

## Emily Gallagher review of Cathy Perkins, *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*

(Clayton, Vic.: Monash University Publishing, 2019), 285 pp., PB \$29.95, ISBN 9781925835533

Cathy Perkins's *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross* begins with a scene not unfamiliar to readers of Australian literary history: a 'little schoolgirl' scribbling away on the 'splintery verandah' of her family's bush home. According to family lore, the nine-year-old had been destined for the inky way long before she gripped her first pencil. An ode was written soon after her birth foretelling her career as a writer, and when the poet Mary Hannay Foott met the two-year-old in 1892 she was impressed to discover the youngster could compose rhymes.

Mary Cross, unlike Foott, was not surprised by her daughter's talents, believing the time she had spent reading during the pregnancy had endowed her child with literary gifts. She had not been short on reading material—the Cross's finely furnished Victorian home at Eagle Farm on the fringes of Brisbane had a 'magnificent collection of high-class literature' (p. 7). Such luxuries would soon be a distant memory to Mary after her husband's auctioneering business collapsed in 1892. In a cruel twist of fate, the young couple watched as the entire contents of their house, including their library, were sold at auction.

So it was that Zora Cross, too young to remember her parents' fall from Queensland's rising gentry, grew up in the shadow of destiny and misfortune. For Perkins, an editor and debut biographer, Cross's 'irrepressible hunger to write' is one of the central threads she uses to weave together the story of her life. Misfortune is another. Cross was barely 12 years old when she experienced the loss of a home first hand. In a 'chatty' letter posted to Ethel Turner as the editor of the *Australian Town and Country Journal's* 'Children's Corner' in 1904, 13-year-old Cross—who, by this stage, was already showing the hallmarks of a talented storyteller—reported that the family home had been destroyed in a terrible fire almost two years earlier. The Crosses built their new home within a stone's throw of the 'black and charred stump' that marked their old hardwood house.

Yet despite the misfortune and hardship that would continue to plague her family, the 'Zora Cross' of the children's corner was a practical Australian girl. Jolly and inquisitive, she preferred apples to pineapples, was crafty with a little bit of wool and ribbon, learned in local and family history, and comfortable sipping at a bowl of tasty 'kangaroo-tail soup' (p. 15). She was also enticed by the prospect of adventure.

By the time Cross finally arrived at Ethel Turner's leafy doorstep in Middle Harbour at Balmoral in 1908, the 'little schoolgirl' from 'Pie Creek' who had first written to her at the 'Children's Corner' all those years ago was fading away. Vivacious and independent, Cross's mind was bursting with stories and questions, her zest for life leaking seamlessly onto the page. As Turner astutely observed: 'your stories and letters gallop away with you' (p. 25). Cross's first literary efforts beyond the children's corner were 'snatched in moments' after a long day teaching or performing (p. 29). Though Cross initially trained as a primary school teacher, she quickly became disillusioned with the demands of modern education. Life as a touring actress, on the other hand, indulged her dramatic side and equipped her with a wealth of new experiences. (Much of Cross's later work had an autobiographical dimension.) As Perkins observes, Cross's time performing vaudeville was also essential to the development of a 'stage speak' and literary identity that she would later harness to woo publishers and editors. One journalist stumbling on Cross in the streets described her as 'terrific with energy' (p. 45). The Sydney editor and critic Bertram Stevens considered her a poet with a 'highly emotional nature, enriched by a varied experience of life' (p. 52) and the writer Dulcie Deamer pitied her for being "all heart", and therefore a person without armour' (p. 177). Deamer, a bohemian herself, must have admired Cross's disdain for convention.

