

Towards a History of Literary Programming on ABC Radio

Bridget Griffen-Foley

AFTER the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was established in 1932, music occupied just over half of airtime, with talk making up the balance. With the gradual evolution of literary content on radio, novels and plays were adapted, serialised or commissioned, and there were competitions and book readings. Such initiatives have been touched on by ABC broadcaster John Thompson (89–109) and in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* entry on radio (Wilde et al. 49–52), however the complex history of this literary relationship requires further investigation. This essay considers the development of book criticism and discussions on ABC radio. It begins in the mid-1920s, as individual ‘A-class stations’ experimented with literary broadcasts in the years before the formation of the ABC,¹ and concludes in the mid-1960s, after the deaths of critics Vance and Nettie Palmer. It builds on the entry on ‘criticism’ in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (Wilde et al. 188–95), and Peter Pierce’s more recent ‘book reviewing’ entry in *A Companion to the Australian Media* (70–71). The history of literary criticism in Australia remains under-researched. In Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon’s 2012 study of literary communities in Australia, there is no individual chapter on criticism, and terms such as ‘criticism’ and ‘reviewing’ are absent from the index. Nor is the ABC considered, which seems particularly surprising in a book partly about institutions of ‘middlebrow culture’. Radio is also absent from David Carter’s substantial chapter on Australian literary criticism in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000).

¹A dual radio system emerged in Australia in 1924, with A-class stations (later consolidated into the ABC) maintained by revenue from listeners’ licence fees, and B-class stations funded by advertising revenue.

My study engages with Ivor Indyk's major 1990 article on the ABC and Australian literature in World War II and his essay on Vance Palmer and the social function of literature, as well as S. B. Clark's earlier thesis on Palmer's role as an influential writer, critic and radio broadcaster. It also focuses on the broadcasting efforts of his wife, Nettie Palmer, which have yet to be embraced by a full-scale study or biography. Deborah Jordan's *Nettie Palmer: Search for an Aesthetic*, while valuable, concentrates on her development before 1925. This article draws on Palmer's own extensive papers in the National Library of Australia, together with contemporary newspaper reportage, to help illuminate the breadth and depth of her work as a critic and broadcaster.

The essay identifies several loosely defined periods: experimental book programming on the ABC and its precursors from 1925 to 1935; the consolidation of book programs as a part of ABC radio schedules in the later 1930s; the ABC's preoccupation with Australian literature during World War II; more international coverage from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s; and diversity and change in the 1950s and early 1960s. The wartime section of this article builds on excellent work by Indyk; fine-grained newspaper research enabled partly by the National Library of Australia's Trove database has fleshed out details of some of the broadcasts he considered, and suggested there was even more ABC coverage of literature – especially Australian literature – than he recognises. My reading has included contemporary newspapers, along with research on ABC paper records in the National Archives of Australia (NAA)². The manuscript collections of broadcasters, writers and the publisher Angus & Robertson (A&R) have revealed the broadcast endeavours of not just the Palmers, but also of other figures, ranging from Frederick T. Macartney and George Farwell to Norman Robb and Colin Roderick, who were heavily involved in writing, publishing and otherwise promoting Australian literature. In examining the ABC's crucial role in the Australian literary ecology, the essay also demonstrates how the ABC provided Nettie Palmer and other women with considerable opportunities as both critics and writers.

My research has involved locating and looking at hundreds of transcripts of book talks held in the NAA as well as individual manuscript collections. However, an in-depth treatment of their contents – covering individual books, great writers and literary movements – and different forms of critical discourse is beyond the scope of the present article. The ABC's refractions between national and international literatures are also worth a more rigorous analysis within the developing field of transnational literary scholarship (see also Dixon 71–73).

²ABC radio scripts held by the NAA are referenced in this essay using the abbreviated citation recommended by the Archives, comprising repository name (NAA), series number and control (item) number. The series are searchable on the Archives website <https://www.naa.gov.au/>.

This study is based on printed records: few actual recordings of book talks in the period examined here seem to have survived, so there are only occasional asides (based on contemporary observations) about the auditory nature of the broadcasts. This empirically grounded article uses paper records of Australia's public service broadcaster to help illuminate and expand understandings of twentieth-century Australian literary history, and points to new directions for historians of literature and the media. It argues that A-class stations and the ABC helped to sustain Australian literary culture from their very inception (see also Dixon and Rooney viii), and that the ABC, at both local and national levels, has been a vital part of the Australian literary community and economy since 1932.

Experimentation

Experimental literary programming began appearing over the Australian airwaves as early as 1925 on A-class stations, seven years before they were consolidated into the ABC. *Wireless Weekly* program guides show the dubiously qualified 'Mr. J. M. Prentice, O.C.B., C-de-G' (also known on-air as 'Uncle Jack') reviewing books on Friday nights; delivering 'A Course in English Literature' on Thursday afternoons; and presenting a 'chat' on 'Studies in English Poetry'.³ The former army officer obscured his origins as a salesman from Moonee Ponds. Prentice also wore a bow-tie, cultivated a sing-song accent and seems to have used his involvement in book reviews on 2BL Sydney to boost his own public stature (Griffen-Foley 323–24; A. Moore).

In Melbourne, bookseller Captain C. H. Peters presented a weekly talk, *Books, Wise and Otherwise*, on 3LO from 1925 to 1938 (Carter, 'Some Means' 338–39; Holroyd). He conducted what was surely the first book competition on Australian radio, offering eight autographed copies of P. C. Wren's new book, *Beau Sabreur*, in 1927.⁴ From 1930 to 1932 Peters also hosted *Literary Log Book* (Carter, 'Some Means' 338–39). By 1928, C. G. Riley was presenting *Books and Bookmen* on Saturday nights on 5CL Adelaide. Sometimes using the nom de plume 'Barossa', Riley was a debater and president of St Raphael's Literary Society in suburban Adelaide and was involved in amateur theatre. His talks included topics like 'Australian Authors',⁵ and by 1932 he had moved on to hosting *Books of the Week* on Thursday nights on 5CL and also 5CK, the first A-class country station in South Australia.⁶

³ *Wireless Weekly* (WW), 29 May 1925, p. 38 and 9 Oct. 1925, pp. 34–35.

⁴ 'Autographed Books at 3LO', *Argus* (Melbourne), 17 Mar. 1927, p. 12.

⁵ *Register* (Adelaide), 28 Feb. 1928, p. 3; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 12 May 1928, p. 8.

⁶ *News* (Adelaide), 20 Oct. 1932, p. 10.

The increasing number of new fiction and popular non-fiction books, coupled with a sense of readers as consumers, fed into the launch of *All About Books for Australian and New Zealand Readers*. The monthly, along with radio book shows, were emerging institutions of a consumer-oriented book culture in Australia (Carter, 'Some Means' 332, 339). In 1932, famous poet A. B. ('Banjo') Paterson helped pioneer the involvement of established writers with Australia's newest cultural institution, the ABC, while also expressing interest in being one of the first Commissioners (Wilde et al. 50). By this point the rate of publication of Australian books was increasing (Carter, 'Antipodean' 96). Although Paterson was not appointed to the Commission, he was invited to give a talk on Australian literature on 2FC Sydney, during which he expressed astonishment at the number of books written by Australians or about Australia. W. H. Ifould, principal librarian at the Public (later State) Library of New South Wales, and a member of the ABC's Adult Education Committee, then suggested Paterson talk on his own work, which he did during 1933 and 1934. Late in 1934 the seventy-year-old Paterson proposed a regular series featuring interviews based on his experiences, travels and diaries. The ABC agreed, although there was some bargaining over what Paterson would be paid since it was felt that his voice was not suitable for a nationally relayed series. He was a clear rather than a good speaker, tending to be nervous and somewhat nasal in tone. The texts of his fifteen *Land of Adventure* broadcasts ended up being read by other presenters in each state (Inglis 14; Paterson 476–548; Roderick 227–33; Semmler 217–24).

Book talks and reviews by somewhat less high-profile speakers had already emerged. In 1933, 'The Bookman' broadcast *Modern Books and Authors* on Wednesday nights on Hobart's 7ZL⁷ and Frederick T. Macartney was heard on Melbourne's 3LO on topics including 'Early Australian Novelists'.⁸ A poet active in Melbourne literary circles and the Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW), Macartney went on to work as a freelance reviewer, bibliographer and university extension lecturer (Macartney 134–35; Miller and Macartney 298–99; Serle, 'Macartney'; Wilde et al. 435).

The ABC's Adult Education Committee arranged for Cecil Mann, the editor of the *Bulletin's* Red Page and a lecturer on Australian literature for the Workers' Educational Association, to present a 2BL lecture on 'Some Current Books Worth Reading' on Friday, 5 May 1933. Mann returned a fortnight later with *Current Books Worth Reading*, which continued fortnightly for the next year.⁹

⁷ *Voice* (Hobart), 29 Apr. 1933, p. 6.

⁸ *Australasian*, 1 Sept. 1934, p. 2.

⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), 5 May 1933, p. 6 and 19 May 1933, p. 5; *Daily Telegraph*, 5 Jan. 1934, p. 10;

Books Worth Reading re-appeared on Sunday, 21 October 1934, now presented by Denzil Batchelor, an English writer and critic living in Australia.¹⁰

Book talks also provided a growing space for women broadcasters. A Mrs J. C. Miller, who had an MA and a Diploma of Education, was by 1931 speaking on weekday afternoons on 3LO about books for children.¹¹ This was followed by a *Books and Women* series, with chatty sessions on ‘Novels to Read’ and ‘Books for the Man of the House’.¹² Doris Waraker (usually introduced as ‘Miss D. L. Waraker’), who wrote articles, short stories, plays and poems, contributed a long article about the personalities of Australian writers, male and female, to the Brisbane magazine *Teleradio* in 1933. She may also have included books and writers in her talks for 4QG, now part of the ABC.¹³

More significantly, Nettie Palmer presented *Australian Women Writers* over 3AR Melbourne on Tuesday afternoons in May and June 1933.¹⁴ She had emerged as an important literary critic with her book *Modern Australian Literature* (1924) and her introduction to *Australian Literature*, a 1929 pamphlet by C. Hartley Grattan, an American scholar of the Pacific (Jordan, ‘Palmer’; Modjeska 50; Hetherington 85–86). Palmer was arguably a successor to the inaugural editor of the *Bulletin*’s Red Page (1896–1906), the forthright and fearless A. G. Stephens (Munro 440). She was keen to protect and understand an emerging literature that was still fragile in its material and institutional bases (Dixon and Rooney xiii).

Nettie Palmer’s 1933 series came in the wake of a 1932 book of her essays, appropriately entitled *Talking It Over*. Her husband Vance had written about ‘The Missing Critics’ in the Red Page a decade earlier: ‘What is wanted is a little genuine criticism in order that it may be discovered what has been done in Australian literature, and what is being done today. There is a big opening for a competent critic, and even a few industrious ones would be welcome.’¹⁵ Nettie’s freelance literary journalism in the 1920s and 1930s also helped to provide a family income as Vance worked on a group of novels (Wilde et al. 541, 543; Jordan, *Nettie* 207, 212; Niall 220–21).

Tweed Daily, 17 Mar. 1934, p. 4.

¹⁰ *SMH*, 20 Oct. 1934, p. 12; ‘Denzil Batchelor’, AustLit, <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/A43206>.

¹¹ *WW*, 10 July 1931, p. 44; *Age*, 4 Sept. 1931, p. 3; *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 4 Feb. 1932, p. 4.

¹² *Age*, 16 August 1932, p. 8, 2 Sept. 1932, p. 3; 13 Jan. 1933, p. 3; *WW*, 18 Jan. 1933, p. 47 and 27 Jan. 1933, p. 51.

¹³ *Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 15 Jan. 1929, pp. 10, 47; *Teleradio*, 8 July 1933, pp. 20–21; ‘D. L. Waraker’, AustLit, <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/A21811>.

¹⁴ *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 13 May 1933, p. 2 and 3 June 1933, p. 2.

¹⁵ Vance Palmer cutting book, July 1923, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 8, Folder 3.

It is likely that Nettie Palmer's talks on women writers – probably including Henry Handel Richardson and Marjorie Barnard¹⁶ – were the 'little weekly affair' for the ABC she referred to in a letter to Grattan (Smith, *Letters* 86–87). However, she discovered that 'public lecturing' was not recognised in Australia 'as a means of support or a marketable product'. The ABC's Victorian manager, T. W. Bearup, insisted that the ABC had 'only £4 an hour to spend, spread over the year, and that I was being rather above myself in mentioning that for my fifteen minutes I'd like a little more than a guinea a time!' (Smith, *Letters* 86–87). A professor on £900 a year might be prepared to take small fees for talks, but it was harder for those who lived by their pens, such as the Palmers (Inglis 30).

Within weeks of her June 1933 letter to Grattan, Nettie was however presenting *Rambles in Bookland*. This series, recorded from 3LO, was to be heard on Wednesday mornings for nearly two years.¹⁷ Palmer spoke about English verse, Swedish literature (with the Nobel Prize in Literature as the hook), books related to the 'woman question', the work of Katherine Mansfield, and books by writers who visited Australia. She reviewed the poetry of the Palmers' friend Frederick Macartney; Furnley Maurice's volume of poetry, *Melbourne Odes*; and Leonard Mann's novel *Flesh in Armour*. Not all the Australian works Palmer considered were inspired by new releases, for she wanted to share with listeners 'the minimum it is decent to know about our writers'. This included Henry Lawson's short stories as well as John Shaw Neilson's and Bernard O'Dowd's poetry. Though libraries might not have some books she wanted to review, she liked the idea of encouraging librarians to secure books requested by readers. Palmer held off reviewing *Titans of Literature: From Homer to the Present*, for example, until an English edition had arrived in Australia. Such was her reputation, overseas as well as domestically, that she had been sent the book by its American author, Burton Rascoe. 'In the short time [15 minutes] and with so much to tell you about', she joked, her talks might better be called *Scrambles Through Bookland*.¹⁸

Nettie broadcast an additional series of talks, *In the Looking Glass*, in 1934, at which time she had handed over her regular column in *All About Books* to Macartney (Carter, 'Some Means' 330). Her radio reflections on national character, heard on Wednesday nights, ranged across accent, language, humour,

¹⁶These were the writers she addressed in a talk for the Cairns Literary Society soon after; see *Cairns Post*, 19 July 1933, p. 6.

¹⁷See, for example, *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, 14 July 1933, p. 12; *Argus*, 13 Mar. 1935, p. 22.

¹⁸*Rambles in Bookland* scripts, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 25, Folder 2.

manners and people's faces.¹⁹ One of the talks considered how writers saw Australians. She focused on O'Dowd's 'greatest work' of poetry, *The Bush*, as well as Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* and the humour of Lawson and Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life*. Of the novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard and Vance Palmer, she commented that they 'take the Australian life as accepted and fulfill the great poetic mission of bringing a higher consciousness, clearness, and harmony to everyday life'.²⁰

Nettie went on to give a talk in 1935 on 'Women and Literature', which concluded: 'Several times the Nobel prize has been given to women . . . Add to these such names of variety and power as Virginia Woolf, H. H. Richardson and Willa Cather, and we can see how high the novel can already be brought in women's hands – those hands that came so late into all the arts'.²¹ Palmer was a vital part of the network of Australian women writers giving each other 'comfort' and 'intellectual and emotional support' in the 1930s (Modjeska 1, 3). Clearly, the ABC was one of her main tools in this undertaking.

Meanwhile, the popular Tasmanian novelist Marie Bjelke-Petersen was heard nationally on the ABC. She addressed topics including 'Novel Building – Collecting Material for a Book', 'The Writer's Vision' and 'Choosing Characters for a Book' (Weidenhofer).²² Australian literature also crept into ABC schools broadcasts, with journalist and author Zora Cross presenting a fifteen-minute English talk on 'Henry Lawson: The Forerunner of Modern Australian Literature – His National Significance' in 1934.²³

That year, the Australian novelist Dale Collins melodramatically prophesied that the advent of radio would mean doom for novelists. Within a decade the 'novel reader would become a radio listener; the novel writer would have to cultivate a pleasant speaking voice'. He was appalled by the thought that it took him eight months to write a book that 'could be read [aloud] in an afternoon'.²⁴ The episode with Paterson's intonation shows that while questions of voice were considered by broadcasters including the ABC, radio was developing as a substantial source of literary income. Radio meant a diversity of work for authors, with talks and reviews, as well as serialisations, readings, and play

¹⁹See, for example, *Shepparton Advertiser*, 29 Sept. 1934, p. 2 and 5 Dec. 1934, p. 2.

²⁰*In the Looking Glass* scripts, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 25, Folder 2.

²¹*Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 10 Jan. 1935, p. 6; *Women and Literature* script, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 25, Folder 3.

²²*Mercury* (Hobart), 13 Apr. 1935, p. 12; *Shepparton Advertiser*, 12 June 1935, p. 10; *Daily Examiner* (Grafton), 18 July 1935, p. 2.

²³WW, 12 Oct. 1934, p. 4. Zora Cross's publications included the 1922 pamphlet *An Introduction to the Study of Australian Literature*.

²⁴SMH, 21 July 1934, p. 14.

and novel competitions (Adelaide 92–93; Inglis 85; Roe 353). ABC broadcasts, and key broadcasters like Nettie Palmer, had the potential to increase sales of books to libraries and bookshops. They were part of the literary community and economy of interwar Australia (see also Carter, ‘Some Means’ 332, 339).

