

## **Finding a Spiritual Home in the Australian Environment: Katharine Susannah Prichard and Vance Palmer in the 1920s**

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‘We are probably, in literary matters’, the Australian critic Nettie Palmer wrote in 1932, ‘where America stood a century ago’ (Smith, *Nettie Palmer* 432). Whatever strength America was gaining at that time, she continued, was not due to a ‘spirit of colonialism’. ‘Nature’ has remained embedded in cultural discourses and historical projects throughout the two centuries of European occupation of Australia. Unlike the republic of the United States, however, Australia still is part of the British empire, no longer strictly speaking a colony, but paying allegiance to the British monarchy and still, arguably, dominated culturally and economically by Britain (and the Northern hemisphere). The colonial project in Australia, by Australian writers and artists, has been identified in the last three decades of scholarship, as the ‘colonial’ imperative ‘to transform’ the strangeness of a ‘new’ land into a familiar and familial home, ‘to conquer or tame it, to possess, to penetrate to make fertile, to domesticate and to husband it’ (Straus qtd Lindsay 21). The intentions and writings of the ‘unsettled identities’ of settlers (that is, the European settlers) in Australia, are thus called into question, and according to Sue Kossew, ‘deeply unfashionable’ in academic circles (1). This ‘colonial’ project by the largely British diaspora, this attempt to transform the strangeness of a ‘new’ land, or place, however, can be viewed from very different perspectives, especially when environmental imperatives are taken into account.

In a recent version of these alternative approaches in *The Littoral Zone*, Veronica Brady finds the ‘great task’ of poetry is to put us in touch with deeper sources of meaning, to rid us of the purely instrumental sense of the world in general and of place in particular. This is a particularly urgent task for people in settler societies who, according to Mircea Eliade ‘find themselves in unfamiliar territory’ and must make a transformation ‘from chaos into “cosmos” and learn to live according to its rhythms’; in other words, to live according to the different laws of nature in the new place (Brady 145). One of the tasks of ecocriticism in Australia will be to liberate much Australian literature, especially the rich lodes of fiction from the inter-war period, from decades of critical material that has attributed to these novels its own assumptions about the relationship between environment and culture. And we need a materially orientated theory of literature, as Jennifer French argues, that takes as its starting point ‘the greatly increased role that the natural environment plays in the economic production of peripheral [colonial] nations’ (11).

Was the desire to create a new nation in Australia partly motivated by an environmental impetus to escape the pollution and overcrowding of the imperial centres, as Glen Phillips argues (152)? By the time of federation of the Australian colonies, utopian aspirations were to the fore. Research is being undertaken on the British and European immigrants,

colonists, convicts and settlers' beliefs about the land, and the processes of adaptation; by the 1890s there was a growing number of writers and artists who began to 'see' the beauty in the landscape, 'a different beauty from the homelands of their ancestors in Europe' (Phillips 155). So-called 'pioneering' experiences of the colonial settlers were finding expression in the short stories and verse of Henry Lawson and in the Gothic writings of Barbara Baynton; but the portrayal is often of a harsh and extremely unforgiving, or indifferent, environment.

The next generation of artists and writers, in contrast, were seeking to express 'a harmony with the environment' in Australia, or so Vance Palmer, Nettie's husband, claimed (Smith, *Letters* 60). In the following pages, this claim of human agency will be addressed. It is an extraordinary claim, and a view that has been largely ignored and edited out by critics and scholars. Were the key figures of the generation of interwar authors seeking to express what they sensed was a different relationship between the natural environment, modernity and technology? Was this a widespread, newly experienced 'harmony' with Australian flora, fauna and environment? The more we re-read this generation's works, the clearer it will become that this was at least in part their intention. This essay focuses on two early novels published in the 1920s that offer us insight into the early environmental imaginations of Katharine Susannah Prichard and Vance Palmer. They have been in part selected to open up wider ecocritical re-evaluations of the critical 'realist' or 'cultural nationalist' writers.

