.⁴³

Dalby Davison, by now 'an elderly literary gent,' was 'battling it out' in Folding Hills, his small farm in Victoria.⁴⁴

Dark's was, as usual, a special case. Hers was qualitatively a different kind of 'turning to the land.' Few came to the farming life with her financial resources. From the start, the experience was stamped with the mark of privilege. Farming, as she explained confidently to her British agent at the outset of these years, would come second to her writing and be not 'too demanding.' Affluence lent her and Eric a high degree of autonomy over their farming lives: from their daily routine to the crops they grew. They opted to grow mainly macadamias, which while far from the lucrative business it has since become, was an easy-care crop, ideally suited to their two-home migratory pattern of life of these years. Among its 'charms,' Eric later said, was that it required little tending: 'you can leave them alone for six months of the year and all that would happen is a lot of weeds have grown up.'⁴⁵

She and Eric were also the exception in the Lane, the only hobby-farmers in the area. Even Mike and the Lowes were nowhere as well placed. Indeed, Mike was struggling to make a living from his dairy-farm, and Lowe, increasingly frustrated that his farmwork 'did not leave him much time for writing' was eventually persuaded to cut his losses and in 1956 sold his farm and returned south.⁴⁶

The Darks never sought to disguise their hobby-farming intentions, nor to overstate their achievements. To anyone who asked Eleanor emphasised the slightness of their farming enterprise.

Our activities could hardly be called pioneering – the district had been settled and farmed for nearly a century, and our nut trees were well established.⁴⁷

Still, others chose to interpret it differently. Caught perhaps in the romantic idea of these fellow intellectuals-turned-farmers, John Manifold's brief visit to 'Bopplenut' persuaded him that they were

visionary entrepreneurs. Soon after, he wrote of how they had taken over 'an almost derelict farm, regenerated its soil, and raised some crops that point the way to new rural industries.'⁴⁸ It was the useful but idealised view of what in reality was, as Dark plainly said to Dorothy Fitzpatrick in 1957, 'an ideal proposition' for 'one who wants a nice little addition to his income without too much hard work.'⁴⁹

While the Darks' were neither backbreaking nor path breaking exertions, life as a hobby-farmer was not altogether a panacea. Though feeling the burden of age and declining health, and with no particular financial need to urge them on, within self-defined boundaries of work, she and Eric abandoned themselves to their new enterprise. Consciously or otherwise, in working the land she was forging her own bonds with, and staking her own claims to her 'bit of earth.'⁵⁰ A month after arrival, she and Eric had graded and packed four bags of oranges, ready for delivery to the Sydney factory.'⁵¹ Six weeks later, her diary proudly records that they had: 'Sent 8 cases & 5 bags of oranges – 1122 in cases & approx. 1000 in bags.'⁵² Throughout, 'E. & I' shared 'the scything & raking under nut trees, & picking up more nuts' – 'nearly 100 nut trees dealt with' – 'clearing under nut trees, about eight kerosene cases of fallen nuts rescued' and the like.⁵³

Dark's personal world in Montville was an intricate network of home, community and social life. The reunion of 'E, M & I' in particular endowed the place with the feel of 'home.' It meant a resumption of old loved habits and patterns of family life. A diary entry written less than a year after first settling there – 'In aft., E. M. and I explored our scrub a bit.'⁵⁴ – evokes with great economy of language and imagery a sense of a return to normality, a coming home, in the Dark household. Mike's wife and family introduced fresh dimensions to home life, endowing the place with meanings and associations that transcended well beyond those of the old home-town.

Montville's social landscape too was familiar country. Dark understood the world and politics of the small community. She had lived and worked in small communities throughout her life: from Redlands to Katoomba to the little company. But Montville's familiarity went deeper still, for it was not simply a village but a tightly-knit homogeneous community, such as had appeared in different guises across her fiction: from the hospital world of *Prelude to Christopher*, to the Watson's Bay harboursiders of *Waterway*, the circle of writers of *The Little Company* and the little colony of expatriates of *The Timeless Land*. She had imagined, as well as lived, in this 'cozy' kind of world. Dark's initial reference to farmers in the district as the 'inhabitants'⁵⁵ sounded unpromising, but she warmed to her fellow farmers with remarkable

ease and was soon on first-name basis with many of them. 'Mr & Mrs Glover' soon became 'Madge & Artie' and so with others. Long-time neighbours and friends of Katoomba whom she still addressed formally – 'Dr



Eleanor and her first grandchild

Alcorn,' 'Mrs White' and the like – would have been perplexed by these changes. But what seemed to be a new Eleanor emerging really was not. It was Eleanor of Katoomba, by then soaked in small town culture and the language of gestures, trying to (and in part succeeding) in merging with her new world.

Less than a week after arrival, she and Eric had been rostered to collect and distribute the neighbourhood's groceries and mail.⁵⁶ They fell gladly into this and other rituals and routines of village life. Alongside other men, Eric and Mike wrestled with the bushfires that regularly struck the area. Eleanor in turn fell in with the women, cutting her share of sandwiches and baking cakes for the host of informal and formal occasions that enriched life at the Lane.

Social life retained similar features and its prominence in her life. She and Eric played tennis regularly, with friends and in club

competition. Her diaries record these activities and evoke their spirit. 'In evening all to tennis party at Moll's, about 40 there; bridge, ping-pong, other card games, all v. hilarious. Home about midnight.'⁵⁷

Dark even accommodated Montville's politics – a dyed-in-the-wool conservatism – without fuss, partly because of their form. Farmers of the Lane were neither aggressive nor self-conscious about their politics, which permeated and were expressed through their farming way of life. Politics in the Lane did not take the form of conflict and intrigue but of quaint wholesome rituals. When in June 1953, the town marked the accession of a new British monarch with a pleasant social affair, she and Eric joined in the celebrations. 'All over to sports ground at 10.30 a.m. for Coronation Day doings,' she wrote unproblematically in her diary that night.⁵⁸ Conservatism here did not bear a sinister Cold War face, but a pastoral one. It was non-confrontationist. It was set in a world secure in its assumption that conservatism was the only true way. Ironically, Montville represented an Australia untouched and unthreatened by the politics of the Eleanor and Eric Darks of society.

Beneath this *bonhomie*, little had changed between the politics of Eleanor of Katoomba and Eleanor of Montville. They simply wore a different look: radical then, apathetic now. Occasional comments betrayed the fact, still charged with the old sting of contempt for her society and its inferior values. With the same irritation that twenty-five years before she had dismissed the 'ridiculous pageantry' and 'the childish fuss' of her fellow Australians over 'that confounded (Sydney Harbour) Bridge!',⁵⁹ she dismissed the excitement over the '1st Russian "sputnik."' 'A little more order in earthly affairs,' she concluded tartly as if scolding a group of raucous school-children, 'would please me better.'⁶⁰

Eric's was a different Montville. He too found it 'a lovely spot and the most charming people you would find there'⁶¹ but, unlike Eleanor, remained emotionally detached from it. His approach to their new world remained essentially pragmatic and low-key. In Montville, he preferred to distance himself from his radical profile of the late 1940. Memories of another community's hounding were clearly still raw. When on one occasion a visiting tennis player made a quip about his radicalism, Eric stomped off the court, unable to contain his anger.⁶²

Eric's sensitivities did not signify a change of politics or level of commitment. Outside the Lane, he soon established contact with like-minded political groups, and by December 1951, had already addressed a peace group meeting in nearby Nambour.⁶³ The possibilities for sustained engagement lacking, he poured his political passions into a string of articles, all of which (not surprisingly) failed to attract a

publisher.⁶⁴ It was Eric, not Eleanor, who researched the case of writer Howard Fast and companions, urging the Fellowship to protest his recent imprisonment by American authorities.⁶⁵ The old soldier still relished the battle and refused to surrender. But his attempts to reconnect with a world in which he no longer held a power base were futile. ASIO's declining interest in his (and Eleanor's) political activities of this period are graphic proof of this.

Denied access to one sphere of politics, he immersed himself in another, throwing himself into the politics and business of farming; within a few weeks of arrival, attending his first 'Fruitgrowers' meeting.'⁶⁶ His wife was clearly delighted (though not surprised) to see him take to the farming life 'like a duck to water'; 'after all,' she reminded a friend, 'he was born & brought up on an orchard.'⁶⁷ It was a homecoming for him too, or so she liked to think.

But just as Eleanor's Montville was not Eric's, neither was it the Montville of Mike and Ann, and others like them in the Lane, who were failing to make ends meet. Nestled safely in her world-proof life, Dark would not – or could not – confront the implications of these failures: either to her son's personal world,⁶⁸ or to the world of the small farmer generally. The young couple's financial difficulties began soon after their wedding. Trying to avert the collapse of their farm, they tried at various times unsuccessfully to supplement their small earnings. Throughout, she and Eric offered generous assistance. She sent parcels and checks from Katoomba to alleviate the deteriorating situation. Above all, the mother's instincts were to shelter her child from adversity. She resented the impositions and inconveniences which the lack of finances forced on her son. A note of impotence crept into her otherwise lighthearted diaries. On one occasion, when he accepted a short-term job some distance from home, she visited him and was horrified to find 'Mike ensconced in horrid cottage for his cane-cutting job.'⁶⁹ She could not draw him into her world-proof life.

Mike's was not her Montville, nor the Montville she was in the process of idealising in her book. In *Lantana Lane*, Tim and Bidy are also a young couple trying to raise a young family on the paltry returns from their bean-farming and 'not even squaring expenses.' But in the best tradition of the Lane, their plight did not defeat but emboldened them, even lifted their spirits.