Consolidation

The 1930s were a ‘prolific’ decade for the Australian novel (Modjeska 1) and literary broadcasts were an established part of ABC radio schedules. Under the auspices of the FAW, an Authors’ Week was held in Sydney in April 1935, designed to encourage the development of Australian literature by bringing the work of writers before schools and the public. The ABC joined in this campaign, broadcasting over 2BL and 2FC the official opening by the Governor, as well as several talks. These broadcasts included ‘Aborigines in our Literature’ (Mary Gilmore), ‘Australian Fiction Today’ (Frank Dalby Davison), ‘Australian Poets’ (Hugh McCrae) and ‘Women Writers’ (Zara Aronson).²⁵

The final talk, ‘Novels of the Bush’ by Miles Franklin, was published in the first issue of P. R. Stephensen’s *Australian Mercury*, and seventy years later was deemed to be one of ‘the speeches that made Australia’ (Roe 353). The appearance of Stephensen’s ‘national literary magazine’ led one Queensland newspaper correspondent to hope that ‘the growth of the literary impulse in this country’ would be met by sound standards of appreciation and a platform for fearless criticism (‘Pegasus’ 1935). However, the *Australian Mercury* was short-lived, and it was the ABC which played a far more enduring role in Australian literary criticism.

Franklin made at least five other broadcasts in 1935, ending with ‘Why Australian Novels?’ Keen to avail herself of the new medium, she was anxious – like many women – about how she would sound, though she had a strong, rich voice. Payments to authors were variable but sometimes lucrative, with Franklin receiving a very respectable three guineas for a talk in the 1938 schools broadcast series *My Life and My Books* (Roe 353–54; Wilde et al. 280; Wilde 325). Franklin would continue to be an occasional broadcaster into the 1950s (Roe 354).

Helen de Guerry Simpson broadcast regularly on the ABC in 1937. Born in Sydney, Simpson spent most of her adult life in Britain and was heard on the BBC on literary, historical and topical subjects, as well as cooking. On visiting Australia to launch *Under Capricorn* and to collect material for a new novel, Simpson was engaged by the ABC to present several talks on subjects of her choice (Roberts; Wilde et al. 631; Dalziell 131). Simpson approached her task

²⁵ *Sydney Mail*, 3 Apr. 1935, p. 17.

carefully, remarking as she left England that she would not ‘err on the side of overmuch criticism’ in such a ‘young nation’ (Stewart 9). Her talks included ‘Literary Imposters’ (on ‘unscrupulous and daring buccaneers and brigands’) and ‘Women in Letters’. These proved so popular that the ABC extended the series up until her September departure for England. One of her talks was for schools, with advice for those who ‘Want to Write’.²⁶

At the same time, B. H. Molesworth was recruited from the University of Queensland as Controller of Talks at the ABC. Under a rearrangement of the national Talks schedule, book reviews were to be heard every Friday, rather than fortnightly. The program seems to have been the established *Current Books Worth Reading*.²⁷ *The Morning Story* read by ‘Scribe’ was also introduced, featuring readings of Australian novels and short stories until the program was discontinued in 1943 (Indyk, ‘The ABC’ 576).²⁸

Books Worth Reading was presented occasionally, and then regularly, by Vance Palmer, who also discussed films and theatre for the ABC (Clark 117; Jordan *Nettie* 239).²⁹ After a richly creative decade, Palmer had, he admitted in a letter to fellow author and recently appointed drama editor of the ABC Leslie Rees, ‘lost heart for writing [novels]’. ‘I suppose I’d prefer something on the A.B.C . . . to anything’, he told Rees as he and Nettie made their way back to Australia from a stay in London, Paris and Spain (Smith, *Vance Palmer* 30, 34; Smith, *Letters* 141).

From their re-scheduling to Thursdays in mid-1938, the *Books Worth Reading* programs alternated weekly: between Palmer in Melbourne and Hector Dinning – a journalist, non-fiction writer and former university tutor – in Brisbane (Inglis 85; McKinnon).³⁰ Disturbed by the threat to civil liberties implied by the *National Security Act 1939*, Palmer was asked by the ABC to ‘keep to literary affairs’. This followed his review of *Fallen Bastions: The Central European Tragedy* by G. E. R. Gedye, who saw the evils of Nazism earlier than most. Despite his censuring, broadcasting was to become almost a full-time job for Palmer during the war years (Walker 164; Clark 118).

Nettie Palmer, the other half of this remarkable literary partnership, pre-

²⁶*Daily News* (Perth), 19 July 1937, p. 2; *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 2 Aug. 1937, p. 3 and 10 Sept. 1937, p. 16; *News* (Adelaide), 9 Aug. 1937, p. 10; *Labor Daily*, 31 Aug. 1937, p. 8; *Macleay Argus*, 3 Sept. 1937, p. 12.

²⁷*Southern Cross* (Adelaide), 14 May 1937, p. 14; *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 17 May 1937, p. 17.

²⁸*Daily Examiner* (Grafton), 25 Jan. 1937, p. 2.

²⁹See also, for example, *Murray Pioneer*, 26 Aug. 1937, p. 22; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 29 Jan. 1938, p. 23.

³⁰*Nambucca and Bellinger News*, 15 July 1938, p. 3; *Macleay Argus* (Kempsey), 4 Nov. 1938, p. 8; *Kilmore Free Press*, 23 May 1940, p. 1.

sented *Readers and Writers* on Wednesday mornings during 1937 and 1938.³¹ She considered four books in most ten-minute programs. In one, framed by the question ‘What are these books, and who are the writers?’, she focused on the Australian women writers Richardson and Prichard. Palmer shared accounts of her own contact with writers: ‘I had a letter from another poet this week, Dame Mary Gilmore . . . She told me that she had just finished preparing a new book of poems . . . It will be one to watch for’.³² At the ABC, Nettie helped to provide a meeting ground for Australian writers and their readers in the years before the advent of literary festivals (see also Sheridan 199).

Most of the broadcasts presented by leading reviewers, including the Palmers, seem to have been relayed nationally by the ABC.³³ But as with ‘The Bookman’ in Hobart, there were also some local literary identities. In Adelaide, for example, ‘Jane Speed’ pseudonymously began presenting *This Week’s Good Books* from 5CL on Tuesdays in 1938. A former librarian, she also reviewed books for the press, and had an interest in art.³⁴ Although *Books Worth Reading* was ‘one of the most popular talks on the air’, a Queensland regional newspaper explained in January 1940, only four books could be considered each week and ‘many of them are not particularly adapted to women’s tastes’. A new – national – ABC program was launched on Thursday afternoons, with ‘Jane Speed’ sharing hosting duties with Muriel Maxwell (Berry), a poet who taught at the University of Sydney, and Hobart booksellers William E. and Frances Fuller, ‘who argue with each other about books they have read in the past month’.³⁵

Wartime

To Indyk, the literary offerings on the ABC at the start of World War II look ‘rather meagre’ (‘The ABC’ 579). However, the research outlined in the previous section, enabled partly by Trove, demonstrates that there was a range of book programming on the ABC, especially in the second half of the 1930s. Indyk’s work (‘The ABC’ 579, 581–86) points to the role of this kind of programming as an expression of Australian cultural values during the war, particularly during the real threat of invasion in 1942.

³¹See, for example, *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 17 Mar. 1937, p. 7; *Herald* (Melbourne), 24 Aug. 1938, p. 23.

³²*Readers and Writers* scripts, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 25, Folder 3.

³³Inglis (141) explains that since 1939 one set of city stations had taken the national program, broadcasting most of the sessions that went on nationwide relay, while the other set took the state program, on which a higher proportion of sessions originated from the state of transmission.

³⁴*Advertiser* (Adelaide), 16 Aug. 1938, p. 6; *Chronicle* (Adelaide), 25 Aug. 1938, p. 2; *Kilmore Free Press*, 25 Jan. 1940, p. 6.

³⁵*Cloncurry Advocate*, 12 Jan. 1940, p. 2; *Dubbo Liberal*, 23 Jan. 1940, p. 5; *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 3 Oct. 1940, p. 8; *WW*, 27 Jan. 1940, p. 24. From 1942, commercial stations 3DB and 3LK seem to have broadcast a program of the same name on Wednesday mornings.

There were occasional ABC sessions on Australian literature early in the war. A. A. Phillips, the Melbourne teacher and anthologist who later coined the term ‘The Cultural Cringe’ (Wilde et al. 555), had a series on mainly English literature in 1940. It included sessions on John Shaw Neilson and R. D. FitzGerald (Indyk ‘The ABC’ 579).³⁶ On the other hand, as Indyk notes, when Professor Walter Murdoch of the University of Western Australia was asked by the *ABC Weekly* to recommend a basic library that would cost no more than £5, he came up with a list of thirty-four titles, none of them Australian (Indyk ‘The ABC’ 579). Nevertheless, the essayist did also speak on the ABC about ‘right and wrong ways’ to encourage Australian literature that year.³⁷

After Hector Dinning was appointed Queensland’s Publicity Censor in 1940 (McKinnon 5), Sydney’s George Farwell began alternating with Vance Palmer as host of *Books Worth Reading*. The ABC’s commitment to ensuring that *Books Worth Reading* had a national reach and appeal, with hosts based in different cities, is notable. Palmer’s and Farwell’s book-talk helped to create an Australian community built around shared notions of books and reading (see also Carter, ‘Antipodean’ 86).

