

Frank Bongiorno review of:

Sylvia Martin, *Ink in Her Veins: The Troubled Life of Aileen Palmer*

(Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2016), 350 pp., PB \$29.99, ISBN 9781742588254

It could be hard being a Palmer. In their times, they were Australia's most famous literary family. Vance, best known as a novelist, was widely respected in his day, if now largely unread and forgotten by all but literary scholars and cultural historians. Nettie, his wife, was a Higgins, the niece of the Arbitration Court president and creator of the Harvester Judgement that enshrined the concept of a national living wage. She was a poet, more often a literary critic, a regular contributor to the press, and the author of histories and biographies.

The Palmers had two daughters. The younger of them, Helen, made a career in Sydney as a teacher, author of children's books and educational texts, and left-wing editor. She wrote the words of the 'The Ballad of 1891', which featured in the 1950s musical *Reedy River*. Through the journal *Outlook*, she contributed something to the intellectual reckoning that came for the left after 1956 with the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising and Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Helen was the rational, no-nonsense, sensible one. It was telling that she made a life for herself away from Melbourne, where the family occupied a venerable place in left-wing political and literary circles. She was close to her father, whose success as a novelist many critics thought hindered by the lack of emotion in his characters.

Sylvia Martin, with her fine reputation as a biographer of neglected but fascinating Australian literary women, has produced a superb biography of the Palmers' elder daughter, Aileen. I recall coming across Aileen's name, from time to time, as I worked through the Palmer Papers in the National Library 20 years ago. In particular, there was a 1948 letter from Edith Young, a friend of the Palmers living in Britain, that discussed Aileen's experience of life in Spain in the civil war and in London during the Blitz. A reply to a letter from Vance, the occasion of the correspondence was Aileen's mental breakdown in Melbourne, a critical moment in her life as Martin shows, and one that presaged years spent in and out of institutions in her home town. The letter—clearly the product of an author familiar with psychoanalysis—also frankly discussed Aileen's gender and sexual ambiguities: 'she early made an emotional transference from the feminine to the masculine role' (p. 243).

I remember, at the time I first read it, wondering what family life would be like for a young woman such as Aileen—she was still only 33—having her life analysed in this way in a friend’s correspondence with her father. Martin provides an eloquent answer in this book. The Palmer family was close, loving and claustrophobic. The unkind might suggest that while Aileen was living in London, Vance and Nettie drew on their substantial expatriate network as if it were a spy network. But Martin is not unkind, and the allegation would be unfair. They were loving parents who worried over their brilliant, troubled daughter’s safety and well-being during a time of war.

She gave them plenty to worry about. Vance and Nettie believed in the power of words to change the world. Aileen criticised her mother on this account, writing: ‘No basis for tacit understanding had ever grown up between Nora [Nettie] and me. She has always had a passion for verbalising everything. It is almost as though nothing exists for her until it has been put into words’ (p. 21). Aileen inherited that reverence for the written word—as well as remarkable facility with language—but she decided to give the world a push along.

Aileen is perhaps best known to historians for her role as an Australian volunteer on the Republican side in Spain during the civil war, in which she worked as a nurse and interpreter. Martin provides a vivid account of these years, which Aileen regarded as the best of her life. She suggests, however, that Aileen’s experience in Spain might have left a legacy of post-traumatic stress disorder, as we would call it now.

Seemingly fearless in the face of danger—and there was plenty of danger to go around—she had great difficulty finding a place for herself in postwar Melbourne. How banal it must have seemed to a woman who had for years been at the centre of things, in the front line of the struggle against the fascists! A woman who, with a friend, had been arrested and fined for throwing red paint over the doorstep of 10 Downing Street to protest appeasement now found herself, after the war, back in what she called the ‘[w]orld of comfortable, cushioned people, stuffed men’ (p. 219).

She was also back at home, living with her parents. From her childhood, Aileen had filled exercise books with stories, writings that were lovingly shared within the family. But the great novel never came, despite much effort over many years. On her return to Melbourne, as she explained, ‘my contacts with people didn’t give me the required stimulus for bringing the drama of my past to life’ (p. 220).

At the heart of the book, and this failure, is Aileen’s loving but fraught relationship with the intense, somewhat humourless Nettie. ‘Aileen’, says Martin, ‘recognised how alike she and Nettie were, not in their “good qualities” but “weaknesses”’ (p. 237). Both had in their own way ‘led very disciplined lives at one time or another’, Aileen reflected, ‘and yet find self-discipline extremely hard: we have scattered minds,

with farflung contacts and interests, and find construction on any scale very hard' (p. 238). She felt protective of her mother, yet could also compare her with Medea, 'gobbling up her own children' (p. 263). And to add to the sense of ambivalence, she felt guilty that her own birth had prevented Nettie from developing her career as a poet, while recognising that puritanism was at the heart of Nettie's own literary failure, as Aileen saw it.

The book's title comes from a reflection by Nettie in a letter to her own mother, at a time when she had decided to put motherhood of Aileen ahead of her poetry. 'I don't want ink to run in Aileen's veins', she said (p. 35). But there was fat chance of that not happening in a household such as the Palmers'. The wider world of her parents was dominated by progressive literary types, and Aileen herself became a teenage communist. Vance and Nettie also moved around: Melbourne, Emerald in Victoria's Dandenongs, Caloundra on Queensland's Sunshine Coast and Catalonia in Spain. The shy and nervy Aileen came with them, but she wanted a 'firm house' (p. 44) that her parents seemed unwilling to give her.