Katharine Susannah Prichard (1884-1969) is one of Australia's most distinguished novelists (J. Hay np). Her major novels and stories have been translated into some fifteen languages. In her thirteen novels, five collections of stories, twelve plays and the autobiography *Child of the Hurricane* (1964), Prichard left abundant record, writes Bruce Bennett, of 'her often inspired attempts' to express 'the life of our people and country with love and an intense intimate sympathy'. She also had a reputation as 'a socialist activist and later as a peace activist', and was active in the early years of the Communist Party in Australia (Bird 308). Vance Palmer (1885-1959) is one of Australia's most important inter-war writers, and is especially remembered for his early insights into the Australian Legend, and his contribution to Australian letters. His *National Portraits* (1940) is one of the first collections of modern life narratives. It both critically records and celebrates the creative impulses of economic, entrepreneurial, through to artistic representative figures. Palmer's *The Legend of the Nineties* assured him a central place in the debates about Australian identity in the 1950s (Smith, Palmer 263). His novels and short-stories were regularly reprinted through to the 1980s and set as school texts. Geoffrey Serle identified a tradition in Australian writing about the bush legend as expressing the conjunction of egalitarianism, nationalism, and Labor (119), which he called the Vance Palmer-*Meanjin* nationalist-internationalist tradition. Nettie Palmer (1885-1964), née Higgins, is the most important non-academic critic of the inter-war years. Like her husband Vance, she was poet, journalist, lecturer and spoke regularly on national radio. So, too, her range was remarkable, publishing collections of essays, individual author studies, biographies, autobiography, environmental histories, edited collections of short-stories, journalism and literary criticism (Jordan, *Palmer* 1ff).

Prichard's and Palmer's generation, the so called 'lost' generation, were adolescents and young adults when the Australian colonies federated in 1901. Bernard O'Dowd urged them to write 'poetry militant' to create a new world 'Delos of a coming Sun-God's race' and not 'rebuild' the 'fatal nest' of the West (35). Alongside the Palmers and Prichard were Miles Franklin, Furnley Maurice, Mary Fullerton, Mary Gilmore, Hilda and Louis Esson, E.J. Brady and Lesbia Harford among others. They positioned themselves in part as heirs to the 1890s writers and sought out experiences in the bush. Their initial youthful enthusiasms for the new Australia at Federation, were tempered by Australia's involvement in the Great War, the loss of many of their contemporaries, and the upsurge of militarist nationalism/imperialism.

These young Australian intellectuals 'lost' their future, and had to come to terms with the aftermath of the Great War in different ways from that of most Australians celebrating Victory in Europe. They sought to escape the devastation and destruction of the imperial centres and act locally, to find 'a secure imaginative retreat', 'taking root there, developing a local patriotism, bringing children up to know its history, and become attached to its soil' (Palmer, *Nettie Palmer* 481). And they sought answers to the political crises through the great thinkers of the era. Their early initiatives in modernist poetry and writing, and guild socialism collapsed after the war and Russian revolution, with some writers turning to Marxism. In the post-traumatic culture of the interwar period, in 1919 when Freud published his essay on the uncanny, many of these writers sought to embrace Australian cultural traditions, rather than engage with overseas trends. They were deeply concerned about the way in which environmental injustice, and about the role of humans in the environment, were being played out on the continent at this time. Rather than seeking to judge and explain, these writers sought to suggest, evoke and display. They challenged dominant and habitual ways of understanding and 'seeing' the natural environment. Their work in Australia, however, is not comparable to the North American tradition of nature writing, but their links with regional writers of the 1920s and 1930s around the globe warrants further attention.

The Palmers moved to a small mountain fastness in the forests outside Melbourne in the southern state of Victoria, and Prichard moved to Greenmount, outside Perth, in West Australia, with her newly married soldier husband to participate in races and log-chops. Nettie Palmer came to believe in *Modern Australian Literature* published in 1924 that writers depend for their powers (for their individual voice) on 'possessing more or less harmony with the life about' them (*Nettie Palmer* 293). In 'Colonial Wares' she proposed that: 'our vital writing has been done by people who have taken their status as complete human beings for granted and found a spiritual home in their environment' (431). Those writers 'who had found a meaning in the life about them and been able to write down what they found' (292) and 'to interpret life as they see it, where they see it' (431) confirm both individual and social worth and create 'a combined and cumulative power' of a sense of vitality (331).

The idea of 'harmony with the life about them' was misinterpreted and largely misunderstood by Australian critics in the 1970s. The idea drew on and parallels Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of harmony with nature that is more to do with the awakening

of the senses and the experience of exhilaration and rapture in the environment, than any nationalist urge. In the quotations above, Nettie Palmer is advocating an eco-sensibility, rather than colonial appropriation. Both the Palmers engaged deeply with Emersonian thinking, as did Katharine Prichard (Jankovic 167ff) and they all had read Henri Bergson on the *élan vital*, Yeats and the Romantics on the ecological impulse as well as Bernard O'Dowd on 'the common room'. To live 'in harmony with the life about them' meant to live according to the rhythms and laws of the natural environment.