Born in England, Farwell wrote for newspapers, magazines and radio, and also acted in radio serials (Farwell 159; Inder; Inglis 55, 87, 118; Thompson 104, 107).³⁸ Farwell’s passing remark in his memoirs (177, 215) that he ‘happened to be one of the ABC’s two Sunday morning book critics’, facilitated by ABC Talks Editor Gladys Owen (Flower), may hint at a lack of commitment to the role, but his endeavours suggest otherwise. He was active in the FAW and one of the editors of *Australian New Writing* (1943–46), moving into writing books of his own about the outback and his travels (Farwell 177, 215; Inder; Wilde et al. 249).

The Palmers were already established as guardians of Australian literary culture, with radio having become their most important general outlet (Smith, *Nettie Palmer* xxxi–xxxii). Vance’s mellow Anglo-Australian voice became familiar to thousands of people who listened to his gentle but firm advice (Inglis 85; Jordan, *Nettie* 247; Barnes 57). Indyk (‘The ABC’ 579–80), along with Heseltine (24) and Walker (9), explains how seriously Palmer worked to produce each of the fifteen-minute *Books Worth Reading* scripts involving four or five titles and, until 1942, to also review for each issue of the *ABC Weekly* (see for example Palmer ‘Trapped’; ‘Gertrude Stein’). Palmer did not even benefit from the critic’s usual ‘perk’, with the ABC retaining review copies to build up

³⁶‘Dodgy Day for Our Poets’, *ABC Weekly*, 5 Oct. 1940, p. 14; *Riverine Herald*, 31 Oct. 1940, p. 4.

³⁷‘Right and Wrong Ways of Encouraging Australian Literature’, NAA: SP300/2, MURDOCH/22.

³⁸*Mercury*, 13 July 1946, p. 19; *Sun* (Melbourne), 31 Oct. 1948, p. 30; *Age*, 8 July 1950, p. 8.

its library (Murray-Smith, 'Book Reviews' 20).

Palmer's pronouncements, moderate yet confident in their tone, introduced listeners to some of the great modern works of fiction (Heseltine 177). Australian literature had a vital place in his broadcasts, as Indyk shows in his analysis of the 1940–1941 broadcasts, which included an obituary for Banjo Paterson ('The ABC' 580–81). His broadcasts were not limited to a treatment of current writers and their works, with scripts on Henry Lawson (Indyk, 'Vance Palmer' 352), Shaw Neilson, Louis Esson, 'Tasma' (Jessie Couvreur), Catherine Helen Spence, Rosa Campbell Praed and E. J. Brady (Clark 172).

In 1942, as the threat to Australia was at its height, the presentation of Australian literature by the ABC was at its most intense and patriotic. The ABC's annual report of 1941–42 referred to the necessity 'to project, both at home and abroad, the Australian interpretation of events . . . [and] the Australian scene through news, commentaries, and atmosphere'.³⁹ It is also notable that at this time Labor Prime Minister John Curtin appointed the journalist and author Ernestine Hill an ABC Commissioner (Inglis 109; Wilde 364; Johnston 94). In addition to reviews and occasional talks by writers, the ABC set about a systematic presentation of Australia's literary heritage through three series in 1942. The first, *So You Think You Know Literature?*, was in the form of a quiz from 3LO, presented on Sunday afternoons from February to December. Host Norman Robb, a Melbourne bookseller, wanted to keep fresh in people's minds 'the unique cultural heritage for whose preservation we are fighting' (Indyk, 'The ABC' 582–83, 585).⁴⁰ On 24 May, Empire Day, the quiz centred on the works of Canadian, African, Indian and other empire writers.⁴¹ Only one of the fifty sessions was devoted wholly to Australian literature, though there were Australian answers required here and there (Indyk, 'The ABC' 583). 'Our Literature', delivered by Marjorie Barnard three months after the fall of Singapore (not in 1941 as stated by Indyk), was part of the series *We Australians*. Her talk, like Palmer's criticism, made much of the Australian earth as the seed-bed of Australian literature (Indyk, 'Vance Palmer' 348; Clark 172–73).⁴²

As Indyk notes, the ABC's other two literary series in 1942 were wholly devoted to Australian literature ('The ABC' 583). *Australian Verse Session*, which went out nationally on Saturday nights, formed the basis of *Fourteen Minutes*,

³⁹ *Tenth Annual Report of the ABC, 1941–42*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ See also *Eleventh Annual Report of the ABC, 1942–43*, p. 9; *Herald* (Melbourne), 31 Jan. 1942, p. 12; *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 26 Dec. 1942, p. 6. For Robb, see *Argus*, 10 Sept. 1955, p. 6.

⁴¹ *Newcastle Sun*, 23 May 1942, p. 2.

⁴² See also *Tenth Annual Report of the ABC*, p. 11; *Newcastle Sun*, Wednesday 27 May 1942, p. 3; *Truth* (Sydney), 13 Dec. 1942, p. 11.

published by A&R.⁴³ The third series, *Problems of Australian Literature*, organised in partnership with the FAW, was arguably the most ambitious. The ABC encouraged collaborative broadcasts, particularly in the talks designed for Listening Groups – inspired by the BBC – on Monday evenings (Indyk, ‘The ABC’ 584–85; Indyk, ‘Vance Palmer’ 352; Inglis 61).⁴⁴ The ‘problems’ addressed each Monday between April and June, published by A&R as *Australian Writers Speak: Literature and Life in Australia*, all related to the social conception of literature. Several talks took the form of a dialogue, including Bert and Dora Birtles on ‘The Effect of the Australian Environment on Australian Literature’ and Gavin Casey and Prichard on ‘How Has the Australian Writer Affected Australian Life?’⁴⁵ In her discussion with her husband on ‘It Takes Readers as Well as Writers to Make a Literature’,⁴⁶ Nettie Palmer played the cynic, though the ABC’s wartime broadcasts on Australian literature generally had an optimistic note (Indyk, ‘Vance Palmer’ 356).

When Vance Palmer’s workload proved too heavy, Nettie would read the books and draft scripts, which he would then incorporate in his reviews and talks (Indyk, ‘The ABC’ 580; Clark 174n). Their reviewing styles were quite different; Vance’s tone was solemn while Nettie was more familiar and lively (Indyk, ‘Vance Palmer’ 351). And yet, according to her diaries, Nettie wrote many of her husband’s scripts for *Books Worth Reading* and *ABC Weekly*. With considerable effort she subordinated her personality to his, observed Indyk (‘Vance Palmer’ 351–52). When Vance was engaged by the Department of Labour and National Service in 1943 to supervise the production of films, publications and broadcasts, Nettie wrote the *ABC Weekly* reviews under her own name (Indyk, ‘The ABC’ 580; Jordan, *Nettie* 244). The news clippings she collected demonstrate her extraordinary range: Grattan’s *Introducing Australia*, C. E. W. Bean’s *War Aims of a Plain Australian*, Kylie Tennant’s *Ride on Stranger*, and Australian, American and Russian short stories, as well as new writing from New Zealand. Fluent in several languages, she also wrote on George Bernard Shaw and Goebbels, and on books about Ned Kelly, slavery, modern art, the war, anti-Semitism, Irish theatre, the Pacific Islands, Japan, China, India and America.⁴⁷ Her criticism, Dixon observes, created an impression that ‘national

⁴³See also *Argus*, 21 Mar. 1942, p. 6; *Herald* (Melbourne), 28 Nov. 1942, p. 9.

⁴⁴*Tenth Annual Report of the ABC*, p. 11.

⁴⁵*Crookwell Gazette*, 22 Apr. 1942, p. 6; *Border Watch*, 2 May 1942, p. 6 and 23 May 1942, p. 6.

⁴⁶*Border Watch*, 6 June 1942, p. 6; *West Australian*, 16 June 1942, p. 2. *Australian Writers Speak* script, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 25, Folder 3.

⁴⁷‘Press clippings – Book Reviews’, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 20, Folders 1–2. On at least one occasion in 1944, Nettie Palmer also presented *Books Worth Reading* herself, see script held at NAA: MT395/1, 336.

literature exists in the same time and space as international writing' (Dixon and Rooney xxv).

The Palmers were amongst the speakers in a series entitled *Australian Literature* and beginning with H. M. Green, the University of Sydney librarian and a former journalist in August 1943. It offered a history of Australian prose to complement the earlier poetry series (Indyk, 'The ABC' 585).⁴⁸ Other speakers included Leslie Rees,⁴⁹ Miles Franklin, George Farwell and University of Adelaide lecturer Brian Elliott. The ABC's 1943–44 annual report recorded that at least 'one talk, and, for the greater part of the year, two talks each week, dealt with Australian literature'.⁵⁰

For five months the program went out on Sunday evenings,⁵¹ before being replaced by *New Australian Voices*. This series, heard on weekends until September 1944,⁵² was presented by a young writer, Donald Ingram Smith, who interviewed thirty-six young poets of the day, including Dorothy Hewett and Max Harris. The series, which provided a contemporary update to the previous historical series (Indyk, 'The ABC' 585),⁵³ was not without criticism. Writing in Melbourne's Catholic *Advocate*, the radio critic 'P. F. M.' remarked that Paul Grano (also Catholic and from Melbourne) was scarcely a 'new' voice.⁵⁴ Journalist and poet P. I. O'Leary was harsher in Sydney's *Catholic Weekly*, calling Smith (also host of ABC's *Over to Youth*) 'badly out of his depth' and huffing that it might have been better if 'a number of immature young women' had remained silent.⁵⁵

In 1944 the ABC also launched *Nation's Forum of the Air*, produced in partnership with the Department of Postwar Reconstruction.⁵⁶ The topical talks, chaired by W. Macmahon Ball on the national network on Wednesday afternoons (Ryan), gave a further outlet to Nettie Palmer to debate a diversity of issues, including censorship, education and peace, over the next few years.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ *National Advocate* (Bathurst), 24 Aug. 1943, p. 3.

