

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

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Ink in Her Veins is the first book-length biography of Aileen Palmer: poet, socialist and daughter to Australia's most renowned literary couple, Nettie and Vance Palmer. Sylvia Martin has written a precise, penetrating but humane account of Palmer's life. She has carefully gathered and drawn on evidence for her claims, speculating in a reasoned way when sources are scant. She has fulfilled the biographer's brief. Beyond this, the book asks big questions about the biographical endeavour, principally whether a life lived around the margins – albeit the margins of cultural, intellectual and political centres – is a life worth telling.

At first blush, it is hard to imagine this book without Nettie and Vance's profile, a faintly tragic situation that underscores, arguably furthers, the calamitous aspects of Aileen's life. And yet as the pages roll, one understands what Martin must have early on. Aileen's contingency, her marginality, even what might be deemed her failure, gives the biographer a unique position from which to recover the past.

Ink in Her Veins gets at hard-to-reach history: intimate and difficult family relations, lesbian relationships, unfinished art, political activism, and mental ill-health. More than this, as gender scholars including Martin have shown, history told from the margins reveals much about the centre, in this case the life of Nettie Palmer. What separates Aileen from Nettie is more opaque the closer one looks. Martin's carefully evidenced analysis shows that it might be summed up by a rather unscientific notion: fortune.

Happenstance is where Martin begins, explaining how Nettie and Vance first

met at the Melbourne Public Library when Vance was on a visit from London. Their lengthy engagement played out in ink (what else?) as Vance sought to cement his writing career in Europe and Nettie Higgins remained the dutiful daughter of Melbourne Baptists. Aileen's mental breakdown is foreshadowed by that of Vance's brother during this period and presents the possibility that Aileen's was inherited. This allows Martin to gently establish one of the book's guiding questions: how much of Aileen's life was predetermined? What ran through her veins?

What becomes clear in these early chapters, as we follow Nettie and Vance's working honeymoon in Brittany, their life in war-time London (during which Aileen was born), and their return to Australia, living on the outskirts of Melbourne, is just how enlivening of Aileen's story is the vast archive of Nettie and Vance's correspondence, diaries and creative work. There must rarely have been a more intimately documented life.

For much of Nettie's writing takes place in the most intimate and searching of registers, where psychological notions couch the day's events; where emotional landscapes are relayed as casually as breakfast. When the young Aileen invents fairy stories, dreams or speaks, her mother takes note and analyses. This material produces two stories: the young subject's, as well as her mother's apprehension. Well-selected ancillary material, in the form of friends' correspondence and diary entries (these people spent *time* at the typewriter) substantiates what Martin deftly shows. Katharine Susannah Prichard, when recalling Nettie's distressed state of mind while pregnant with Aileen, wondered later whether it produced Aileen's 'intensely sensitive repressed emotion to people and affairs'.

From such a closely examined upbringing the teenage Aileen emerges triumphant, for she happily assumes the emotionally dense writing life, contemplating her mother in her diary, for instance, which Nettie (openly) reads, and considers in her own diary. It's fantastic material for the biographer and Martin enriches it by explaining the protocols of time, place and family that give this material its particular meaning. At thirteen, after the family move to Caloundra, north of Brisbane, Aileen writes her first autobiography. By then she had written several novels, and it is clear from Martin's quotation of these texts that the young Aileen was a clear and imaginative writer.

Nettie and Vance's relationship is cast here from a new angle. While it is clear Nettie does much of the domesticating and parenting that enables Vance's career, and imperils her own, it is hard to see Nettie doing anything other, such as the fascination she held for her children, family members, friends, and even acquaintances such as Henry Handel Richardson, who turned out not to like her very much. Vance's principal advantage over his wife appears to be the

singularity of his focus; less positively, his emotional detachment. Nettie was drawn to people and her support for writers, as a critic and correspondent, made a professional sense of this personal inclination. Nonetheless, Nettie's unrealised creativity hangs like a threat over Aileen's life.

From Martin's account of Aileen's three years at Melbourne's Presbyterian Ladies' College (PLC), Aileen appears in a hurry to become the writer, linguist, and feminist her mother wished she had been. The shadow of Richardson, whose *The Getting of Wisdom* took place at PLC, and which Aileen feverishly reads, would 'both haunt and inspire'. Nettie shared afternoon teas with Richardson's Melbourne confidant, Mary Kernot, while Vance spent time with Richardson herself in London. Martin draws expertly on the Kernot–Richardson correspondence as though she is a movie director with access to multiple cameras, narrating encounters from different perspectives. First she presents Nettie's upbeat vantage, then Kernot's bitchy one, finishing with Richardson's patronising nutshell.