*Working Bullocks*, Prichard's landmark literary work published in 1926, is a novel about the Karri forests in South-western Australia. The Karri tree grows to 90 metres making it one of the tallest species in the world. Well before the recognition that de-forestation is one of the drivers of increased carbon in the atmosphere, Prichard is raising questions about the destruction of the Karri. The novel is both a political allegory and a love story of Red Burke and Deb Colburn. Nettie Palmer recognised its importance, especially in the lyrical and sensuous evocation of the environment:

It is different not only in quality but in kind. No one else has written with quite that rhythm, or seen the world in quite that way. The creative lyricism of the style impresses me more than either the theme or the characters. From slang, from place-names, from colloquial turns of speech, from descriptions of landscape and people at work, she has woven a texture that covers the whole surface of the book with a shimmer of poetry. As you read you are filled with excitement by the sheer beauty of the sounds and images (*Nettie Palmer* 24).

The desire that Red and Deb feel for each other moves them like a natural force, according to Ivor Indyk, one of Australia's foremost contemporary critics: 'it holds them in its sway, in what is, therefore a kind of subjection' (vi). A mosaic of the timber industry is revealed in all its different aspects, in the various kinds of work of 'falling' in the forest, and sawing in the mill, of cooking and cleaning in the boarding house, 'in the contemplation of our relationship with nature, in social relations and communal rituals' (vi). After Red's partner (Deb's brother, Chris), is killed when a tree trunk rolls on him, Red retreats to the untrammelled 'wilderness'. He forgets his girlfriend, the superficial Tessa. Tessa is contrasted with Deb whose 'being flowed pure and strong from its sources' (Prichard 232). Mary Ann Colburn, mother and protector of Deb, copes with loss and hardship, and Mark Smith, political idealist and leader tells the timber getters they are mere 'working bullocks'. Prichard's use of ironic juxtaposition of the human and the 'natural' realms heightens her critique of the exercise of power, whether as sexual desire, physical strength, or moral authority (Indyk ix). Most importantly Indyk argues that the portrait of Red is one of the first of a series of representations of primitive Australian masculinity (x). For Indyk, Red may be 'at home' in the forest, but he seems to have lost his way in life.

Vance Palmer asked Prichard directly why there was a shift in the narrative from male to female view-point—from Red's point of view to Deb's. Prichard's response suggests her incipient ecofeminism; she could not be 'satisfied with a Red vision of the Karri'. 'I had to have the Deb outlook as well' (Throssell 46) Also, she added, she could not 'endure to stalk a man, as it were, behind a female signature.' *Working Bullocks* needs to be read as

Deb's vision of the Karri; it is Deb who is an early representation of 'primitive' (as per Indyk's usage) Australian femininity; she is the woman who is more spiritually 'at home' in the forest than the other characters.

Other critics address the novel as an exploration of political possibilities. When Deb's brothers are killed through the impossibly dangerous working conditions, the workers organise a strike. These readings reasonably assume that Prichard's primary concern is about the working lives of battlers and the possibilities of revolutionary struggle; but what is of interest here is the extent these critics overlook Prichard's concern with non-human species. If we read her as asking questions about the Karri, and about how the Karri forests can be protected in the days before direct action movements, where does hope of human intervention lie? To return to issues of land, rather than labour and capital, it is worth recalling that visitors to Australia, such as D.H. Lawrence, were finding that 'It's a dark country . . . the glamour, the un-get-at-able glamour! A great fascination, but also a dismal grey terror underneath' (282). For some, especially newcomers, the violence and terror of colonialism was never far from the surface. Prichard's country, on the other hand, had no such abyss and held no uncanny 'terrors' (Throssell 43). Her women characters, especially, breathed in its beauty. Deb's vision of the Karri is described as a time of heightened awareness, a being at home in the land; she is 'alive' in harmony with the trees:

As the [bullock] team splashed along shining threads of the track, she looked away into distances of the leaves: millions, millions and millions of them massed together. The systems of their lives fused, dark and purpling in the distance, fountains of green fire and sunlight where the sunshine struck them. Deb knew nothing of ancient philosophies; but she had a sense of being close to the life about her, a knowledge of oneness with it, profound and serene. She could not have put it into words, but the feeling was like a benediction. The great trees with their power, the flame of their lives, the fate they were moving towards, she was akin to them; and to the earth, sombre and fecund, thrusting forests from her deep soil, holding them in the air through all the years. The processes of growth had always been a miracle to her, and no one had been able to tell her much of them (248).