⁴⁹ *Newcastle Sun*, 2 Oct. 1943, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Twelfth Annual Report of the ABC, 1943–44*, p. 12.

⁵¹ *Mercury* (Hobart), 22 Jan. 1944, p. 14.

⁵² *Examiner* (Launceston), 30 Sept. 1944, p. 8.

⁵³ Scripts of interviews with Judith Pitt and Marjorie J. Law are held in NAA: MT395/1, 204 and NAA: MT395/1303.

⁵⁴ *Advocate* (Melbourne), 12 July 1944, p. 18.

⁵⁵ *Kilmore Free Press*, 4 Nov. 1943, p. 4; *Catholic Weekly*, 27 July 1944, p. 8.

⁵⁶ *Herald* (Melbourne), 19 July 1944, p. 3. The Department published a periodical by the same name from 1944 to 1951, though the program itself continued until 1964 (Inglis 238).

⁵⁷ *News* (Adelaide), 18 Oct. 1944, p. 4; *Argus* (Melbourne), 19 Nov. 1949, p. 43; 'Mrs Nettie Palmer [Forum of the Air]' NAA: MP298/4, 40.

Australian Writers Speak, borrowing the name of the book inspired by *Problems of Australian Literature*, was broadcast from November 1944 to April 1945, initially on Saturday mornings and then on Sundays. Smith interviewed eighteen established writers, including Nettie Palmer⁵⁸ and the venerable Mary Gilmore,⁵⁹ as well as poet Bernard O'Dowd.⁶⁰ As Indyk notes, the series was less satisfying than the previous ones, largely because the interviewer kept returning to issues they had discussed two years earlier. The featured writers, concerned with the lack of remuneration, the unavailability of Australian books, and overseas publishers dumping 'rubbish' in Australia, expressed a persistent anxiety about whether there were enough readers to make Australian literature a reality (Indyk, 'The ABC' 586).⁶¹

Looking outward

Reflecting a new outward-looking attitude to the world, a different kind of series ran on Sunday afternoons on the ABC's national network from July 1944. The first instalment of *Great Writers and Their Ideas* considered 'Literature of Other Nations – Understanding the Foreigner', and was presented by Walter Murdoch. The series covered the canon from Homer (by A. R. McDonald) and Cervantes (Vance Palmer) to Balzac (Professor A. R. Chisholm) and Tolstoy (Palmer) (Indyk, 'The ABC' 586).⁶² The series concluded with Nettie Palmer on 'Proust – and the Passing of An Age' and Margaret Walkom (an Arts graduate and Talks research officer at the ABC) on 'Their Lasting Importance'.⁶³

To Indyk, 'an essentially European literary tradition, in which English literature plays only a minor part' was being resuscitated as the war drew to a close ('The ABC' 586). The focus may have shifted from Australian literature, he writes, but there was still a nationalist emphasis in this subordination of English literature in favour of a European literary heritage for Australia. He might also have noted that there were talks on English writers (Jonathan Swift and Charles Dickens) and American writers (Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe).⁶⁴

⁵⁸ *Australian Writers Speak* script, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 25, Folder 2.

⁵⁹ Script held at NAA: C102, 1841823.

⁶⁰ For other surviving scripts, see NAA: SP300/1, MILES FRANKLIN/2 and MILES FRANKLIN/3; SP300/7: 115.

⁶¹ *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 20 Jan. 1945, p. 7.

⁶² *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 20 July 1944, p. 6.

⁶³ *News* (Adelaide), 18 Nov. 1944, p. 5; *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 25 Nov. 1944, p. 7. For Walkom, see *SMH*, 1 Nov. 1935, p. 4 and 6 Mar. 1946, p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Mercury* (Hobart), 26 Aug. 1944, p. 19; *News* (Adelaide), 30 Sept. 1944, p. 4 and *News* (Adelaide), 14 Oct. 1944, p. 6; *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 21 Oct. 1944, p. 7.

While Indyk is correct to observe that *Australian Writers Speak* was the last Australian-literature series for some years ('The ABC' 586), *Writers of Our Own Time*, which emerged in the last six months of the war,⁶⁵ featured two Australian authors (both women). Henry Handel Richardson was discussed by her friend and later biographer, Nettie Palmer.⁶⁶ Franklin spoke about popular novelist Edith Joan Lyttelton, who had written under the pseudonym 'G.B. Lancaster' before her death earlier in the year.⁶⁷

On Sunday nights throughout most of 1945,⁶⁸ *Books from the Top Shelf*, ranging from *Pilgrim's Progress* to *Sherlock Holmes*, was broadcast (Indyk, 'The ABC' 586). Amongst the classics of English literature were at least three Australian books: Marcus Clarke's convict novel *His Natural Life*; Rolf Boldrewood's bushranger novel, *Robbery Under Arms*; and *A Letter from Sydney, the Principal Town of Australia*, by the colonial promoter Edwin Gibbon Wakefield.⁶⁹

Spotlight on Literature, including ten-minute readings from well-known books, was heard on the ABC's national network on Sunday afternoons from June 1945 to October 1946.⁷⁰ Amongst the presenters were Vance Palmer (on *Moby Dick*, *Great Expectations* and *Kidnapped*) (Clark 171),⁷¹ A. D. Hope (on the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca),⁷² Margaret Clarke (on Walt Whitman),⁷³ Nettie Palmer (on George Santayana)⁷⁴ and Green.⁷⁵ Again, room was made for at least some Australian books, including *Such is Life* with Vance Palmer.⁷⁶ In May 1946 Nettie Palmer hosted a special program on O'Dowd, who read some of his own poetry to mark his eightieth birthday.⁷⁷ That month, Farwell

⁶⁵ *Mercury* (Hobart), 9 Dec. 1944, p. 2; *Mail* (Adelaide), 2 June 1945, p. 8. See also André Malraux script, 'Dec 10' [1944] ; Martin Andersen Nexø script, 'Feb' [1945], Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 25, Folder 1.

⁶⁶ *Beaunes Times*, 27 Apr. 1945, p. 6.

⁶⁷ *News* (Adelaide), 5 May 1945, p. 5; *Truth* (Sydney), 6 May 1945, p. 30.

⁶⁸ See, for example, *Newcastle Sun*, 10 Mar. 1945, p. 7; *Truth* (Sydney), 30 Dec. 1945, p. 31.

⁶⁹ *Newcastle Sun*, 1 Sept. 1945, p. 7, 8 Sept. 1945, p. 7 and 20 Oct. 1945, p. 6.

⁷⁰ *Australasian Book News and Library Journal*, July 1946, p. 32. See also, for example, *News* (Adelaide), 9 June 1945, p. 5; *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 13 Oct. 1946, p. 8.

⁷¹ For scripts see NAA: SP300/7, 116, 117 and 118.

⁷² *Mercury* (Hobart), 5 Jan. 1946, p. 19; *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 16 Mar. 1946, p. 5.

⁷³ *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 25 Nov. 1945, p. 5.

⁷⁴ *Mercury* (Hobart), 18 Aug. 1945, p. 25; script held at NAA: MT395/1, 482; see also script, 2 Dec. 1945, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889–1964, Series 25, Folder 1.

⁷⁵ *Australasian Book News*, July 1946, p. 32.

⁷⁶ Script held at NAA: SP300/7, 119.

⁷⁷ *Tribune*, 3 May 1946, p. 4; *Australasian Book News*, July 1946, p. 32.

also presented a talk following a FAW mission to Mudjee to raise money for a memorial to Henry Lawson (Hart 1946; Farwell 249).⁷⁸

Margaret Upward's Book List was broadcast on Wednesdays out of Melbourne. The four surviving 1945 and 1946 scripts of this program suggest that Upward (about whom little is known) reviewed two books per episode. In November 1945, she went back over the year's lists to suggest ten books as Christmas gifts.⁷⁹ A new opportunity for literary content emerged soon after, with the launch of *Quality Street* on the national network on 16 June 1946. The initiative of John Thompson, a poet and University of Melbourne graduate who was a Talks assistant at the ABC, *Quality Street* broadcast prose, verse and music each Sunday (Farwell 278–80; Inglis 164–65). Australian poetry was a favourite subject, with readings of, and talks about, poets including Edgar Holt and Judith Wright.⁸⁰ Newspaper critics thought the session 'entertaining and educational' (Weaver 11) and the 'best half-hour on the air' (Morris 26).⁸¹

The ABC also supported the development of children's literature. ABC personnel – Charles R. Bull, Director of Youth Education, and Ida Elizabeth Osbourne of the Argonauts Club and national children's session – joined with librarians and other interested parties to launch a Children's Book Week in December 1945. The NSW Children's Book Council that emerged, with Bull as inaugural president, was to become a national endeavour (Sheahan-Bright 166–67).