Young, talented and impressionable, Cross was part of a new generation of women writers beginning to take shape in Sydney under the watchful eye of Mary Gilmore. Born in the later years of the nineteenth century, women such as Deamer, Vera Dwyer, Dorothea Mackellar, Nina Murdoch, Ruth Bedford, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Ella McFadyen were seen by some contemporaries as heirs to the decidedly more masculine literary fervour of the 1890s. Until now, none of these women have been dedicated a book-length study, not even Mackellar, whose patriotic poem 'My Country' has had an enduring place in popular culture for over a century. Cross, not unlike Mackellar and Prichard, has not been entirely 'left out' of Australian literary history, but she has—as Perkins demonstrates—been too quickly dismissed.

Cross's neglect has surprised a good number of reviewers. It will not, however, surprise many Australian biographers. Cross belongs to a cohort of women writers—poets, playwrights, novelists, editors and journalists—who, in another time and place, might have had a statue built in their memory. Rather remarkably, in the mid-1980s it was a horserace that was given over to Cross's memory. 'It's lucky Zora Cross can't object,' wrote Judith Wright, 'and since nobody remembers the poor woman, the good name of Poetry can't be involved' (p. 87).

Serendipity and happenstance have so far played a significant role in uncovering the lives of Australia's 'lost' women writers. Perkins's first 'encounter' with Cross, in the basement of the Mitchell Library in Sydney where she was checking a reference relating to the Australian publisher George Robertson, is a fine example. It is

a meeting of chance, albeit one that propelled her on a decade-long journey to uncover the woman behind the name. ‘History will find me’, Cross once assured her daughter (p. 243). That historians have not ‘found’ Cross earlier—at least not with comparable depth—reflects the masculinist traditions of national history, as well as the priorities of an earlier generation of feminist historians. When historians first set out to recover the lives of Australian women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, they were often drawn to the extraordinary lives—or, at the very least, the extraordinary in the lives—of women such as Gilmore, Mary Fullerton and Miles Franklin. These women, who exuded the nineteenth century and could be celebrated as mothers of Australian literature, seemed to write themselves into history. The legacy of the so-called ‘minor poets’ was messier, more eclectic and very often haunted by the ordinary.

Perkins is sensitive to the way Cross’s identity as a woman, as well as a lover, wife and mother, shaped her personal and professional life. Although she resisted the demands of domestic life in her early 20s, she eventually surrendered to the ‘stability’ of the home. In telling Cross’s story, however, Perkins has sought to resist a narrative that envisages her as retreating into domesticity, instead shining a light on the grit and determination of a woman who never stopped scribbling. After giving birth to a son outside of wedlock, she left the baby with her parents in Gympie and travelled to Brisbane where she opened an elocution and theatre studio, edited a weekly arts newspaper and pursued her career as a writer. As the horror of World War II entered its deadliest year, Cross entertained on the vaudeville stage and compiled the first collection of love sonnets that would propel her into fame. And in 1918, plagued by rheumatism, chicken pox and eye infections, and living in the same house as her young son and dying father, she began the second volume.

By her own account, the effort almost killed her. When it didn’t, she kept on writing. She was ‘compelled’, observes Perkins, “‘by a bullying muse’ to keep writing, to “just go on and on until it was finished”, ignoring hunger, tiredness, children and visitors’ (p. 48). In a letter to a friend in late 1916, Cross admitted: ‘I am determined to get on with my writing and push everything else aside’ (p. 57). Her youngest daughter remembered her mother ‘as a dedicated writer who worked all day and every day of her life’ (p. xii). Cross’s resolve was remarkable. For a moment, critics wondered if this really was the woman who would finally write the Great Australian Novel or an epic to stand alongside Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*.

Over 100 years on, it is Cross’s first collection of love sonnets, *Songs of Love and Life* (1917), that has endured. This was an astonishing collection by an Australian writer. Drawing on both classical and Shakespearean themes, the sonnets were works of serious lyrical power and poetic vision, portraying women as sexual beings with their own fantasies and desires. Most readers recognised Cross’s work as a tribute to a woman who had already ‘lived and loved’ (p. 69). Several reviewers even celebrated Cross as an ‘Australian Sappho’, admiring her candour. The writer and

critic Nettie Palmer echoed Turner when she wrote that Cross ‘had genuine artistic abandon’, but ‘not the corresponding restraint’ (p. 85). On the other hand, the artist Norman Lindsay, notorious for his conservative views, was repelled by the sonnets. He considered them ‘ludicrous’, and only reluctantly agreed to produce a single cover illustration after a lucrative commission (p. 61).