Aileen shone at school, eventually attending Presbyterian Ladies College—like Nettie before her—where she developed a romantic attachment to a Miss Hutton, the French teacher. It is hardly surprising that Aileen would have so admired Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom*, set in that very school, with its depiction of Laura's crush on Evelyn. Nettie helpfully invited Miss Hutton home and even more helpfully lent her a copy of *The Getting of Wisdom*, which was pointedly unavailable in the PLC library. Vance merely teased Aileen about an advertisement he'd seen for Hutton's Pork.

Studying literature and languages at the University of Melbourne gave her a substitute family of sorts, 'the Mob', with its bohemian relationships between young women and secret understandings and codes. Aileen combined this activity with wider left-wing political associations at a time when the world seemed headed for disaster. Her family was encouraging of her activities, if often worried by the almost manic way in which she threw herself into political activity in competition with her studies. But there were first-class honours for her thesis on Proust. No one seemed to doubt her talent or promise.

The dutiful daughter, who buried herself in her own writing late into the night, typed up her parents' work with efficiency and, later in life, cared for her ageing mother, could be exasperating. But after the war, Aileen was wounded by her mother's growing indifference to her creative work. As Nettie's own health deteriorated, it becomes fairly obvious that she increasingly detached herself, calling on Helen in Sydney for assistance in dealing with Aileen's difficulties and, until his death in 1959, relying on Vance as family diplomat. Vance himself had a much-loved brother, Wob,

who spent most of his life in an asylum in Queensland. It seems likely that this was not only a source of family shame, but of worry about inherited instability, especially as Aileen's declining mental health became such a concern to the Palmers.

But while this story has powerful tragic dimensions—the account of the insulin-glucose and electroconvulsive therapy that Aileen endured in Melbourne institutions is particularly harrowing—it is less a story of failure than an act of recovery and reconstruction. Martin insightfully and respectfully surveys Aileen's published and unpublished writings, the draft novels as well as the fragments of memoir and the poetry that increasingly became Aileen's preferred genre, and were disliked by her family because so bound up in their minds with in her mental illness, drinking and instability. But the extracts selected from her oeuvre for inclusion in the text clearly suggest a woman of considerable talent.

There is much in this book of interest to practitioners of the biographer's art. Martin's use of Aileen's manuscript writings is, as already hinted, deft and intelligent. There is a restraint in much of the prose; not in the sense of an author being unwilling to chance her arm, but one who recognises the sheer complexity of her subject and the dangers of over-analysis.

Nor is Martin herself prone to wandering into the story. The biographer clearly wants to ensure that a woman who lived in the shadow of a dominant family is not, on this occasion, overshadowed by a biographer insistent on playing their part in the story as detective or psychoanalyst. Martin occasionally records her responses to evidence, such as a 1966 rejection letter from the Commonwealth Literary Fund, preserved in Palmer's papers but torn in two. But she keeps a dignified distance at other times and, as one of the most intelligent and sensitive Australian writers on love between women, she deals with Palmer's romantic and sexual life with the insight and sensitivity one would expect. There are also some beautifully executed passages on many of the photographs presented in the book's plates, which are allowed to do just the right amount of biographical work that photos of this kind should do. They are not, in this manner, merely decorative or add-ons but integral to Martin's reading of Aileen's life.

The key photograph, perhaps, is one of Vance and Nettie at Ardmore, the home of Nettie's family in Kew that became the Palmers' and eventually, for a time, of Aileen's herself. Vance and Nettie, grey-haired literary elders by this time, probably around 1950, are standing in front of a portrait of Aileen, painted in London by Madge Hodges just before the war. In the painting, Aileen is a woman of the world, cigarette in hand, short hair, a model of poise and sophistication—and, of course, a contrast to the life that was by then unravelling in Melbourne (the photo would have been taken shortly after her first breakdown).

Martin discusses the photo at the beginning her book. But it is there again near the end, where she quotes Guido Baracchi, an old family friend, writing to Aileen that the painting, which he saw whenever visiting Vance and Nettie, ‘spoke poignantly to me about you’ (p. 275). The painting also figures in the biography’s afterlife. Martin was unable to locate it during her research but, after publication, she received an email from a woman who had known Aileen through the Kew branch of the Communist Party. Her father, a lawyer, had befriended Aileen; she had bought the painting from Aileen when she was selling Ardmore in the 1970s and it was still on the wall of her home. As Martin has since commented, ‘Looking at the lost portrait in full colour hanging in the company of this friend, a member of the party she devoted her life to, it struck me that Aileen had finally moved beyond the shadow of her parents into the light’.¹

This is a meticulously published biography, in many ways made possible by Aileen’s own work in preserving the Palmer Papers, one of the great collections in the National Library of Australia, a treasure trove of material on Australian literary life. Tellingly, she thought it should include manuscripts from members of the entire family, not only Vance and Nettie. Martin has also travelled to the key sites in Aileen’s life in Spain and England.

There is a lovely image at the beginning of the book, of Martin finding one of Aileen’s Spanish civil war poems ‘being given a stirring reading in Spanish by a bearded young man on a YouTube video’ (p. 3). There is also something stirring about the thought of Aileen Palmer living on archivally in this manner, with the internet and digital technology making her words accessible to people who will never go anywhere near the Palmer Papers, Aileen’s small body of published work or, indeed, this fine biography. Here is something for biographers to contemplate: that their subjects live ghostly lives, in a range of surprising ways, long beyond their death. We have long known of the biographical afterlife. But the traces of those lives can now be witnessed with a few clicks on the computer. That has implications for biographers narrating lives, but also for readers who, with little effort, can now move quickly beyond the judgements of the biographer and the materials of the biography. Sylvia Martin’s *Ink in Her Veins* is perfectly pitched for such times.

1 Sylvia Martin, ‘The Lost Portrait’, *Inside Story*, 23 April 2018, insidestory.org.au/the-lost-portrait/.

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