Clem Christensen, editor of *Meanjin*, and Ian Mair, formerly literary critic of the *Argus*, filled in for Vance Palmer, who was writing a novel, as Melbourne presenters of *Books Worth Reading* for two months in 1946.⁸² The radio critic of the *Argus* received a letter from 'H. D. of South Yarra' remarking that although many radio talks were 'inferentially dull', the ABC's book and art reviews were 'lively, intelligent and provocative'.⁸³

Palmer used *Books Worth Reading* to review each new issue of the 'little magazines' – *Meanjin*, *Southerly* and *Quadrant* – as they appeared (Indyk, 'Vance Palmer' 357).⁸⁴ He was chosen to address 'Literature and the Arts' in *Introducing Australia Overseas*, a series broadcast by the ABC on Sunday nights in

⁷⁸*Sun* (Melbourne), 15 May 1946, p. 6.

⁷⁹Surviving scripts for *Margaret Upward's Book List* held at NAA: MT395/1, 429, 456, 469 and 567.

⁸⁰Sample scripts for *Quality Street* are held in NAA: SP1297/2.

⁸¹See also *Smith's Weekly*, 31 May 1947, p. 24.

⁸²*Australasian Book News*, Aug. 1946, p. 72; *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 26 Sept. 1946, p. 4.

⁸³*Argus*, 21 Dec. 1946, p. 18.

⁸⁴For a review of *Meanjin*, see, for example, NAA: SP300/7, 204.

conjunction with the Department of Information.⁸⁵ Here Palmer further developed his nationalist literary crusade, telling listeners that since Lawson, it had been the responsibility of writers to observe and record through their own, not European, eyes (Clark 174).⁸⁶ Palmer's broadcast commentaries demonstrated a continuing capacity to situate Australian works within an international context, for the benefit of listeners, and indeed the writers themselves. Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory*, he wrote in 1950, 'bears a closer relation to the work of Upton Sinclair than to that of the great French writer, Balzac' (qtd. in Heseltine 178–80).

Meanwhile, a page of 'New Books Reviewed' appeared in the *ABC Weekly*, with reviewers credited by initials. There was a weighting towards Australian titles, ranging across poetry, novels and non-fiction. For example, the page on 28 September 1946 featured J. Russell's *Sand Rising* and the Australian War Memorial's *H.M.A.S. IV* (both reviewed by 'H.P.'), Rae Campbell's *A Man Comes Home* and Isabel Dick's *Wild Orchard* (by 'E.L.'), as well as studies of Australian telecommunications (by 'F.B.O.').⁸⁷ Other ABC literary endeavours in the immediate postwar period included *Talk*, a monthly magazine inspired by the BBC's *Listener*, intended both to reproduce spoken word broadcasts and to leave more of the *ABC Weekly* free for information about programs, which appeared in 1946 and 1947 (Inglis 182; Thompson 90). Vance Palmer contributed pieces on Frank Dalby Davison, Albert Camus and Theodore Dreiser before the magazine closed (Clark 283). In 1947 the ABC's weekly magazine *Over to Youth* (Inglis 167) began introducing listeners to 'well-known Australian books . . . in an unusual and interesting way'.⁸⁸

Then senior editor with A&R, Colin Roderick presented 'Book Flash' for about three years. The Monday segment was part of a women's program hosted by Sheila Hunt, the ABC's only woman announcer in Sydney (Inglis 137). She introduced Roderick, who generally reviewed one book per segment,⁸⁹ though the format gradually varied. Early in 1948, Roderick interviewed the popular Australian writer E. V. Timms about his new novel, *Forever to Remain*.⁹⁰ 'Book Flash' began to feature excerpts, apparently read by actors, from the

⁸⁵*Border Watch*, 20 May 1947, p. 2.

⁸⁶Clark states that the broadcast was in 1949, but it appears to have been in 1947; see *News* (Adelaide), 28 June 1947, p. 4.

⁸⁷*ABC Weekly*, 28 Sept. 1946, p. 13.

⁸⁸C. Charlton, letter to A&R, 21 Jan. 1948. Angus & Robertson Correspondence Files, vol. 111A.

⁸⁹See, for example, *Sun* (Melbourne), 10 Oct. 1948, p. 30.

⁹⁰'Book Flash No. 11: Monday 22 March 1948', Papers of Colin Roderick, 1948–1963.

books Roderick was reviewing.⁹¹ The following year, with the segment now on Wednesdays, he was interviewed about his own new Rosa Praed biography.⁹² Nettie Palmer was given at least one opportunity to fill in as presenter of the women's session.⁹³ Meanwhile, Gwen Harrison, who was active in theatre circles and had joined the ABC as secretary to Molesworth, was helping to run women's talks at the ABC. One of her responsibilities was *Listeners' Book Review*, which ran on Mondays at 2.50pm until 1950 (Paterson, 'Women in Radio' 10).⁹⁴

Like 'Jane Speed' in South Australia, Catherine King and Miriam Pollak became well-known literary critics in their home states. In Perth, Catherine King extended her ABC women's session to include a 'book talk' each Friday. The daughter of Walter Murdoch, King was an Arts graduate married to English lecturer Alec King. Late in the war, Catherine had begun hosting the mid-morning Western Australian women's session, and over the next twenty years she exploded the notion that women had a specialised set of interests. She created opportunities for West Australian writers and artists who could comment on overseas books, art and films (Inglis 169–70; Bolton 9).⁹⁵ Miriam Pollak presented a segment called 'Companionable Books'. A University of Melbourne graduate who was fluent in Swedish, Pollak had undertaken translation work in Europe and written for an English newspaper before the war (Lewis 81–82).⁹⁶ King took personal responsibility for sending A&R scripts of reviews of its books by herself and her offsidiers, including a Daphne James. In the process, King developed a warm relationship with A&R's publishing director, Walter Cousins, who was delighted that 'the Perth A.B.C. reviews are in your hands as you always do a good job'.⁹⁷ Cousins was also grateful to other ABC reviewers, such as George Farwell, for sending their scripts to A&R.⁹⁸ These could be used for publicity purposes, and shared with the authors, again showing the ABC's role in Australia's literary marketplace.

Back in Melbourne, Norman Robb reprised *So You Think You Know Lit-*

⁹¹'Book Flash No. 14: Monday 12 April 1948', Papers of Colin Roderick, 1948–1963.

⁹²Untitled transcript, n.d. Papers of Colin Roderick, 1948–1963. The script of a 1951 talk about Praed is held at NAA: SP369/1, R/36.

⁹³*Tribune*, 31 Mar. 1948, p. 5.

⁹⁴*Advertiser* (Adelaide), 1 Sept. 1947, p. 16.

⁹⁵See, for example, *Narrogin Observer*, 12 Aug. 1954, p. 19; *Beverley Times*, 16 Sept. 1954, p. 7.

⁹⁶*West Australian*, 12 Feb. 1941, p. 10.

⁹⁷Correspondence between King and Cousins, 26 July 1947–6 Aug. 1948; Daphne James scripts, 6 and 13 Apr. 1948, Angus & Robertson Correspondence Files, vol. 111A.

⁹⁸W. G. Cousins, letter to Farwell, 25 June 1946, Angus & Robertson Correspondence Files, vol. 111A.

erature? in 1948 and 1949.⁹⁹ An actor would read excerpts from unnamed works in the 3LO studio. Each Sunday afternoon session ('chapter') had a theme, such as 'History in Literature' and 'Gardens in English Literature'. A prize of three guineas was awarded to the first listener who sent in the correct answers to the questions asked in five sessions. The program entailed considerable preparation, and much correspondence to process.¹⁰⁰ The Brisbane *Sunday Mail*'s critic urged listeners who considered themselves well-read not to miss the show: 'May be too highbrow for popular taste, but it does us good sometimes to be reminded how little we know'.¹⁰¹ An additional series on 3LO on Friday evenings in April–May 1949 was Allan Aldous's *By-Ways Among Books*. The scriptwriter and lecturer addressed accessible topics including mistakes made by writers and literary hoaxes (no doubt inspired by the recent Ern Malley hoax).¹⁰²

Colin Roderick contributed to *Armchair Chat*, a long-established ABC program on Sunday afternoons, in the early 1950s. The topics of these, and other occasional ABC broadcasts, by Roderick included Goethe, with 1949 marking the centenary of the German writer's death.¹⁰³ Other subjects were 'Fresh Fields in Fiction', 'Australian Writing',¹⁰⁴ 'Australian Writers I Have Met', 'Australian Women Writers I Have Met' and 'The Year's Achievement in Australian Writing'.¹⁰⁵ 'Are Australian Writers at Grips with Life?' was one of the more provocative topics chosen.¹⁰⁶ Robb, Vance Palmer and theatre critic Geoffrey Thomas also contributed to *Armchair Chat*.¹⁰⁷ Roderick was also part of a special Australia Day feature on 3LO on 26 January 1950.¹⁰⁸ Two years later, 2FC serialised *Ralph Rashleigh* and an accompanying talk by Roderick, who claimed to have traced the authorship of the convict novel to James Tucker (Hart 1952 10; Scott).