The last figures in Tim's banks statement were now ominously printed in red, but strangely enough he was more cheerful than he had been for months. It often happens this way with suckers. The more you bash them

down, the more they bounce, and Tim was already explaining to Bidy why it was quite inevitable that they should have better luck next year.⁷⁰

Lantana Lane is many things: a fairy-tale, a means of escape, an attempt to improve on the real-life Lane, a tribute to Rural Australia. But it was not the Montville of most who lived there, including her husband, son and family.

The Montville years belonged as much to the artist as to the individual, and like the individual, the artist too maintained an ambivalent relationship with her new world. She wanted to belong, but only in her own terms and always from a distance. If the individual derived her sense of belonging from owning 'a bit of earth,'⁷¹ working the land, and interacting as an old hand with fellow farmers, then the artist derived her sense of belonging through her work. In the act of writing in and of the place, Dark was also staking her claim to Montville.

Combining writing with farming – even hobby-farming – proved in fact less satisfactory than originally expected. The nomadic character of their lives and the unsettling patterns it set throughout the 1950s considerably eroded her writing time and energies. Still, within these structural constraints, the writer – like the individual – made a smooth passage from one to another world.

Creating 'a room of her own' in 'Boplenut' was an essential part of settling into her new environment. The small study set in a quiet corner of her farmhouse hardly compared in size or style with her grand study-cottage in 'Varuna,' but it performed its function well. Over time, she made it increasingly her own, planting a small garden under her study window,⁷² turning the room – like her study in Katoomba – into a place of solitude and contemplation.

In Montville, being a writer – like being a hobby-farmer – necessarily distinguished her from the rest. In a town with 'no fences,' it was widely known that (and what) she was writing, that she was coaching her daughter-in-law (an aspiring writer) in the trade, and assisting Eric Lowe with the writing of his biography on Charles Sturt.⁷³ No one in the Lane was under any doubt which was the profession and which the hobby, and what is more, no one seemed to care. Fellow farmers welcomed their writer-in-residence, a unique experience in the life of the Lane. Dark was less at ease with her celebrity status, and just as before she had constructed the *persona* of the aloof artist, she now shaped the *persona* of the writer-farmer, and not only for local consumption. It would 'do us good to read a Serious Work once more,' she granted in reference to Brian Fitzpatrick's wife about his recently

published *The Australian Commonwealth* (1956), but there was no harkening for it nor for the Serious World that produced it.

The Montville years were no writer's exile. Free of peer pressures from the little company and the old radical camp, from the politics of her profession and her art, the period offered her an ideal opportunity to explore the boundaries and exploit the commercial potential of her art. What new horizons did it open for her writing? What, if any, were its hidden restraints? The basic dilemma of her public years – to negotiate the artist's need for solitude and obscurity with the 'serious' writer's sense of responsibility and accountability to her society – need trouble her no longer. She was now free to devote herself to her art in her own terms.

The liberating effect of the Montville years on the artist is clear. Her writing acquired a new freedom. Like in the apprentice years, she again experimented with form and content, adopting new styles and courting new audiences. She revisited old attitudes and practices abandoned in the early 1930s for the sake of art-and-country, in the process repossessing responsibility and accountability for her work. Professional and political dimensions grafted onto her work in the public years peeled off, as did the moral agonisings of the artist. Without fuss, she gladly traded the calling for the business of writing. Like in the apprentice years, she seemed once again in control over her writing.

Dark slipped back easily into her carefree ways of the 1920s. In planning future work, she once again turned avidly to her agents for commercial tips and guidelines on market imperatives. What sorts of stories, length and treatment did they recommend? What were the economic pros and cons of journal versus book publishing? She raised the possibility of re-issuing old novels, and sought expert advice on the merits of paperback versus hardcover editions.

If you could some time give me a line on what kind of thing English magazines do like it would be helpful; ... others of a different type, which I might do if there seemed any prospect of selling them. Also, what would be about the most acceptable length?⁷⁴

Her agent replied with a ready list of taboo subjects in British magazines: 'anything like divorce and such subjects as murder, cruelty to children, disfigurement and disablement are unwelcome.'⁷⁵ No longer claiming to write only 'what comes,' she adapted her writing to market imperatives. *Lantana Lane*, cut in the general 'good news book' mould, followed the new guidelines closely

Dark's decision to tell her story of the Montville years in a series of

short-stories, rather than the usual novel form, was also based on professional advice. Her agent's remarks – that her stories were 'unsuitable for magazine publication, but ... might have possibilities as part of a book' – gave her pause, and she eventually (if begrudgingly) abandoned her original idea of selling them twice – 'first to magazines, and then in book form' – so as to make double profits. There is a touch of irony in the way she rationalised her decision to herself, turning the artist's priorities of the public years – ethical over financial – upside down:

abandoning all thoughts of magazine publication does
leave me freer in the writing, as I can make them as long
or as short as I like.⁷⁶

Dark's Montville years also released her from social aspects of her profession. Though she retained an educated layperson's interest in literary developments in the industry, she kept a cool distance from literary society itself. In Katoomba or Montville, contact with fellow writers was rare. Bonds shared with the little company, even literary ones, were a thing of the past. A few were still writing – both Palmers included –⁷⁷ but mostly non-fiction non-political work. The literature of social conscience and the focus of commitment that had fired and sustained the group were no longer.⁷⁸

Eleanor too had abandoned her commitment to, if not altogether her sense of responsibility towards, such a literature. The four pieces (two non-fiction, two fiction) that emerged from these years testify to this fact. None was written fully in Montville, but all enjoyed and reflected the benefits of living 'round the corner from the world.' Except for *No Barrier*, a hangover from the public years, the other three carry in tone and content the unmistakable stamp of the Montville years. They compose her 'literature of sanity and sunlight.' Its pitch rose steadily from piece to piece. *Lantana Lane* was not so much its conclusion (it was certainly not intended to be) as its apogee.

Both her non-fiction pieces were published in *Walkabout*, a new character of journal reflecting a new *genre* of writing. 'They All Come Back' (1951) and 'The Blackall Range Country' (1955) are travel pieces, written from personal experience. The first recounts her journey to Central Australia during the family 'walkabout' of 1948; the second, takes the reader on a 'sightseeing' tour of Montville's mountain country. Together, they trace a bigger journey – from 'the Centre' to the periphery of the timeless land – which *Lantana Lane* later completed:

'They All Come Back' holds the first allusion to the 'homecoming,' linking it firmly to the sense of calling – the earth's summons of its children – later developed in *Lantana Lane*. Her visit to 'the Territory'

was a journey to

the very essence of our country ... the Centre--that heart
which has been called dead, but which seemed to me
quite formidably alive.⁷⁹

The visit, a kind of pilgrimage, assumes in places the flavour of a religious experience, as the land reveals new 'truths' to her, disclosing for the first time 'a different kind of ugliness' and a 'new kind of beauty.'⁸⁰ Three years after her visit, still under the spell of the experience, she confessed nostalgically to the reader: 'Personally wherever my flesh may be, I shall always spend my winters at Tennant Creek'⁸¹.

The push inland into the essence of Australia was only the first phase of her journey. By the time she wrote 'The Blackall Range Country,' in 1955, her focus and priorities had shifted considerably. For all her nostalgia for 'the Centre,' she had not spent her winters at Tennant Creek, but in the cushioned world of the hobby-farmer in the Lane. There, in what Raymond Williams called 'border countries' – 'in time and place, between an older rural and a new industrial society'⁸² – the land was no longer 'red, flat, barren, dry, and empty to the far horizon,' but 'stamped everywhere with the imprint of man's work and habitation'⁸³. A place of 'difficult' beauty had yielded to one of 'scenic wonders.' The timeless land was receding ever further from her landscape of 'home,' its place usurped by the more convivial Queensland countryside and the small-settler communities that over generations had shaped the bush to their needs and specifications.

Montville country then, subdued by the will and vision of Europeans, was the destination of her symbolic as well as her practical journey 'home,' far cry from "the Centre". Here ancient links with the original inhabitants were recognised only in the form of quaint legends and 'a legendary romance of aboriginal times'⁸⁴. There was nothing 'difficult' about its beauty or its terrain. Its picture post-card prettiness delighted the eye, prompting in some thoughts and images of pastoral. In practical as well as literary terms, the land was being subdued to suit Eurocentric needs expectations. There is no doubt who possessed who in this landscape. Indulging in what Andrew described elsewhere as 'nostalgic ruralism'⁸⁵, Manifold later wrote of his journey there through 'bora-ground country' and 'ancient rain-forest,' finally emerging 'on the roof of the world.' 'Children on horseback waved to you, and everyone could tell you where the Darks' farm was.'⁸⁶ Manifold's, like Dark's, was the nostalgia of white Australians for European physical and social landscapes.

Dark's two fiction pieces – *No Barrier* (1953) and *Lantana Lane* (1959), one historical, the other semi-autobiographical – trace a different process. One reflects the end of one chapter in the artist's life, the other the beginning of another. One reflects the burden of the past, the second the promise of the future.

The writing of *No Barrier* is a long tale of woe. Everything seemed to conspire to rob her of already waning resources to complete the loathsome project. The premature wave of assessments of her work which began to appear at the turn of the decade, part of a broader review of the work of her generation, were demoralising both at a general and personal level. The development signalled the changing of the guard. Symbolism aside, more to the point is that she had not fared as well in these assessments as the twice-winner of the ALS gold medals, and celebrated author of two historical novels, might have expected. Critics praised highly certain aspects of her work – its technique, command of the language and psychoanalytical abilities – but few were prepared to rank her alongside Prichard and Richardson in the top ranks of the field. The underlying suggestion was that she had fallen short of her promise. G.A. Wilkes said as much in his 1951 'interim report' of her work.⁸⁷

Dark's dismissive attitude to critics in the past had been partly genuine, partly a strategy of self-defence. Since *Prelude to Christopher*, she had kept as full a collection of reviews of her novels as her press clippings' service could provide. But this particular wave of reviews was different from earlier ones. Its verdict reflected the beginnings of posterity's judgment on her work. It was her canon, however incomplete, that was being assessed here.