Deb 'understood and respected' 'the power of the trees' (183). Prichard tells us that she grew to have an almost anthropocosmic view of the forest: 'As a child Deb had believed the trees would never forgive what man had done to them'; she sensed the 'rites to appease' dead trees and their 'worship' in the forest by the fallers, bullock-drivers and men at the bush landings, but 'dazed and amazed' by the way 'tree corpses' were handled brutally and callously in the mill (184). (For further clarification of the use of 'anthropocosmic' in this sense, see Sam Mickey, who posits at its core is an understanding of how humanity and the cosmos are 'not mutually exclusive opposites, but are intimately interconnected in a dynamic and vital process' (Mickey 238)).

In an ecocritical reading of *Working Bullocks*, the constant movement of association between the 'natural' and the human worlds of the novel embodies key themes of human / earth relationships, human / animal relationships, and human / non-human

relationships. Even while Red and Deb are united at the end, Prichard implies the future of the Karri resides in the vulnerable hands of women like Deb who are trapped in the powerful struggle between the sexes.

From this period, a comparable novel, a critique and bold re-drawing to the colonial romance, is Vance Palmer's *The Man Hamilton* (1928). Why is the novel a re-drawing of colonial romances? The story can be read as a love triangle. When we privilege the central woman character in this reading of the novel, there is no happy ending. The heroine, Nina Byrne, a governess on a remote cattle station, is a young woman from the city, and her affair with Hamilton, the owner of a neighbouring station, holds the central place in the narrative, but comes to naught. An important part of the novel tells of Nina's process of becoming aware of the land, the place, the heightening of her senses and the depth of her emotional life. This is foreshadowed in the very opening passages where Nina lies 'facedown in the grass, letting the scent and warmth of the earth soak into her body . . . a favourite habit of hers. (1)

Prichard and Vance Palmer also corresponded about this novel. Astonishingly Prichard wanted to know why the woman, Nina, was even included. Vance did not share her scruples of stalking the opposite gender. To Prichard, Hamilton's romance seemed the 'weakest part . . . perhaps necessary on account of box office returns—but not to be commended in a serious artist' (Palmer Papers, 4.10.1928). Prichard underestimated Vance's capacity and expertise in evoking the life of his female characters. Nettie Palmer records in her diary that the novel was not written as a 'potboiler' (16.10.1928). Previous critics, notably Harry Heseltine and Vivian Smith, have tended to see the novel in terms of Hamilton and a masculine struggle about the 'will', and about Hamilton's integrity in committing to his responsibilities (Heseltine 11-12). A critique in terms of racial stereotyping and whiteness could dismantle Vance's portrait of the Indigenous wife, excruciating to contemporary understanding, but Vance is more sensitive in his portrayal of Steve, their son, an Aboriginal child reared and loved by his white father contra the Stolen Generations.

Vance grew up during the heyday of White Australia; he lived in Queensland where racial anxieties were heightened by the Pacific Islanders' indentured labour. In 1909 when he worked for a year on a remote cattle station in west Queensland, (Kooma country, language group Gunggari), Vance met a man named Hamilton who owned the neighbouring station. It was the time of Vance's environmental awakening and initiation. He also met the real Hamilton's wife, an Indigenous woman, and he described her to Nettie:

I knew of her before but never felt her reality in that emphatic way. It is eleven years since he married her, and at that time perhaps she had some fleeting grace or other, but now—I don't care to think of his life too much. There are three children and they all have their mother's eyes. God knows I have always tried to shut my eyes to the differences of colour and caste that help to keep men apart, but how can life be bearable to two people in such isolation, with such continual proximity,

unless they love one another with the very breath of their soul and be kin in thought and dream? (Palmer 2012, 295)

One of the questions Vance is asking in *The Man Hamilton* is about what kind of white man, what kind of masculinity, would it take for a father to commit to a Black / white marriage, and what kind of life would he have? Contextually, miscegenation was largely hidden, from the time of first contact when European men seduced, raped and impregnated Indigenous females, and generally escaped the responsibilities of paternity. Nearly twenty years after his first encounter with the real Hamilton, Vance addressed his earlier questions in this story of the hero's passionate love affair, bound as he was by his devotion to his Aboriginal son, and his deep attachment to the environment where he lived and worked. Because of Vance's portrait of Nina, *The Man Hamilton* is perhaps the most interesting of Vance's station novels that all explore the changes in land use with the pastoral industry, and the authentic belonging of the Indigene: [Hamilton] 'could not imagine the boy [Steve] uprooted, and taken to another place . . . He'd die away from here . . . whither from the root up' (154).