⁹⁹See, for example, *News* (Adelaide), 20 Nov. 1948, p. 6; *Truth* (Sydney), 14 Aug. 1949, p. 37. The State Library of Victoria holds three boxes of Robb's radio scripts from 1941 to 1949, although they have yet to be fully sorted.

¹⁰⁰For scripts from *So You Think You Know Literature?* from 1949, see NAA: MT395/1, 1182, 1220, 1241, 1260, 1269, 1279, 1285, 1294, 1301, 1307, 1314 and 1321.

¹⁰¹*Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 26 Dec. 1948, p. 8; see also *Smith's Weekly*, 23 Apr. 1949, p. 18.

¹⁰²*Age*, 21 Apr. 1949, p. 16, 28 Apr. 1949, p. 4 and 5 May 1949, p. 4; for a sample script see NAA: MT395/1, 1252.

¹⁰³*Sun* (Melbourne), 28 Aug. 1949, p. 46.

¹⁰⁴*Advertiser* (Adelaide), 16 Jan. 1950, p. 16; for a sample script see NAA: SP369/1, R/35.

¹⁰⁵Scripts held at NAA: SP369/1, R/32 and R/33. See also *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 24 Sept. 1951, p. 16.

¹⁰⁶*Sun* (Melbourne), 17 Oct. 1952, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷Scripts for Robb held at NAA: MT395/1, 775; Thomas SP369/1, T/10; Palmer SP300/7, 372 and 399.

¹⁰⁸*Age*, 20 Jan. 1950, p. 1.

Diversity and change

Vance Palmer remained in the vanguard of ABC radio's literary efforts in the 1950s, although the decade was to be marked by diversity and change. He was the driving force behind *A Century of Australian Literature* on Sunday afternoons.¹⁰⁹ The series featured Palmer talking about Henry Kendall and Adam Lindsay Gordon, William Hay and Eleanor Dark, and Catherine Helen Spence, 'Tasma' and Rosa Praed.¹¹⁰ Other sessions were on writers including Lawson, Paterson, O'Dowd, Gilmore, Murdoch, Lindsay, Stewart and Slessor.¹¹¹ West Australian writer John K. Ewers considered Prichard as well as Palmer himself.¹¹² Two of the talks were broader, on contemporary Australian poetry (by ABC broadcaster Bruce Miller) and literary magazines (by Kenneth 'Seaforth' Mackenzie).¹¹³ The series was punctured by a separate talk on 'Literature' by Palmer in *Fifty Years of Federation*.¹¹⁴

Book reviewing came to be part of rural, as well as women's, programming at the ABC. From 1952 'Farmers' Book Review' appeared as an occasional segment in another more general daily program, *Country Hour*,¹¹⁵ presented by the host, Fraser Parkes (Inglis 153), on Sundays.¹¹⁶ Murdoch kicked off a national Sunday-afternoon series on *Books That Have Influenced My Life* the following year.¹¹⁷ Somewhat unusually for an ABC's books series, the line-up was all-male: Goethe scholar Derek Van Abbe, classics Professor John Elliott, Baptist preacher and writer F. W. Boreham, South Australian public servant A. M. Ramsay, and law Professor Geoffrey Sawyer.¹¹⁸

Farwell had ceased co-hosting *Current Books Worth Reading* with Vance Palmer in about 1950. Other writers and critics then shared responsibility

¹⁰⁹ *Age*, 12 Jan. 1951, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ Script on Kendall and Gordon held NAA: SP300/7, 288; Hay and Dark, SP369/1, P/27/1 and Spence, 'Tasma' and Praed, SP369/1, P/27/2.

¹¹¹ For scripts, see NAA: SP369/1-C/51/15, E/2, H12 and MC/7/1.

¹¹² Script held at NAA: SP369/1, C/51/2.

¹¹³ Scripts for Miller NAA: SP369/1, C/51/14 and Mackenzie NAA: MC/7/3.

¹¹⁴ *Age*, 19 Apr. 1951, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 13 Feb. 1952, p. 8.

¹¹⁶ Script held at NAA: SP620/1, P7.

¹¹⁷ *Herald* (Melbourne), 23 May 1953, p. 8; script held NAA: SP300/2, MURDOCH/30.

¹¹⁸ *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 23 May 1953, p. 8; *Maryborough Chronicle*, 30 May 1953, p. 10; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 27 June 1953, p. 10; *Advocate* (Burnie), 11 July 1953, p. 21.

for the program, including Clem Christesen,¹¹⁹ Phillips,¹²⁰ Alec King,¹²¹ Cecil Hadgraft¹²² from the University of Queensland, and University of Adelaide classicist Professor A. Norman Jeffares.¹²³ Nettie Palmer, who also presented the program under her own name,¹²⁴ had to make do with ABC outlets such as this. There was no equivalent to the BBC Third Programme, she lamented to a relative, ‘to meet the needs of [Australians] who aren’t satisfied with the alternatives of low comedy and parliament’ (qtd. in Smith, *Letters* 202).¹²⁵

Alec Hope, recently appointed as the first professor of English at the Canberra University College (now the Australian National University), presented *Current Books Worth Reading* several times. He was familiar with broadcasting from his time as ‘Antony Inkwell’ on the Argonauts.¹²⁶ Amongst the books he chose, or was assigned to review, was *Australia Writes: An Anthology*.¹²⁷ This was edited by Hope’s colleague Tom Inglis Moore who introduced one of the earliest comprehensive university courses in Australian literature in 1954 (approved as a degree subject in 1955) (Perkins).¹²⁸ Academics like Moore and Hope juggled their reviewing efforts between the ABC and the press, with John Thompson urging Hope to ask the *Sydney Morning Herald* for a review copy of Thompson’s own *Thirty Poems*. ‘With all due respect to the A.B.C.’, wrote Thompson in a revealing letter, ‘I think that the S.M.H. review, when ably and sufficiently done, carries more weight’. Hope agreed with Thompson, but was nevertheless willing to review for both.¹²⁹

Vance Palmer remained very much the voice of *Books Worth Reading*. His friend, Allan Ashbolt, who had joined the ABC Talks Department in 1954, told

¹¹⁹Script held at NAA: MT395/1, 981.

¹²⁰*Current Books Worth Reading* (CBWR), 24 July 1955, 8 Jan. and 1 Apr. 1956.

¹²¹CBWR, 9 Oct. and 20 November 1955, 15 Apr. 1956.

¹²²Script held NAA: SP369/1, C/53/1.

¹²³CBWR, stamped 1 Mar. 1956 (NLA).

¹²⁴CBWR, 4 and 18 Sept. 1955, 2 Oct. 1955; scripts, c. 1953, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, Series 25, Folder 3.

¹²⁵In 1946 the ABC became obliged to broadcast the proceedings of the Commonwealth Parliament; during sitting weeks, normal programs on the national network were suspended to facilitate the broadcasts.

¹²⁶Script held NAA: MT395/1, 930. See also CBWR, 10 July, 23 Oct. and 4 Dec. 1955, 29 Apr. 1956.

¹²⁷A. D. Hope, letter to J. M. [sic] Pringle, 28 Sept. 1953, Papers of Alec Derwent Hope, 1914–1991, Series 2, Folder 673.

¹²⁸For a discussion about ‘Australian Literature and the Universities’, see *Meanjin*, vol. 13, no. 2, Winter 1954 (A.D. Hope); vol. 13, no. 3, Spring 1954 (W. Milgate and A. Norman Jeffares); vol. 13, no. 4, Summer 1954 (Vance Palmer and E. Morris Miller).

¹²⁹‘John T.’, letter to ‘Alec’, 19 Oct. 1954; Hope to Thompson, 26 Oct. 1954, Papers of Alec Derwent Hope, 1914–1991, Series 2, Folder 674.

Moore how difficult it was to ‘find writers and poets who broadcast well’.¹³⁰ This may have been why no individual writer or critic was appointed by the ABC to co-host with Palmer. (In 1955 Moore and the Canberra FAW successfully proposed to Molesworth an ABC discussion about ‘The Aborigines in Australian Literature’ – possibly the first ABC literature talk with an Indigenous theme).¹³¹

In 1954, on the Whitford commercial radio network in Western Australia, Irene Greenwood began presenting a show called *Books Worth Reading*, sponsored by a local bookshop. A former ABC broadcaster who had been presenting a popular women’s program on the commercial network (Baker; Griffen-Foley 224), Greenwood would almost certainly have been aware of the program with a very similar name on the ABC. This ‘homage’ points to the program’s profile in Australian literary and broadcasting circles.