The writing of *No Barrier* was also handicapped by other factors: from the researcher's frustrations⁸⁸ to the writer's loss of heart about her society-in-crisis, to the author's lack of sympathy for her subject, to the artist's growing resentment of the *genre*. She sometimes complained of being unwell and of her energies 'flagging,'⁸⁹ and worried that 'after many years of writing in odd hours and half-hours' her 'powers of sustained concentration' might have 'atrophied.'⁹⁰

Not even the 'sanity and sunlight' of the North helped. Once in Montville, Dark's early attempts to reconnect with the Muse came to nothing, which frustrated her: 'so far no progress,' she wrote disconsolately a fortnight after arrival.⁹¹ The laborious process of completing the last volume consumed the bulk of her creative energies. Dark tried vainly to motivate herself to write a worthy successor to the earlier volumes, but to no avail. She dragged herself from page to page. Six months into it, she was still undecided about its basic focus and

structure.⁹² In late 1951, eighteen months into the book, she noted: 'Full stop on novel for last week or so, & still nothing coming--very tired of it and all writing.'⁹³ Her tendencies towards 'verbosity,' most marked in *Storm of Time*, worried her literary advisers,⁹⁴ but such anxieties proved groundless. Out of sympathy with virtually every aspect of its writing – its *genre*, period, legacy of 'method and manner'⁹⁵ bequeathed it by the earlier volumes – the fundamental problem this time lay not in an abundance, but in a dearth of things to say.

At the heart of the problem lay old festering grievances of the artist against the constraints of writing history, except this time, there was nothing to compensate for the frustration. She seemed devoid of the vision, the faith and sense of purpose that had carried her through the bumpy patches in the writing of the two earlier volumes. What the *Argus* reviewer called 'a tug-of-war'⁹⁶ between novelist and historian was a central problem of the book.

Fiction had earlier functioned as supplement and enrichment to the historical context. But Dark's reading of the early Macquarie era – as a time of relative peace and prosperity for the colony – was hardly the kernel of a good story, nor was her response to the governor himself. Phillip's vision of the colony had warmed her to the man, and his moral dilemma as humanist and imperialist, Bennelong's friend and the King's emissary at once had intrigued her. She had empathised with Bligh, admired his pluck, and celebrated his championing of the small farmer. But little gripped her about the character of Lachlan Macquarie and his long solid period of governorship.⁹⁷ Nor was she in sympathy with the basic premise of exploration as a way of 'opening up the country' to white settlers, as her original title 'Land of Plunder' suggests. Trying to overcome these obstacles, she sought to recruit the ghosts of the fiery John Macarthur and Governor Bligh of *Storm of Time*. 'Jack Bodice and Bounty Bligh' may be 'twelve thousand miles away,' she argued, but 'their fierce and unforgetting spirits were still turbulently present.'⁹⁸ By taking the heart of her story off-shore, however, she left her topic even more impoverished than before.

The novel was not an unmitigated failure. Dark's gift for characterisation and the occasional fine passage lift the story in places. In the end, however, *No Barrier* remains a book in search of a good story, a coherent plot and an enthusiastic author.

One of a dozen American publishers offered the manuscript before it was eventually withdrawn from that market, encapsulated the collective view.⁹⁹ Dark was

writing so exclusively for her Australian market and is so

eager to give a rounded picture that she has almost entirely forgotten the need to give the reader a good story.¹⁰⁰

Two years after initial negotiations for American publication began, Dark heeded her agent's advice that she 'put this to one side' and 'wait for your next novel.'¹⁰¹ The unthinkable had happened. The once much heralded trilogy, launched with such fanfare in the States a dozen years before by *The Timeless Land*, and given another boost a few years later by *Storm of Time*, had ended, in the United States at least, ignominiously. Collins, her British publishers of long standing, accepted the manuscript, and agreed also to publish an Australian edition. Loyalty to an old and faithful client perhaps, and a different reading of the book's likely success in British markets, saved Dark the indignity of having to scrap her manuscript altogether.

The Australian reception was mixed, as were the yardsticks used – ideological, aesthetic, historical, patriotic – to assess the merits of the book. The Cold War was a major subtext, the trilogy another. Critics' tendencies to approach the three volumes as a continuous narrative – one work in three parts – worked in its favour. Among the few who approached it in its own right, there was no consensus. *Women's Weekly* proclaimed it 'absorbing reading' – 'the actual people come alive again for the reader' –¹⁰² while the *Adelaide Advertiser* found 'the cumulative effect' of the story 'decidedly not entertaining reading.'¹⁰³ There were no *New York Times* or *Times Literary Supplement* reviews this time.

Critics from both sides of Cold War politics disapproved of the book. The *Sunday Telegraph* reviewer, Norman Bartlett, objected to the author's 'romantic protest against oppression' which he equated 'in this instance' with 'civilisation.' Dark, he claimed,

links the convict with the blacks among the dispossessed, although she does not blink at the fact that convicts were as cruel to the blacks as were free settlers and officials.¹⁰⁴

Some critics of the Left celebrated its attempt to 'rescue our national democratic traditions,' but frowned at other aspects. The *Tribune* saved its most pointed criticism for the book's tendency 'to belittle the mass action of the exploited people.'¹⁰⁵

Faithful friends and colleagues trod carefully in their comments. Diplomatically, 'Miss May' glossed over the book itself, praising the author's 'warm-hearted championing of those poor oppressed souls'¹⁰⁶ and 'wide sympathy and human understanding'¹⁰⁷. But not everyone could disguise their disappointment. Osmar White's review, its criticisms all the more pointed because made publicly, did not mince words. Dark had failed, he argued, 'to sift the grain from the chaff' and

so develop the story's potential 'as a social commentary.'¹⁰⁸

Once completed, Dark was understandably anxious to leave her book behind. Her relief at shedding the two-and-a-half-year old burden was palpable as she turned '(very thankfully!) from history to do a novel of modern times,'¹⁰⁹ and 'historical only,' she emphasised, 'in the sense that any honest novel is historical.'¹¹⁰ No one tried to dissuade her.

No sooner had she sent the corrected proofs of *No Barrier* to her British agents in February 1953, than her mood began to lift¹¹¹ and she began a new work routine. 'Getting up early every morning to do some writing,' she wrote resolutely in early April.¹¹² But it was not easy to recover the rhythm, and six months later echoes of the old despondency can still be heard. 'Sat at desk for about 3 hours in morning & accomplished nothing.'¹¹³

The breakthrough finally came halfway through the Montville years. In January 1955, the first reference appeared to what would become *Lantana Lane*. Her diary records an 'experimental beginning on another new book.'¹¹⁴ The process, 'v. rusty and laborious!'¹¹⁵ in parts, eventually gathered momentum. The book was published towards the end of the time and place of 'sanity and sunlight' it sought to recreate and immortalise.

Lantana Lane is the centrepiece of her literature of that time and place. It affirms and celebrates life and locates the essence of that life in Rural Australia. Like the place it seeks to recreate, it is a world of sanity and sunlight. *Prelude to Christopher* and *Lantana Lane* are miles apart in virtually every way but one. In both, the author seems – and is – basically at home with her material. She is writing from within her story and in sympathy with her subject. Her ear has captured the local accent and her attempts to evoke it in farmers' casual conversations are much less strained than in the case of the fisherfolk in *Sun Across the Sky* or Jack Saunders and his kin in *Waterway*. She has also captured their distinctively Australian *joie de vivre*. Indeed, her portrait of the Lane owes much of its most compelling character to the raw caustic bush-humour she captures so well.

The book appears at first deceptively simple, while in fact it juggles many themes and scans many traditions at once. It blends simplicity with sophistication, slapstick with insight, hilarity with nostalgia, sunny optimism with stark fatalism. It combines elements of Furphy's *Such is Life* and Blake's *Songs*, Australian and European literary traditions and political theories. It contains allusions to Hamlet, the Bible and Camelot, and references to 'Professor Freud's theory of wish-fulfilment.'¹¹⁶ It

evokes the sunniness of Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* and the sinister feel of the government men in Kafka's *The Trial*. It shares with White's *The Tree of Man* a search for the extraordinary in the ordinary in Australian rural life, and with Robin Boyd's *The Australian Ugliness* a pointed critique of the 1950s 'Trend' in suburban tastes for interior decoration and so-called 'Gracious Living.'¹¹⁷

The book has integrity not because of, but despite the burden it carried as a reflection – by an outsider – from within of the life and soul of that community. The *persona* of the narrator, as collective voice, does not hold true. Farmers of the Lane did not make ready allusions to Hamlet and Blake, hold antagonisms against their fellow Australians 'round the corner from the world,' nor were self-conscious about their world. The narrator's excitement about the Lane in a sense betrays her alienation from it. To these farmers, it was a taken-for-granted thing. Lantana Lane was 'home.'

More so than the narrator, it is 'the artist' who introduces a false note into the story and the spirit of the Lane. Like Montville, the Lane may have welcomed an artist-in-residence, but as its guest not its collective voice. No true-blue farmer from Queensland (and the major point about the Lane is that it is composed of true farmers) would agree with the narrator's contention that 'the three sections of the community which always keep on working whatever happens' were 'farmers, artists and housewives.'¹¹⁸ The *persona* of the artist-as-farmer sat as awkwardly in the real Lane, as in the imagined Lane.