For Cross, *Songs of Love and Life* seemed a sign of greater things to come. Perkins, too, recognises the acclaimed love sonnets that carried Cross into the spotlight as part of a large and evolving literary oeuvre. Like many of her contemporaries, Cross was a versatile writer. Later works such as *An Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy* (1921) and *Daughters of the Seven Mile* (1924) received favourable reviews. Although neither had the same sensational success as her sonnets, they bore little evidence of a writer in decline. Elsewhere the name ‘Zora Cross’ was still appearing regularly in popular newspapers and literary magazines. In the *Australian Women’s Mirror*, a successful sister publication to the waning *Bulletin*, Cross used her skills as an interviewer and reporter to celebrate the lives of Australian women writers. Women, young and old, benefited from Cross’s advocacy. The work with the *Mirror* also allowed Cross to strengthen her connection with the Australian literary community. After she began her relationship with the *Bulletin*’s ‘Red Page’ editor and poet David McKee Wright in 1918—a man 20 years her senior and already married with four children—Cross had retreated from the wider community of women writers. Following Wright’s sudden death in 1928, the comradery and busyness of journalism gave her a sense of ‘solace’—and perhaps also a new purpose (p. 174).

Ever since Cross published her first collection of sonnets, her place in the Australian literary canon has been the subject of debate. Before their association soured in the mid-1920s, the enterprising bookseller and publisher George Robertson considered her the ‘greatest woman poet’ alive (p. 87). Though Robertson’s views would change in time, Cross was evidently not a run-of-the-mill girl poet. Her contemporaries and subsequent generations of feminist and literary historians all agree that her sonnets were daring, even subversive. Unfortunately, however, Cross never managed to write anything quite so daring again. Eventually, as the prospect of another sensation faded, even Cross’s most energetic supporters would consider their early faith in her a mere ‘lapse of taste’ (p. 86). It is perhaps not surprising that Perkins has largely avoided questions of legacy in her biography. The more explicit claims she explored in her master’s thesis have been tempered, enveloped in a narrative that is grounded in Cross’s lived experiences. The reception of Cross’s work by contemporaries is often discussed, but her place in Australian literary history is usually only hinted, suggested and alluded to. Perkins’s restraint is both admirable and frustrating. Strangely enough, what it seems to suggest is that the least interesting part of Cross’s life is her ‘shelf life’. Instead of reaching for the controversial or extraordinary, Perkins has chosen to linger over the ordinary, pulling away the curtain on tragedy, hardship and personal struggle.

In *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*, Perkins has set out to write a traditional, albeit brief, 'cradle to grave' biography, diverging only slightly to structure chapters around circles of correspondence. These circles, each of which adopts its own individual time-loop, are propelled by Perkins's archival encounters, affording readers an occasional glimpse of the biographer's craft. They also serve to position Cross within the wider literary world of her time, while simultaneously distinguishing her from other big personalities.

Although Cross's story is arranged around relationships, the portrait that emerges is a lonely one. No other personality seriously competes for the reader's attention. The continuity in this biography is Zora Cross, not Ethel Turner, Mary Gilmore, George Robertson or David McKee Wright. Cross's loneliness is evoked elsewhere, particularly in Chapter 6 where Perkins charts the poet's relationship with Rebecca Wiley, an assistant to Robertson. Though Cross's writing remains front and centre, in the background the furniture begins to change: the writer settles into her relationship with Wright, moving to a 5-acre property at Glenbrook in the Lower Blue Mountains. Wright's alcoholism, poverty, chores and children soon disrupt the couple's idyll writing retreat, though they remain steadfast until Wright's sudden death in 1928. There is an intensity to Cross's bond with Wiley, free from the 'stage speak' that overshadows her other correspondence and heightened by her isolation at Glenbrook, that is both alluring and suffocating. It is this latter dimension of Cross's character that Perkins struggles to negotiate. As a biographer, she is protective of her subject, and offers a sympathetic reading of the writer as she slips slowly into obscurity.