The ABC began publishing a periodical entitled *Current Books Worth Reading* in 1955. Production was basic, with issues essentially consisting of the radio scripts. This was an odd decision, for within months the long-established program was replaced by *Today’s Books* on Sunday mornings. This fledgling periodical morphed into a new periodical entitled *Today’s Books*. Some newer presenters emerged, including the *Courier-Mail*’s literary and theatre critic David Rowbotham, writer Geoffrey Dutton, and academic Leonie Kramer (later a chair of the ABC).¹³²

In 1958 the ABC found its book reviewing policy questioned by a satirical Adelaide periodical, *Mary’s Own Paper*, and the radical magazine *Overland*. Alan Carmichael, the Director of Talks, replied that reviewers ‘were chosen for the breadth of their interests, and for their ability to comment intelligently on any book, whether it happens to be a novel, or a connection of poems, or a popular scientific treatise’ (qtd. in Murray-Smith, ‘Book Reviews’ 20). By now a serial reading had resumed each morning, with Carmichael explaining that it was dedicated to Australian novels (Thompson 90–91; Murray-Smith, ‘Book Reviews’ 20).

Meanwhile, Palmer co-hosted *Today’s Books*, as well as other broadcasts. He delivered a talk, and contributed a full-page article to the *ABC Weekly*, in 1954 to coincide with the release of his book *Legend of the Nineties*. Having suffered

¹³⁰Alan Ashbolt, letter to Moore, 18 Mar. 1955, Papers of Tom Inglis Moore, 1918–1978, Series 3, Folder 10.

¹³¹B. H. Molesworth, letter to Moore, 29 Sept. 1955; Moore to Molesworth, 3 Nov. 1955, Papers of Tom Inglis Moore, 1918–1978, Series 3, Folder 10. Joining Moore in the discussion, recorded at 2CY in Canberra, were journalist Charles Meeking and anthropologist Marie Reay.

¹³²See *Today’s Books*, 1957; *Today’s Books*, 1959–62, Papers of Geoffrey Dutton, 1898–1998, Series 38, Files 13–14.

two heart attacks, Vance Palmer managed to prepare six scripts for *Today's Books* (Clark 278–79) before he died, aged seventy-three, in July 1959. In a letter of sympathy to Nettie, Ewart Chapple, the ABC's Victorian manager, declared that the ABC had long been in Vance's debt 'for the fine sense and sensitivity he brought to the books and writers in his broadcast reviews'. Moreover, Vance had shown 'insight and understanding' in helping to shape programs as a member of the ABC's Talks Advisory Committee: 'In broadcasting, as in the wider sphere of Australian letters, he will be sadly missed'.¹³³

Just a few days later, a special issue of *Meanjin* in honour of both the Palmers was published. The historian Kathleen Fitzpatrick (no stranger to broadcasting herself) paid tribute to the sense of integrity, commitment and range implicit in Vance's voice: 'He presumes that we are grown up and gets straight down to business . . . He presumes, too, that we have minds and addresses himself to them, always offering some solid arguments or ideas worth thinking about. He does his work before he comes to the microphone' (Ward et al. 250; Indyk, 'Vance Palmer' 353; see also Barnes 65). Some of Palmer's 'Writers I Remember' broadcasts – on A. G. Stephens, Steele Rudd, Barbara Baynton, Edward Dyson and Randolph Bedford – were published in *Overland* into the 1960s (Clark 284–85).

In uncertain health, Nettie Palmer spent her last years largely caring for sick and elderly relatives. She continued to write, concentrating on her projected autobiography, although her broadcast output seems to have declined (Smith, *Letters* 229–34; Wilde et al. 541). By the time of her death at the age of seventy-nine in 1964, there had been several other ABC radio developments that would have pleased her and her husband. Colin Roderick was recruited to the ABC's NSW Advisory Committee.¹³⁴ John Thompson went 'around with his taperecorder' interviewing people who had known Miles Franklin, including Roderick, P. R. Stephensen, Muir Holburn, Nancy Keesing and Beatrice Davis (Roe 562), for an in-depth feature on her life and work.¹³⁵ A documentary marked the centenary of Banjo Paterson's birth (Semmler 18, 26, 89, 100, 237, 254).¹³⁶ And in 1963, the weekly fifteen-minute review of *Today's Books* was replaced by a half-hour magazine program, *Today's Writing*, and an accompa-

¹³³Ewart Chapple, letter to Nettie Palmer, 20 July 1959, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1850–1966, Series 1, Folder 6.

¹³⁴David Moore, letter to John Yeomans, 29 May 1959; Mungo MacCallum to Moore, 3 June 1959; A. N. Finlay to Roderick, 6 Aug. 1960; Roderick to Finlay, 12 Aug. 1960, Angus and Robertson Correspondence Files, vol. 111A.

¹³⁵*Bulletin*, 24 June 1959, pp. 2, 58. Franklin had died in 1954.

¹³⁶In 1961 H. M. Green had been asked by the ABC to present a short critical contribution on Paterson to a documentary; it is unclear if this is the same documentary that was broadcast in 1964. Green died in 1962. See Ewart Chapple, letter to Green, 1 May 1961, Papers of H. M. Green, 1930–1963, Series 2, File 'A.B.C.'

nying periodical (Inglis 238).

Conclusion

‘But for the ABC, we would have inhabited a land of perpetual drought’, Farwell wrote of the 1930s in his memoirs (191). ABC historian Ken Inglis remarks on how ‘the national stations were cherished as the first agency of enlightenment to bring music, drama, talks and news . . . simultaneously to people in all states’ (77). This essay has attempted to show how involved the ABC was in enlightening Australians about literary culture, building on some experimental efforts by A-class stations in the years before 1932. It has uncovered a plethora of book review and talks programs broadcast largely on the ABC’s national network, as well as on some state-based stations.

The book critics given airtime by the ABC were drawn from Australia’s literary community; few came from within the ranks of the broadcaster itself. ABC radio helped make writers, journalists, academics, librarians and booksellers into public intellectuals, and several also made important contributions to the scholarly study of Australian literature. Nettie Palmer had published *Modern Australian Literature* in 1924, while Frederick Macartney revised and updated E. Morris Miller’s annotated 1940 bibliography, *Australian Literature From Its Beginnings*, in 1956 (Macartney 147–49). H. M. Green’s two-volume *A History of Australian Literature Pure and Applied* followed in 1961, and Leonie Kramer edited *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* twenty years later.

Vance and Nettie Palmer, who were crucial to ABC book review programs from the 1930s to the 1950s, were described by *Overland* editor Stephen Murray-Smith as ‘the truest professional partnership that Australian literature has seen’ (‘Swag’ 22). Even so, they were not the only couple to broadcast about books, with contributions by H. M. and Dorothy Green (Wilde et al. 306), William and Frances Fuller, Bert and Dora Birtles, Catherine and Alec King, and Clem and Nina Christesen.

Nettie Palmer’s recent induction into the Australian Media Hall of Fame is some recognition of her print and radio endeavours¹³⁷ as part of her vital role as a ‘liaison officer in literary life’ (Jordan, ‘Palmer’). She led a contingent of women critics on the ABC, including Mrs J. C. Miller, Doris Waraker, Marie Bjelke-Petersen, Helen de Guerry Simpson, Margaret Walkom, Margaret Clarke, ‘Jane Speed’, Catherine King, Miriam Pollak, Margaret Upward, Miles Franklin and Leonie Kramer. Early Australian women writers, including Catherine Helen Spence, ‘Tasma’, Rosa Praed, Barbara Baynton, Henry Handel Richardson, Mary Gilmore and Edith Joan Lyttelton, had their

¹³⁷ Australian Media Hall of Fame, <https://halloffame.melbournepressclub.com/article/nettie-palmer>.

work examined on-air. ABC critics recognised the flourishing of the Australian novel, particularly by women, in the interwar years (Modjeska). They presented talks about, and reviews of, works by Marjorie Barnard, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Eleanor Dark, Mary Gilmore and Kylie Tennant.

A. G. Stephens is widely recognised for giving the *Bulletin* ‘an influence and importance in literary matters probably unmatched by any Australian weekly before or since’ (Wilde et al. 189). With their broadcasts on contemporary and classic Australian and world literature, the Palmers assumed this role from the 1930s to the 1950s. While the ABC did not provide a full institutional home or income for either of the Palmers, it was to emerge as important as the *Bulletin* in providing an institutional ballast for Australian literature and criticism (see also Carter, ‘Critics’ 263, 268). ABC radio was heard across Australia, just as the *Bulletin* had been disseminated nationally since its launch in 1880.

The public service broadcaster mediated literature for Australian readers and listeners at a time when the university teaching of Australian literature was in its infancy, and the first chair of Australian literature (assumed by G.A. Wilkes at the University of Sydney) was not established until 1962 (Wilde et al. 194). Vance Palmer had written about Stephens in 1941: ‘He chose to pioneer a field in which there was little hope of immediate reward, and Australia owes an unpayable debt to his courage, his insight, and his integrity’ (qtd. in Ward et al. 257). Palmer could have been writing about himself and his wife, and indeed several other pioneering ABC radio critics who played a dynamic role in Australia’s literary community and economy.

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