Lantana Lane is a collection of eighteen short-stories so closely associated they are more like episodes, although each stands alone. Witty, even hilarious in part, each contains a 'serious' political or philosophical subtext. Generally, the stories share the same setting, period, set of characters and narrator who speaks for 'we dwellers of the Lane' and tells each tale. Farms and the land on which they stand provide the setting, but the stories are about the farmers, their families and pets. The Lane is above all a social landscape. The land is central but also subservient to that landscape.

The Lane is composed of small farmers. Some are recent arrivals, others of longer residence. All share a common denominator: each heard the calling and returned to the land, where they have remained a happy 'bunch of unrepentant anachronisms.'¹¹⁹ The Lane, each comes to realise, is their natural 'home.' Tough resilient characters who are willing to confront the harsh realities of farming life 'for the sake of possessing a bit of earth of their own,'¹²⁰ their defiance of the odds lifts them from victimhood to a peculiar status of heroism. They belong to an old honourable line of 'mugs' who despite the 'drudgery, misery,

penury, monotony, anxiety, bankruptcy and calamity' of farming,¹²¹ still choose the life and 'will continue to farm until they die--or (like Cain) are driven out.'¹²² Many in the Lane

at first ignored the summons of their blood, and addressed themselves to callings not their own. But in the end, given half a chance, they will all find their way back, rejoicing, from ease to adversity; they will return, singing hosannas, from liberty to bondage; they ask nothing better than to till the ground, come sweat or cyclone, come drought or depression, come curse or creditors; and if the voice that thundered o'er Eden has not taught them sense in six thousand years, the voice that now analyses their economic predicament, and coldly foretells their ultimate extinction, might just as well pipe down. Cursed they may be--but they are cussed too.¹²³

Doomed to extinction by the 'rural Moguls who measure their properties in square miles,'¹²⁴ the forces of 'progress' and centralisation of government and industry, farmers remain a robust lot and 'live longer than any other description of people except clergymen.'¹²⁵ Characters move in and out of centre stage as if on cue, for the hero of this story is no one in particular, but the Lane: the community which they compose. This 'crop of mugs'¹²⁶ like countless generations before them, dating back to Adam himself, went into the life knowingly.

The farmers inhabit a human-scaled world, in which even physical features of the place are allowed their own integrity and identity. Ordinary features become landmarks and as such are lifted to extraordinary status, like 'The Bump' and 'The Dip' and 'The Tree blocking half the road at the foot of Hawkins' hill.' By implication, only one of a kind exists in the Lane. Individuality, *Lantana Lane* emphasises, need not be a victim of close-knit communal life. The lifting of the concrete to the abstract – the dip after 'The Dip' and so on – suggests the story of the Lane as an allegory.¹²⁷

But all is not well in this little Camelot (references to the Arthurian legend abound) even if – as the narrator affirms with tongue-in-cheek – the climate is 'ideal' and the weather 'just about perfect.'¹²⁸ Everyone knows 'that the bone is pointing straight at their hearts.'¹²⁹ The Lane is under siege by the Department of Main Roads 'casting a critical eye upon our district'¹³⁰, and under threat by 'the dreadful fastnesses of the Atom.'¹³¹ It is doomed. If Big Government, Big Bureaucracy and Big Business do not destroy it, nuclear warfare will. Powerless before such forces, the farmers have the good sense to abandon themselves and their

fate to happy things, while they last. They also draw satisfaction from the well-known fact of their longevity. “‘Better a live farmer than a dead economist.’” they say.¹³² When the inevitable time comes and ‘the highway catches up’ with them, they will have no regrets for (thus the narrator concludes the tale) even ‘if the treasure we have accumulated makes no show upon our bank statements, neither is it subject to income tax.’ Their wealth has been ‘safely invested’ in enjoying the life itself. This defiant-cum-triumphant note – not unlike Gilbert Massey’s self-consoling remark at the end of *The Little Company*, ‘We floundered but at least we rebelled’ – underpins the whole story.

Pen portraits of particular ‘characters’ of the community contribute a sense of diversity within the commonalities, and of the central role of the individual inside the collective. The Lane, the implication is, may be small and self-contained but it is large enough to accommodate the individual quirks and gifts of all its residents. Herbie Bassett, the town sloth, and Gwinny, the forerunner of today’s superwoman model of efficiency at home and at work, are a case in point. Herbie and Gwinny lie at either end of the Lane’s spectrum of human enterprise and achievement, they represent the extremes in human tendencies towards leisure and work, thought and action. Yet the Lane has a place for and values both. The second oldest inhabitant of the Lane at fifty-three, Herbie was released by the death of his wife to pursue life as he saw fit. Convinced that ‘the main business of life was to be happy’ he pursued his goal relentlessly, devoting the bulk of his waking hours to the art of ‘good, concentrated gazing’,¹³³ at sunrises and the like. His sedentary life hurts no one, while his utter indifference to things material is an inspiration to his neighbours. Consumerism and conformism have no place in Herbie’s life.

Gwinny’s remarkable physical and mental energies make her the antithesis of Herbie. She is the quintessential professional farmer’s wife, a woman of immense inner resources, initiative and unquestioned organisational skills. She is an Amazon in physical and moral stature. Indeed, she is the ultimate symbol of the little community itself: efficient, independent and self-sufficient. The more Australian society embraces growth and expansion, the suggestion is, the more it will need its Gwinny’s.

Consider the multifarious enterprises which, with the passing years, grow bigger and bigger, better and better, more and more perfectly organised until no one can cope with them any more. How they need a Gwinny!¹³⁴



Outdoors



Indoors

The harmony that characterises life in the Lane extends to vulnerable creatures, such as birds and children. Each plays an integral part in the life of the community, and contributes a distinctive and

colourful thread to the fabric of the Lane. Each is assigned a chapter in the book. 'Nelson,' the one-eyed kookaburra who (the narrator admits) 'has us all by the short hairs.'¹³⁵ He outwits and outcharms the farmers who compete daily for the honour of feeding him. Self-indulgent and unfaithful, 'Nelson' is nonetheless everyone's favourite. His presence at their kitchen or dinner table lends legitimacy to their residence in the Lane. 'Nelson' is nature's local representative, extending them a welcome to the Lane.

'Sweet and Low' – 'about Pan, and shepherd lads, and some boy or other who came piping down a valley wild'¹³⁶ – borrows unashamedly in language, image and theme from the Introduction to Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. Set in the context of a 'dead-end road'¹³⁷ dinkum Aussie village, where the pastoral must often bow to the practical, the story of the little boy 'piping down a valley wild' undergoes a dramatic transformation. It becomes the hilarious tale of Tony Griffith – 'just eleven' and 'never, never, never tired' – and five-year-old Joy – 'a very polite, ladylike and motherly little girl' until provoked.

Like two royal personages in a crowd of commoners, or two millionaires in a suburban cottage, or two gangsters at a church social, they were always sharply aware of each other.¹³⁸

The 'deplorable affair' surrounding Tony's new fife, thrown by some unknown force into the family 'dumpty' – "'Did it fall, or was it dropped?'"¹³⁹ – and the rescue operation that ensues are gems of conception and execution. Dark's talent for comedy, her sensitive portraits of the children and her ability to distil from Blake's classic a distinctly Aussie tale of 'outrage and invincible determination'¹⁴⁰ show her a consummate storyteller in the best tradition of Furphy and his celebrated *Such is Life*.¹⁴¹

Each story performs a dual role. Each is a yarn as well as a fragment of a larger tale about the community itself, which is the central character of the book. The big story is not only greater but more complex than the sum of its parts. It is both a tragedy and a comedy about a quintessential Australian community out of step and out of sympathy with major developments in the broader society. In the end, neither harmony nor hilarity will save the Lane. Doom awaits it in the form of Kafkaesque members of the Department of Main Roads who visit it regularly with plans of 'deviation.' With cold methodical efficiency, these smiling types will destroy the very essence of the community, which is its autonomy and its integrity. An open, expansive community to its own population, the Lane harbours a profound sense of isolation and alienation from the rest of society. Herein lay yet another familiar

country for Eleanor Dark. Like her little company of writers, farmers at the Lane also harbour a 'them-and-us' mentality.

Lantana Lane was published in Australia, New Zealand and the U.K. It surpassed even *The Timeless Land*, in its universal appeal. The book was warmly welcomed by the local community. The *Glasgow Herald* thought it Dark's best work and named it 'the best of the week's novels.' The Brisbane *Courier Mail* saw it as Dark's coming of age. She had "'found'" herself in the book.¹⁴² A visiting American professor of comparative literature ranked her work with Xavier Herbert, claiming their literature was 'rooted in Australia' and was Australia's best.¹⁴³ The book's appeal was among the broadest of any of her books, both in terms of cultural and national boundaries. Extracts from her stories found their way into anthologies of Australian nature writing. A Darwin radio program entitled 'Land and Its People' did a 'dramatised book review' of it.¹⁴⁴ The *Times Literary Supplement* called it 'a little masterpiece.'¹⁴⁵ Both Australians and British critics claimed it as their own. The *Canberra Times* declared it 'essentially Australian' and the *Glasgow Herald* found it had 'the mood of Elmbury, transported to the Antipodean.' It was reportedly among the best selling in Brisbane bookshops and among the most in demand in the Darlington Public Library in England.¹⁴⁶

Critics did not always concur on the precise virtues of the book, but no one seemed to doubt its fineness and general appeal. Some celebrated its craftsmanship,¹⁴⁷ others its 'brilliant characterisation.'¹⁴⁸ Some remarked on its 'essential' Australianness,¹⁴⁹ others on its universality. A few probed beneath its frothy surface to find thoughtful and thought-provoking social commentaries: 'beneath the humour there is a solid view of pertinent comment on a way of life that is typically Australian.'¹⁵⁰ Many welcomed the advent of the humorist,¹⁵¹ and praised her comic talents.¹⁵² The *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer welcomed 'this charming and gracefully written book' – for its laughter – 'its most delicious feature' – and her portrayal of 'ordinary people.' The book could 'hardly fail to win the affectionate esteem of Australian readers.'¹⁵³ Dark's briefest book had achieved what the sum of her previous nine novels had not: a resounding consensus view, from literary critics and popular audiences alike, that herein lay a genuinely Australian people's story. Their appetite whetted, some already wondered what sort of a book would follow *Lantana Lane*.