At the University of Melbourne, while majoring in French and German languages and literature, Aileen became attached to 'the Mob', a group of women who believe in 'spontaneity, free love and a worship of trees'. Martin compares Aileen's diaries from this period with others involved in the Mob, speculating on their frequent use of codes. It seems clear that the women engaged in what Martin calls 'gentle sexual experimentation' alongside poetry readings, diary sharing and extended flirtation.

As Martin shows, Aileen had at PLC begun using pseudonyms for women she felt intensely about, fully conscious that her mother would have disapproved. A sad, darker tone enters the book, and Aileen's life seems to head towards confusion, shame and mental deterioration. Martin explains that Aileen used an arsenal of names for people and places, confusing herself at times. Faced with a large, chaotic archive of fictional and autobiographical fragments, Martin has sought to disentangle reality from fiction, to pin down sequence and meaning. In a rare aside the biographer confides: 'sometimes I have felt that working on Aileen Palmer's autobiographical writing . . . is a little like entering a hall of mirrors where nothing is quite what it seems'.

Aileen's career as a volunteer translator and triage nurse in the Spanish Civil War illuminates vividly the emotions of war and the idealism that can propel great physical feats. Travelling to Spain with the British Medical Aid Unit, Aileen became a stalwart senior member of her team. Comrades – for volunteers were mostly of the Party – recalled that, as a worker and a colleague, Aileen 'didn't know how good she was'. Privately she suffered. Long months in Spain were relieved by short trips to London. Worryingly, during one such

visit, she reflected to Nettie: 'I begin to feel that life in Spain is in many ways more comfortable mentally'. It was better to be involved than to watch from afar the 'world going up in flames'.

After Spain, and still in her mid twenties, Aileen came under pressure from her parents to return to Australia. As another war took hold she determined to stay in London, to 'try and be useful', believing that the Spanish experience had developed in her a mental 'toughness'. Hindsight refracts Aileen's use of that word. From here, what she identified as coping looks like repressed trauma. Through the London Blitz, Aileen drove ambulances, engaged in fractious love affairs, and attempted to complete her novel. Martin depicts a period of increased mental unravelling that is ultimately postponed until her return to Melbourne, where years of psychiatric treatment ensue.

From this post-war life chaotic and sometimes sublime poetry emerged. (Some of this, the reader is consoled to learn from Martin, has since been used in memorials associated with the Spanish Civil War). Though Aileen knew the damage her time in Spain had caused her, Spain remained the 'highlight of her life'. As a portrait of PTSD Martin's book is sensitive and illuminating. One wonders whether, if its biographical subject were part of the Australian Defence Forces, fighting on another front, the book would have generated much wider attention. It is unsparingly sad to read that 'after Aileen Palmer's death, there were no tributes and no obituaries'.

Martin is to be applauded for recognising the value of Palmer's story. She has allowed the big questions to curl around and press upon the life narrative. One of the biggest – how much of our lives are determined by our physical molecules, how much by our choices – governs *Ink in Her Veins*. DNA, blood, brain cells were composed during Nettie's pregnancy, when she wrote her best poetry. It was during this period, fittingly, that Nettie used the phrase 'ink in her veins', worrying that her daughter might inherit her parents' obsession with writing.

At times I did wonder whether Martin had assumed Nettie's conception of Aileen a little too much, as if she had unconsciously taken on the role of a handwringing mother, forcing Aileen into the position of a perpetual daughter. It is the depth of Aileen's mental instability, and Nettie's possibly generative role in it, to which Martin routinely returns. Moments of haphazard pleasure rarely escape this penetrative gaze. This perhaps is the downside to that full Palmer archive; those family diaries, letters, all those accounts of Aileen's girlish and sometimes eccentric antics; her sessions with the psychiatrist. How could the biographer resist Nettie's rich and deep comprehension of her daughter? But while Nettie understood Aileen with undoubted incision, she was also inevitably

firmly and particularly positioned.

As Martin acknowledges, Nettie's accounts of Aileen reveal much about Nettie. She was an involved, guilt-ridden mother if ever there was one. The close account of relationships shows us more than one person, and Vance and sister Helen appear stripped back in moments too. And so maybe *Ink in Her Veins* should more properly be called group biography – the biography of a family.

Works cited

Martin, Sylvia. *Ink in Her Veins: The Troubled Life of Aileen Palmer*. UWA Publishing, 2016.