Writers, certainly the great ones, often seem to dally on the precipice between self-discipline and obsession. For many modern writers, Cross's career is as a cautionary tale of the dangers of perfectionism, passion and isolation. Following Wright's death, the feverish determination that had defined so much of Cross's life slid into obsession as her long-standing passion for ancient 'Rome became the primary exercise in mourning' (p. 196). Relying on a meagre literary pension and freelance journalism to sustain her family, the ageing writer poured her energy into a multi-volume work of historical fiction. Like her work with the *Mirror*, the trilogy helped to give her a new sense of purpose. It also consumed the next three decades of her career. 'I never leave Rome', she wrote in a letter to a friend in 1930 (p. 204). Perkins is careful not to allow Rome to consume her work as it did Cross's, quickening the narrative as she reaches the end. At the same time, the dark and dramatic intensity that readers glimpsed elsewhere in the biography seems to slip through Perkins's fingers. At a moment when readers might have expected Perkins to turn inwards towards Cross and Glenbrook—perhaps even to her youngest daughter April—she turns outwards. The Zora Cross that emerges in the last chapter of this biography is positioned within the contemporary literary hierarchy, as an admirer and beneficiary of the benevolent Mary Gilmore.

The success of Gilmore's later life jars with Cross's. While Gilmore is arranging her papers for posterity, Cross is comforting her 22-year-old daughter as she dies painfully of tuberculosis. She supports her eldest son after he is injured at war, delays arranging her papers, suffers severe economic hardship and struggles to find a publisher for her Rome trilogy. Then, in 1957, on the back of these challenges, the 65-year-old courageously embarks on a two-year long trip to Europe to finish her books and secure a publisher in London.

It is here, on this rather heroic note, that Perkins chooses to draw the story to an end. Readers are given a fleeting glimpse of Cross in old age before they are told of her sudden death in 1964. As misguided as Cross might have been in her Rome project, those eight final years of her life deserved more attention. This was a woman who had, by her own account, lived a life filled with 'lies and hopeless mistakes' (p. 50). What mistakes, lies and regrets haunted her? How did the 'specific loneliness of Zora Cross' (p. 126)—as Perkins terms it—plague the writer at the end of her life? How did her relationship with her children and grandchildren evolve? Did she despair at the prospect of death?

Perkins leaves these questions largely unanswered, though she pauses momentarily to consider the question of legacy. In the epigraph, readers wander with Perkins to the 'a simple unmarked rectangle of buffalo grass' in Emu Plains cemetery (p. 241); they climb a steep path to Glenbrook to find a missing sculpture; and they drink tea with Cross's youngest daughter April, now 94 years old, gazing out over the national park as Cross once did. It is a clever ending. With these final scenes, Perkins leaves readers to despair at the poet's diminished place in national memory and rejoice at her rediscovery.

An eloquent, accessible and tender biography, *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross* is an important contribution to Australian literary history. Perkins brings a sensitive and sympathetic eye to her subject, uncovering a woman of captivating depth, strength and intensity whose life was shaped by an 'irrepressible hunger to write and to be published'. It is a fitting tribute to Cross's life and career, and one that she might very well have commended. 'Life does not flow', wrote Cross in a letter to her son Ted in 1944. 'It moves in circles which time throws off like chapters in a book' (p. 229).

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:  
*No. 5, 2021*, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National  
University, Canberra, Australia.