Even before events of late 1960 put an end to the Montville years, Dark had been struggling to 'pick up threads again' of her writing.¹⁵⁴ Diaries of late 1958 and 1959 show her increasingly frustrated. She was physically weary and lacking in mental concentration. In September

1959, all she could report to her diary was being: 'Formally in attendance at desk for a while, as usual.'¹⁵⁵ In Montville, six months later, she was 'still feeling too tired to tackle writing again – all to be warmed up anew!'¹⁵⁶

Psychological as well as physical burdens were to blame. Just as the narrator of *Lantana Lane* looks away from the bleak side of the life she extolled, so had Dark herself. Increasingly through the late 1950s, she had sought desperately to hang on to the shreds of an illusion of family life. John's marriage had broken down. Not altogether coincidentally, a sense of impending disaster hung over the fate of Mike and Ann's own marriage. As late as December 1959, from 'Varuna,' she prepared a generous hamperful with 'things for the kids Xmas,'¹⁵⁷ including frocks she had made for Ann and the two little girls. Dark's diaries yield little of this background, except for the occasional remark – 'Got on scales & discovered had lost 1/2 stone!'¹⁵⁸ – which reveals a serious problem and her awareness of it.

A call from Montville from her old tennis partner in happier days officially signalled the beginning of the crisis. Dark fled to Montville. On 26 November – 'the longest day of life!' – she heard from her daughter-in-law of 'what has been obvious for a long time.'¹⁵⁹ She and Mike were separating. It did not help matters that John was involved.

Almost fifty years after her family had split into its component parts, Dark had again to endure – and help her son endure – a similar crisis. A remark about Eric in her diaries – only negative note about him across the span of her writings – offers a measure of her emotional state. It reads bluntly: 'No letter from E. yet, v. disappointed'¹⁶⁰ Ironically, it was neither the real nor the imagined Montville – but Eleanor's Montville – which had come to a sad ending.

On 1 December she, Ann and the children departed Montville. She left Mike alone 'looking wretched – worried about him'¹⁶¹ Once in Katoomba, the mother continued to fret. 'Now feel I should have stayed with Mike.'¹⁶² It was a painful time for all involved. By mid-December, the family lay scattered in fragments from Montville to Katoomba to Sydney.¹⁶³ Dark was 'too tired still to do much – too restless to rest!'¹⁶⁴ and found it 'slow to get over physical & nervous strain of last months.'¹⁶⁵ December 25 was the 'usual dreary Xmas day'¹⁶⁶ and New Year's Eve found her feeling no better.

The worst year of a tough decade. Book quite at a standstill again, doubt if I can find energy to resuscitate it.¹⁶⁷

Her fears proved well-founded. Dark's diaries of the 1960s and beyond show her stubbornly attempting to reconnect with the Muse, but

to no avail. She wrote reams of material, but mostly about grim subjects dealt with morosely. Like most of the little company, she too had fallen silent.¹⁶⁸

The Montville years were a rich time in Eleanor Dark's writing life, but the temptation to see them as a natural conclusion to that life should be resisted. Dark did not intend for *Lantana Lane* to be her swansong. The author was not having her last word. What, if any, would have been the future directions of her literature after such a book remains open to speculation: both in literary and political terms.

One thing is clear. Dark's celebration of the world of Montville and identification with the Australia of Montville – heartland of the Country Party, home of small-settler capitalism, its land worked by generations of White Australians, subdivided and re-subdivided along European notions of management and cultivation, the domestic and working lives of its men- and women-folk governed by strict gender-based roles and responsibilities – aligned her with a political philosophy conservative to the core. Was this the Australia that was 'home,' and if so, how to reconcile it with her radicalism of the public years? The conflict between her conservative capitalist lifestyle and radical politics was nothing new nor peculiar to her or her generation of radical intellectuals. Neither was the conflict between the domesticated traditional housewife and the advocate of women's rights. But these had never crossed over before into her literature. Individual and artist had often reflected different 'truths.' In *Lantana Lane* for the first time Dark inscribed her own personal values – the way she lived and thought – onto her imagined lives.

Ultimately, Montville (and the Lane) embodied a world that was fundamentally the negation of values and principles that defined her social thought and her literature of the 1930s and 1940s. *Lantana Lane* celebrates an Australia forged through European dispossession and exploitation of the timeless land, and age-old patriarchal notions of the right and proper place of men and women in society. Black Australia features in none of her writings of these years. It rates but a brief mention in 'The Blackall Range Country,' and only as a distant and romantic past, a source of quaint legends and exotic local names: an Aboriginal past summoned to enrich and validate White Australians' sense of place and cultural soil, without intruding awkward questions of possession and dispossession. For the author of *The Timeless Land*, it constitutes a massive shift in perspective and sympathies.

The Montville years also underscore the intimate relationship between the individual and the artist, and between her real and imagined

lives. More fundamentally, they reflect the basic dependence of her creative on her personal world. Dark's 'world-proof life' had shown great resilience in the past, and withstood many assaults from without. But never from within. A major casualty of this assault was the illusion of that 'world-proof life' – and the equally illusory sense of security and protection it had fed the artist. She never recovered from the family crisis of 1960. Henceforth, whatever energies Eleanor Dark could summon went into the family history, completed towards the end of the 1960s. Beyond that project, lay fifteen years of failed attempts to reconnect with her Muse.

In one such unfinished novel, she seems to offer a tough – and conclusive – self-assessment of her literary merits, as well as a possible insight into the grim quality of the artist's last barren years.

Thirty years ago I imagined – most properly – that I would someday be a good writer, if not a great one – though even that seemed gloriously possible. This illusion faded into the decent and sober knowledge that I could never be more than a respectably competent one; and (such is the excellent adaptability of the human mind), I have come to accept it without anguish. There is really no question about what I shall do with my remaining bit of life; I shall write – or begin – another reasonably competent book. But it so happened that for the first time since – at the age of seven or thereabouts – I discovered that I like pushing a pen across a sheet of paper, I have no 'work in progress.' Not even, now, my drawer full of scraps, for about a month ago, in a sudden frenzy of impatience, I burnt them all in the grate, and a fine pile of flimsy ashes they made. It was odd – and at first rather exhilarating – to know that my desk was innocent of anything but stacks of blank quarto. The drawer had always been a graveyard of failures, but any pile of blank paper is a potential masterpiece. I had a curious illusion of being at the beginning again, full of ardour and confidence; for a day or two I was still tempted to believe that I might produce the book – the one which every writer hopes to write someday, and never does.¹⁶⁹

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- ¹ Eleanor Dark, *Lantana Lane*, p. 254.
- ² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Sonia Lewinthal, c/o Whittlesey House, McGraw Hill, New York, 1.11.49, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ³ Diary entry, 10.5.50, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁴ Unknown author, 'The Uneasy Chair: The Writer in Isolation,' *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. xi, no. 3, spring 1952, pp. 196 and 301.
- ⁵ 'Pineapple Soufflé,' *British Weekly*, 14.5.59.
- ⁶ Sydney J. Baker, 'Our Good Earth,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23.5.59.
- ⁷ *Adelaide Advertiser*, 16.5.59.
- ⁸ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Dorothy Fitzpatrick, '8 Jn. '57' (8.1.57) NLA MS 4965/2/412.
- ⁹ Most notably, the Korean War, the Malayan crisis, the Petrov Affair, the major split of the ALP, the Royal Commission on Espionage.
- ¹⁰ Dark, diary entry of 7.2.52, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹¹ Dark, diary entry of 14.6.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹² Letter from Eleanor Dark to Margaret Kent Hughes, 11.4.53, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 7/149.
- ¹³ Dark, *Lantana Lane*, pp. 203-204.
- ¹⁴ Several pages in length, Modjeska's discussion of the period is based principally on material from *Lantana Lane* itself. Although she clarified from the start that the book was 'not an exact account, but a lyrical representation of the quality of the experience,' she relied mostly on material from the imagined Lantana Lane for her observations of the real Lane and its inhabitants. Modjeska interpreted these years not as 'a solution' but as Dark's personal resolution of 'the dialectic of self and society' that had so far eluded her. 'Hammer at Destiny,' *op. cit.*, p. 96. That resolution however takes the form of a kind of triumphant defeatism. Even though

aware that the Lane is ‘an anachronism’ and ‘in the modern world anachronisms cannot be tolerated,’ Modjeska argued, ‘Dark’s optimism does not fail her’ for she knows ‘there will always be mugs who will insist on being anachronisms’ (pp. 102-103).

- ¹⁵ Helen Garner, Introduction, to Dark, *Lantana Lane*, Virago Modern Classics, 1986, pp. xii.
- ¹⁶ John Oliver Dark, ‘Light on Dark,’ letter to the editor of 9.8.87, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13.8.87.
- ¹⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 24.12.50, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁸ See diary entries of 25 July – 1 August 1950, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹⁹ A Dr Byrons and his family moved just before Christmas, but for most of the Montville years ‘Varuna’ was not rented.
- ²⁰ See diary entries of late November-early December 1950. Diary entry, 2.12.50, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²¹ Diary entry of 7.12.50, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²² With time and energy at a premium, she nonetheless did her share for the needy around her, such as the elderly lady rendered helpless by a broken wrist. For over a fortnight, Eleanor visited her daily, shopped and cooked, occasionally even stayed overnight to keep her company. Eleanor Dark, diary entries from 30 August, 1950 when she writes: ‘Mrs White broke her wrist – went up in evening with E. to see if anything I could do,’ until 15 September, 1950, last reference to this matter: ‘called in to see Mrs White on way home.’ ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²³ The old lady she had recently nursed, now ‘turned up in evening with delectable fish pie for our evening meal!’ Diary entry, 19.12.50, ML MSS 4545 18(25). and the next day ‘brought us another delicious hot meal.’ (Diary entry of 20.12.50, ML MSS 4545 18(25). As if in roster duty, another neighbour followed the next day bearing ‘soup, lettuces & eggs for our lunch’ (Diary entry of 21.12.50, ML MSS 4545 18(25).

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- ²⁴ Eleanor returned but once and only out of concern for Eric who, despite a sudden collapse one morning in their flat, insisted on driving there to keep an appointment. It is doubtful that of her own accord she would have visited the old hometown before setting north. Diary entry, 12.4.51, ML MSS 445 18(25).
- ²⁵ See various diary entries of late December 1950, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²⁶ Diary entry of 10.1.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²⁷ Hardy's *Power Without Glory*, a thinly veiled, semi-fictional account of the life of the millionaire, John Wren, was the basis of a libel suit by Mrs Ellen Wren, whose alleged fictional counterpart in the tale – Nellie West – has a child from an adulterous affair. The criminal proceedings instituted against Hardy carried profound implications for the writing of fiction generally in Australia, throwing into question the essential driving force of the creative writer: to mould life into art. Hardy's acquittal came after nine long and anxious months.
- ²⁸ Diary entry of 4.2.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ²⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Miles Franklin, 17.5.52, ML MSS 364/26/481.
- ³⁰ Letter from Miles Franklin to Marjorie Pizer, 15.2.51, ML MSS 530 1/4.
- ³¹ A grant awarded to Judah Waten, his communist sympathies well known, had already prompted Menzies to call for security checks on writers recommended for CLF grants.
- ³² H.P. Heseltine described this period as 'one of the most painful episodes' in Palmer's career; his resignation from the CLF Advisory Board (of which he had been a member since 1942 and chairman since 1947), 'a direct outcome of the whole unhappy affair.' Allan Ashbolt, 'The great literary witch-hunt of 1952,' in A. Curthoys and J. Merritt (eds.), *Australia's First Cold War. Vol. 1. Society, Communism and Culture*, Allen & Unwin, 1984, p. 163.

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- ³³ In place of Palmer, Dr Archibald Grenfell Price was appointed to head the Advisory Board. In 1931 he had published a propagandist booklet denouncing communism, and from 1941-1943 had served as UAP member to Federal Parliament. His 'conservative credentials were impeccable,' Tom Inglis Moore, a surviving member of the old Board wrote to the Palmers. The poet Kenneth Slessor, also a new appointee, was thought to be 'somewhat disdainful of political involvement.' *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- ³⁴ Letter from Tom Inglis Moore to Nettie Palmer, 7.3.55, NLA MS 1174/1/8676-77.
- ³⁵ In January 1953 Devanny confided to Franklin the shocking contents of a letter she had recently received from a correspondent she refused to name (see letter from Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin, 30.1.53, ML MS 364/32/133) but later described as a man who though himself 'not a P. member' himself, was married to one. (see letter from Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin, 16.2.53, ML MS 364/32/137-9.) The letter allegedly accused Bartlett Adamson (until his death in 1951 a leading figure of the Sydney Fellowship and member of the CPA) of being 'an Intelligence Officer for the British Government. In plain English, probably the dirtiest spy that ever wormed his way into Party secrets.' (See letter from Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin, 30.1.53, ML MS 364/32/133.) Franklin prudently chose to suspend her judgment on the matter. Pronouncing herself 'astonished' at 'the direction the accusation has taken, not at its character,' she warned her colleague to tread carefully on such matters. 'You'd want to be very sure of your authorities and evidence.' It sounded, Franklin said, 'fantastic and it-can't-happen here-ish.' (see letter from Miles Franklin to Jean Devanny, 4.2.53, ML MS 364/32/135.) At work at the time on her autobiography, Devanny, bitter about the treatment meted out to her by certain high-ranking members of the Party, was herself carrying her own vendetta against them. Thus, while she assured Franklin that she would approve of 'what I have to say about you' and was keen 'to do full justice to all the writers,' Devanny also made it clear that she would not be 'pulling my punches where gangsters, blackguards and fools are concerned.' In October of that year, Devanny was showing her paranoia about the Party's old antagonisms towards her, advising Franklin to 'please be careful' of what she told Prichard 'or any other of them (Communists)' about her, for it 'will

be discussed in a meeting and a line laid down about it.' Prichard herself, Devanny remarked, was capable of lying, as she had done in the past, for the sake of the Party. A request to Franklin to 'burn this' letter was later deleted. (see letter from Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin, 12.10.53, ML MS 364/32/193.)

³⁶ Eleanor Dark, 'The Blackall Range Country,' *Walkabout*, 1.11.55, p. 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Two exceptions are New Year's Eve 1953, when Michael, John and his family converged in the old family house. (See diary entry of 12.12.55, ML MSS 4545 18(25)) and in the Spring of 1958, when John (now separated from his wife Joan), together with Michael and Ann and their respective families, stayed in the old family home for a few days. (See diary entry of 28.8.58, ML MSS 4545 18(25)).

³⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Dorothy Fitzpatrick, '8 Jn. '57' (8.1.57), NLA MS 4965/2/412.

⁴⁰ Dark, *Lantana Lane*, pp. 43-44.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴² Nicholas Brown deals at length with this phenomenon in *Governing prosperity* (1995) in the context of wartime centralisation and the search for new organisations of life in postwar Australia. Its main relevance here lies not only in the widespread perception of the need to find ways of returning accountability to the governors, and influence in and accessibility to decision-making to the governed. It also lies in the attempts to rescue from the past and from the pastoral past in particular the small and the simple in the organisation of human society. For example, in the advocacy of 'regionalism' – 'to evoke from the people ... their own peculiar ambition'; the reinstatement into official iconography of 'the traditional institutions of society' – such as 'the family, the school, the small community club, village or small town'; the celebration of a social ideal set against the grain of technological change and featuring "towns ringed with tiny farms, intensely cultivated market gardens, poultry farms and orchards" Nicholas Brown,

Governing Prosperity: Social Change and Social Analysis in Australia in the 1950s, Cambridge, 1995, p.136.

- ⁴³ Letter from Flora Eldershaw to Nettie Palmer, 13.12.49, NLA MS 1174/1/7766.
- ⁴⁴ John Morrison, *The Happy Warrior, Literary Essays on the Giants of Australian Literature Marshall, Palmer Waten, Davison and of course Morrison himself*, 'Frank Davison,' Pascoe Publishing, Fairfield, Australia, 1987, pp. 55-61.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with Eric Dark by Darby, *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁶ Eric Dark, 'Biographical Note' on Eric Lowe, two-page typed draft, n.d. (post-1961), in the possession of Michael Dark.
- ⁴⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to A. Grove Day, 26.6.65, NLA MS 4685, No. 14.
- ⁴⁸ Manifold, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- ⁴⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Dorothy Fitzpatrick, '8 Jn. '57' (8.1.57), NLA MS 4965/2/412.
- ⁵⁰ Dark, *Lantana Lane*, p. 12.
- ⁵¹ Diary entries of 2 and 3.6.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁵² Diary entry of 12.7.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁵³ Various diary entries of May and June 1951, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁵⁴ Diary entry of 13.1.52, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁵⁵ Diary entry of 5.5.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁵⁶ Diary entry of 9.5.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁵⁷ Diary entry of 4.9.53, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁵⁸ Diary entry of 2.6.53, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁵⁹ Last portion of a letter from Eleanor Dark to Molly O'Reilly (c. early 1932), in the possession of Michael Dark.

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- ⁶⁰ Diary entry of 9.10.57, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁶¹ Interview with Eric Dark by Darby, *op. cit.*
- ⁶² The incident was remembered over forty years later by another of the players for what it revealed of Eric's unsuspected sensitivities on such matters. Interview with Dulcie Brown at her home in Caloundra, August 1992.
- ⁶³ Diary entry of 14.12.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁶⁴ His article regarding the High Court's ruling of early 1951 declaring the Communist Party Dissolution Act unconstitutional, sent to his socialist colleague John Morrison for possible publication, is a case in point. Far from sounding a note of triumph, Eric warned against complacency, urging instead constant vigilance against the forces of darkness. A narrow 'round' may have been won for the cause of freedom, but there would be, he predicted, other attacks waged upon it, each of which had in turn to be resisted. Eric Dark, article submitted to J. Morrison for publ., 1950s, ML MSS 5049 Item 4.
- ⁶⁵ The Fellowship, he suggested, should hold a 'special meeting' to consider the matter, and invite the American Ambassador to attend the discussion. He had, Eric explained, read all of Fast's works and admired the author not only for his literary skills but also for his 'love of mankind and passion for justice.' Letter from Eric Dark to Sec of Sydney FAW, 22.9.50, FAW ML MS 2008 10(14) K22112.
- ⁶⁶ Diary entry of 6.6.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁶⁷ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Margaret Kent Hughes, 14.11.51, ML MSS 4545 16(25) 7/131.
- ⁶⁸ It was only when the crisis that ended the Montville years broke, its ramifications inescapable, that for the first time she admitted (to her diary) to prior knowledge of the circumstances that had led to it. It 'has been obvious,' she said, 'for a long time.' Diary entry, 30.11.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ⁶⁹ Diary entry of 12.7.59, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁷⁰ Dark, *Lantana Lane*, p. 157.

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- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁷² Diary entry of 27.3.52, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁷³ Eric Lowe died before the biography could be published.
- ⁷⁴ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Dorothy Daly, Curtis Brown, London, 20.4.56, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁷⁵ Letter from Dorothy Daly, Curtis Brown, London, to Eleanor Dark, 10.5.56, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁷⁶ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Graham Watson, Curtis Brown, London, 1.11.56, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁷⁷ Between 1950-54 Nettie published three works: *Henry Handel Richardson: a study*, *The Dandenongs* (1952) and her critical study of *Bernard O'Dowd* (1954). Vance's *Old Australian bush ballads* (1951) and his much celebrated *The legend of the nineties*, both non-fiction, also appeared at this time.
- ⁷⁸ Barnard wrote non-fiction, but unhappily. By late 1950, she was doing 'very little writing' with 'just a short story here & there.' (Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 24.8.50, NLA MS 1174/1/7871.) Two years later, she confessed that 'a pen no longer, even physically, seems at home in my hand.' (Letter from Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 15.6.52, NLA MS 1174/1/8157.) Eldershaw, Devanny and Franklin suffered a similar fate.
- ⁷⁹ Dark, 'They All Come Back,' *Walkabout*, 1.1.51, pp. 19-20.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸² Andrew Bear, 'Raymond Williams in Ruralurbia,' in *Meanjin Quarterly*, summer 1974, pp. 429-432, p. 430.
- ⁸³ Dark, 'The Blackall Range.'
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁵ Bear, *op. cit.*, p. 431.

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- ⁸⁶ Manifold, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- ⁸⁷ Wilkes, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- ⁸⁸ Access to historical sources threatened to become a major drawback, for whereas basic material had been available locally, with *No Barrier* she was 'handicapped' by the fact that almost all the necessary records were in Sydney. Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 26.2.50, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁸⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 26.2.50, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁹⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 24.12.50, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁹¹ Diary entry of 19.5.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁹² Letter from William Collins, U.K., to Eleanor Dark, 30.11.50, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁹³ Diary entry of 1.11.51, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ⁹⁴ They advised that 'there is rather a reaction now against too long novels,' and reminded her of 'the rising costs of paper' which made 'very long books apt to become so expensive,' and thus mitigated against 'their chance of success.' Letter from William Collins, U.K., to Eleanor Dark, 30.11.50, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁹⁵ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Alan Collins, Curtis Brown, New York, 7.3.53, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ⁹⁶ *Melbourne Argus*, 27.6.53.
- ⁹⁷ When in 1957, Brian Fitzpatrick offered to lend her his copy of the Macquarie Journals, she politely but firmly refused it. 'My present feeling is that I never want to read, far less write another word about that particular period of our history.' Letter from Eleanor Dark to Dorothy Fitzpatrick, 8.1.57, NLA MS 4965/2/412. A comment made by Eric in an interview shortly before his wife's death, however, suggests that she may have entertained some ideas of picking up the threads of her historical work. She had, Eric said,

'partly in her head a final book on Macquarie,' whose 'lovely title' was to be 'Macquarie Light, but she never even started. She just couldn't feel she could go on.' Interview with Eric Dark by Giuffré, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

- ⁹⁸ Dark, *No Barrier*, p. 104.
- ⁹⁹ An editor with McGraw Hill when it published *Storm of Time*, Lois Cole was now at Crowell, one of the dozen or so American publishing houses offered *No Barrier*. Other publishers who were offered and refused the manuscript included: McGraw Hill, Crowell, Julian Messner, Putnam's, Bobbs Merrill, Appleton Century Crafts, Random House, Harper's, Longsman Green, Morrow and Funk & Wagnalls.
- ¹⁰⁰ Letter from Alan Collins, Curtis Brown, New York, to Eleanor Dark, 6.11.52, ML MS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁰¹ Letter from Alan Collins, Curtis Brown, New York, to Eleanor Dark, 3.2.54, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹⁰² Georgina Morley, 'New historical novel makes absorbing reader,' *Women's Weekly*, 8.7.53.
- ¹⁰³ *Adelaide Advertiser*, 11.7.53.
- ¹⁰⁴ Norman Bartlett, review, *Sunday Telegraph*, 4.7.53.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Tribune*, 2.9.53.
- ¹⁰⁶ Letter from 'Miss May' to Eleanor Dark, 3.7.53, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁰⁷ Letter from 'Miss May' to Eleanor Dark, 14.7.53, ML MSS 4545 24(25).
- ¹⁰⁸ Osmar White, 'Are our writers unventuresome?', 4.7.53, ML MSS 4545 10(25).
- ¹⁰⁹ Letter from Eleanor Dark to William Collins, London, 6.3.53, ML MSS 4545 22(25).
- ¹¹⁰ Letter from Eleanor Dark to Alan Collins, Curtis Brown, New York, 7.3.53, ML MSS 4545 22(25).

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- ¹¹¹ Diary entry of 19.2.53, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹¹² Diary entry of 2.4.53, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹¹³ Diary entry of 25.10.53, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹¹⁴ Diary entry of 1.1.55, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹¹⁵ Diary entry of 3.1.55, ML MSS 4545 18(25).
- ¹¹⁶ Dark, *Lantana Lane*, p. 12.
- ¹¹⁷ References scattered throughout the chapter 'The Narrow Escape of Herbie Bassett,' pp. 22-36.
- ¹¹⁸ Dark, *Lantana Lane*, p. 72.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- ¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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- ¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- ¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- ¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴¹ Several critics pointed to the similarities between the two books.
- ¹⁴² Brisbane *Courier Mail*, 9.5.59.
- ¹⁴³ Professor Werner Friedrich of North Carolina University. 'Australia Needs "Arrogant Writer,"' *Melbourne Age*, 7.8.59.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Darwin News*, 28.8.59.
- ¹⁴⁵ *Times Literary Supplement*, 10.4.59.
- ¹⁴⁶ As reported in *Northern Despatch* (Darlington) England, 2.5.59.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ian Mair, reviewer for the *Melbourne Age* remarked that Lantana Lane 'again demonstrates, if nothing else, her ability to write one of the most competent prose styles at the command of any Australian, woman or man, novelist or not.' *Melbourne Age*, 16.5.59. In collection of reviews, ML MSS 4545.
- ¹⁴⁸ 'W.G.L.,' *Methodist Recorder* (London), 22.10.59. The *Glasgow Herald* was also clearly taken by the residents of the Lane who 'like the lantana' 'simply keep alive and grow, without the slightest intention of incommoding anyone. 'You'll love this larrikin,' *Glasgow Herald*, 2.4.59.
- ¹⁴⁹ 'About Farmers: And Lantana,' *Canberra Times*, 30.5.59.

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- ¹⁵⁰ 'There's Nothing – And Nobody – Dull in Lantana Lane,' Hobart *Mercury*, 11.6.59.
- ¹⁵¹ Mair, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵² Its 'most excellent good humour,' *Canberra Times*, 30.5.59.
- ¹⁵³ Sydney J. Baker, 'Our Good Earth,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23.5.59.
- ¹⁵⁴ Diary entry of 11.11.58, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁵⁵ Diary entry of 1.9.59, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁵⁶ Diary entry of 21.5.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁵⁷ Diary entry of 11.12.59, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁵⁸ Diary entry of 26.11.60, ML MSS 4545 (18)
- ¹⁵⁹ Diary entry of 30.11.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁶⁰ Diary entry of 28.11.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁶¹ Diary entry of 1.12.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁶² Diary entry of 3.12.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁶³ The children were with Ann and John in Sydney, and Mike was still in Montville.
- ¹⁶⁴ Diary entry of 19.12.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁶⁵ Diary entry of 23.12.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁶⁶ Diary entry of 25.12.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁶⁷ Diary entry of 31.12.60, ML MSS 4545(18).
- ¹⁶⁸ Barnard wrote several historical works in the 1960s and in 1967 *Miles Franklin*. Prichard published the autobiographical *Child of the Hurricane* (1964). Devanny died in 1962, Nettie Palmer in 1964, Prichard in 1969, Barnard in 1987.

¹⁶⁹ Eleanor Dark, untitled and unfinished MS about Kate Vernon, ML MSS 4545 14(25).

Epilogue

Let us leave our old friend in one of those moments of unmingled happiness, of which, if we seek them, there are ever some, to cheer our transitory existence here. There are dark shadows on the earth, but its lights are stronger in the contrast. Some men, like bats or owls, have better eyes for the darkness than for the light. We, who have no such optical powers, are better pleased to take our last parting look at the visionary companions of many solitary hours, when the brief sunshine of the world is blazing full upon them.

Pickwick Papers, Charles Dickens

The family crisis of the late 1950s shook the foundations of Eleanor's 'world proof life' like no other before it. Nothing – not the vicious Katoomba campaigns against her and Eric, nor the middle-of-the-night threatening phone calls punctuating those campaigns, nor even the political witch-hunt that drove her and Eric to seek refuge in a far-away farming village in Queensland in the 1950s – had prepared her for this onslaught from within. So long as the sacred core of family life – that secret garden of security and stability she and Eric had cultivated over the decades – had remained intact, Eleanor seemed always to find the strength to confront whatever dark forces had threatened her community, professional and artistic lives. Family, closely-knit and closely-guarded, had been her personal fortress, the heart of her 'world-proof-life,' the basic source of vitality from which in crisis after crisis she had drawn strength and resolve.

Now ghosts of a childhood half a century old had returned to haunt her. Another broken family lay scattered again, with children – now her grandchildren – shuttled here and there to separate homes and separate family circles. The life force that had propelled the young Pixie O'Reilly to believe in a brighter future was all but spent now. The intra-family nature of the crisis made it all the harder to begin anew.

Drawing a clean line between protagonist and antagonist was not easy. Ann was the daughter Eleanor never had. She was the mother of her grandchildren. There would be visits to 'Varuna.' Who would come? Who would stay away? On the matter of John, there were no blurred lines. For decades, Eleanor remained adamant that she would not see him. He was not welcome in her home. The lioness was

protecting her son, even if Mike himself had from the start adopted a conciliatory mode. Then as now he remained more sad than angry at the events that led to the breakup of his marriage and family life. In time, he would find his true soul mate, have a son, remake his life. But not Eleanor. Tired, both physically and spiritually, she had neither the time nor the energy to move on, to invest in such possible tomorrows.

Eric – caught between affection and loyalty for two sons, and above all, an overriding instinct to protect his wife from the aftershocks of the crisis – adopted the unenviable role of crisis manager. His first communications with John were couched in the form of appeals: to his conscience, to his sense of honour, to his empathy for his brother's plight. But to no avail. John – and Ann – were set on their new course. Threads of their new family life were already forming, while Eric, Eleanor and Mike contemplated the shreds of what was left of the old. For a time, while Mike reoriented his life, Eleanor had her two restless creatures living once again under the same roof at 'Varuna.' But these were largely opaque times. It is mainly through Eric and his letters to John of the period immediately after the crisis that we see refracted the pain and grief enveloping three generations of Darks.

As in the case of her mother Eleanor McCulloch in that earlier family tragedy, the voice of Eleanor Dark is heard but faintly if at all. A long brooding silence follows the crisis and in those stark blank spaces we – the onlookers, posterity – are left to envision the impact. Eric's letters to his son continued through the years, as eventually the bitterness gave way to understanding and what appear to be genuine attempts to re-establish some kind of relationship with his estranged son. Time and the opportunity for reflection softened Eric's perspective. But not Eleanor's. It had taken so long to build her fortress-life, and so little to demolish it.

Eleanor Dark never published again. The family crisis that imploded her world-proof life devastated individual and artist alike.

This is with hindsight. Eleanor herself plodded on valiantly, as through the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s she struggled time and again to reconnect with the Muse. Hundreds of thousands of words – in the form of unfinished manuscripts of a play, a novel, a family chronicle – bear witness to a determination bordering on desperation to find a way back to her writing. None of the attempts saw the light of the day. Nor deserved to. They were the fruits of a tree already severed at the base.

The spark gone from her life and work, the rest – the almost twenty-five years spanning Mike and Ann's separation and Eleanor's death – conflated into one final act for the artist, performed largely in silence

and in shadow. Diaries and letters, family photographs, Eric's private and public remarks, Eleanor's reams and reams of failed attempts at reconnecting with her writing all resonate with a deep desolation. The illusion of a 'world-proof-life' had finally been exploded. There had been, after all, no such thing. Only the resources – and the good fortune – to sustain it for a time.

In an earlier (academic) biography of Eleanor Dark a decade ago, I decided to end my story of her life with the death of her art. I recall my urgency, my impatience to draw her story to a close. A few brief paragraphs bridged the last twenty-five years of Eleanor's life, the quarter of a century between the publication of *Lantana Lane* in 1959 and her death in 1985. I did so out of an overwhelming instinct to protect a Museless Eleanor – a naked artist – from the intruding gaze of posterity, to shield her and her barren decades as an artist from the public eye. Time and personal circumstances had ravaged her creativity and she lay bare and exposed. This was no temporary writer's block, though it may have felt so at times. This was artistic paralysis. And in the end, artistic death. The sun had settled on Eleanor Dark's creative imagination. I wanted to give the dead artist a dignified private burial. And I still do.

For the historian, the issue of periodisation – the timelines we draw around our subjects, our themes, our issues – is always a challenging one. For in drawing those lines and creating a 'period' we are making fundamental statements about relevance and significance, about focus, coherence and argument. My timeline of Eleanor's life was premised on the artist and embraced two complementary halves: the formative years when her writing was 'brewing,' and the active years when, through her published novels and shorter pieces, her art was consummated. Conceptually too there were two concurrent halves: the development of her art (and through it, her personal and professional bonds with fellow writers in the little company) and the erection and fortification of her world-proof life, the fortress existence which neither the Depression, nor the Second World War, nor even the outbreak of the Cold War could topple. The logic of this approach to periodisation makes it easier for me to conclude her biography with the twin deaths of her art and her 'world-proof life.' The rest was personal and should be left private.

The lines we draw between the human and the divine spark can often be too blunt and prescriptive. In the case of Eleanor Dark, we see their interdependence and ultimately their common fate. But it was the human that fed the divine in Eleanor Dark, not the other way around. And when the fortress existence that had sustained the human collapsed, nothing was left to house the divine spark. The fact that over time her art

became captive to that life remains a fact – a sad and central fact – in the story of Eleanor Dark’s writing.

But as I gaze into the prism of Eleanor Dark one last time, the refractions I see are not of the sad matriarch of a fractured divided family, but of the writer in her moments of splendour and, certainly in the case of *Prelude of Christopher*, of artistic genius. The character of Linda Hendon belongs amongst the gallery of classic Australian fictional characters; her story amongst the finest of Australian literature. *The Timeless Land* – well over half a century since its conception – remains an urgently contemporary story of unresolved conflict: between the clash of civilizations of the original inhabitants and the waves of intruders into their culture and their land; between the human instinct to respect and to ravish the environment that sustains us on this continent; between the noble vision and the awful deeds of Dark’s Governor Philip, the Individual of a New Order and the King’s faithful servant all in one; between a society-in-crisis – and at war – threatened by forces from without and within, and the struggles of its citizens to protect precious civil liberties in the midst of growing alarm and distrust. *The Timeless Land* remains in urgent dialogue with Australians of the New Millennium.

Ultimately, Eleanor Dark’s legacy is the peculiar kind of humanism that lies embedded in the best of her literature. Animated by pessimism – never optimism – it assumes and respects the forces of darkness, and celebrates the hard-won triumphs of those who dare to confront them. In this sense, it draws on quintessentially Australian literary and historical themes of the unequal struggles humans wage against nature, against fate, against officialdom, against themselves, and where the only triumph to be extracted resides in the acceptance of the struggle itself and the means employed to delay or mitigate the inevitable. We see this in her most tragic and lighthearted characters and stories where victory is *moral* victory and lies precisely in accepting the harsh realities of life with dignity and resolve.

Eleanor Dark valued and celebrated human agency even – or perhaps especially – in the face of impossible odds. From Linda Hendon in *Prelude to Christopher* to the farming community in *Lantana Lane*, Dark’s heroes are tragic heroes whose compelling force is to face squarely the terrible fate that awaits them. Dark was no romantic writer, as Marjorie Barnard once described her. Not in the conventional sense. She was romantic only in the moral conviction she invested in the glory of confronting tragedy – the inevitable human tragedy. And in so doing, she transcended that tragedy. That these were two of her best novels is no coincidence. Dark wrote best from personal experience of the human

drama. In the mental agonies that lead Linda to place herself in the way of an oncoming train, no less so than in the farmers' vigil of passive resistance against the forces of 'progress' that would eventually destroy their lives and their community, Eleanor Dark was inscribing her own life's sorrows and regrets. And her conviction that the key to individual redemption lay in a full communion with life's dark forces.

Eleanor Dark died on 11 September 1985 after a long painful battle with osteoporosis. Eric, by now well into his nineties,¹ nursed her spirits and body to the end with the usual devotion. He offered these remarks in an interview a year before her death:

She's been married to me now for 62 years, and all that time she's been looking after me. And now she feels guilty that I have to look after her for just a year or so! She looked after me for 62 years.²

Older even than her ties with Eric were her ties with the world of literature and the artist. Pixie O'Reilly's favourite toy evolved through the years into many different and often contradictory things, as did the writer herself. Its last function, it appears, was to comfort her, as bedridden and desperately ill she turned to Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality' 'to refresh her memory.'³

¹ Eric died on 27 July 1987.

² Giuffré, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

³ *Ibid*, p. 107.

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This study is based principally upon Dark's private papers, including those in major public collections and those still held by her family. It makes extensive use of a wide range of primary sources, conversations with Dr Eric Payten Dark, Michael and John Dark and other family and friends, and visits to her trio of homes, 'Varuna' in Katoomba, 'Jerrikellimi,' the family cave in the Blue Mountains, and 'Bopplenut' in Montville, Queensland. The centrepiece of these sources is composed of Dark's two public collections of papers. The major collection of these papers – ML MSS 4545 – was bequeathed to the Mitchell Library by Eleanor Dark in 1985. These papers comprise some twenty-five boxes. They include personal and business letters, diaries, unpublished essays, drafts of poems, short stories, plays and novels (also often unpublished), manuscripts of her published novels, review and other newspaper cuttings, photographs, notes and letters relating to family histories. The National Library of Australia holds a smaller collection of her papers, NLA MS 4998. It consists of newspaper clippings (mainly reviews of her novels), and personal correspondence with a number of prominent Australian literary figures of the period.

This study also makes extensive use of other collections of papers belonging to writers of the little company and contemporaries elsewhere in Australian literary and intellectual society, and brings them into dialogue with Dark's, and with the broader context they shared.

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