How best to frame these writings? Literature of place? Socialist realism? Critical realism? Cultural nationalism? I suggest that they are less 'literary constructions of place' (as in respecting their phenomenology), and that they are more about a range of characters' responses to the environment and place. Key characters in these novels know the place with all their senses; often but not always as we have seen, these characters are uneducated. So—while Barry Lopez warns of the difficulties of partial knowledge—when seeking to know a place, through the interrogative process and reading about it (Peter Hay 154), these writers suggest how these particular people were experientially embedded in their landscape. And through these diverse characters' stories, very different gendered responses to the issues of development and resource extraction, timber felling or drilling for water, or even the capitalist accumulation of wealth, are evoked. The novels are written so the Australian reading public can indeed know about the environment and the relations of power. This type of understanding, however partial, these writers imply, is essential in the process of decolonisation.

A 'region' does not exist, that is except to the people who live there, until it is interpreted artistically, argues Nettie Palmer (*Nettie Palmer*, 359). In the mid 1930s, she reiterates D.H. Lawrence's claim that Australia was a region across which no word had yet been written: 'This place has not yet been loved'. Palmer and Lawrence were wrong. Australia is shared colonised space. There are and were different ways of loving; and the country, Australia, had been sung for aeons in the many Indigenous languages. Palmer is assuming that the literary and artistic imagination was very important for the Western mind in the movement from chaos to cosmos. Otherwise (and here she quotes the English critic, Edward Garnett) human nature appears 'absolutely uncanny and ghostlike, or merely—uninteresting, unfit to be made into literature', with, we could add, a purely instrumental sense of the world.

Both the Palmers and Prichard had a strong sense of their own spirituality and the natural environment, as part of a wider generational rejection of Edwardian Christianity and

institutional religion. In their failure to fully endorse Indigenous sovereignty, their work has been criticised in the last three decades, as too some of their work in terms of gender. At the time of publication of *Working Bullocks*, initially by the American publisher Cape, the book's royalties did not cover the typing bill. Like her fellow writers Prichard initially faced few reviews, 'poor royalty payments', poor marketing and poor supply of books to the Australian market' (Hetherington 419). *Working Bullocks* fared better than *The Man Hamilton*, which had only two small print runs in Australia. While both books are out of print, they are read and loved by those who know the country out near Mitchell in Queensland, or the Karri. (Comment based on personal communication and number of hits on articles reprinted through Eco-Online Case studies).

The importance of these earlier white writers lies in problematising the relationship between people and land; and in their early attempts to portray different resolutions to the varieties of human embodiment in the environment, that is where individual and social life is premised on 'the continuous interchange with the rest of nature', as 'active natural beings (as Marx put it)' (Benton 212) Their work included characters who experienced sacred 'harmony' within the landscape and work opened up questions about prior occupation, custodianship, environmental justice and decolonization. *The Man Hamilton* contains references to working bullocks; if we see it in dialogue with *Working Bullocks*, Vance's response is about characters, Hamilton and his Indigenous family, dwelling in place that is today recognised as colonised space. As Jack Lindsay writes about *The Man Hamilton*, 'In learning to love the Australian earth, to enter into it through both meditation and work, changing it and being changed by its forms and essences, the Australian cannot but rediscover those whom he [and she] supplanted, learn certain things from their culture' (150). Indigenous Australians have a great deal to say about the connection between the spirit and the land, and about the process of place-making, that is about making land sacred and honouring the environment. The Indigenous philosopher Mary Graham has challenged European Australians to tell and retell the stories, so that white Australia might learn to honour the earth. Custodianship, she finds, is not just a green solution to environmental destruction (192).

In their mature work, both the Palmers and Prichard built their serious literary fiction on extensive journalism, writing about the land and its people, nature and the landscape. Prichard's next major novel, *Coonardoo* (1929), is the first Australian novel with a central Indigenous heroine, and Palmer continued to write about Indigenous Australia, notably in *Men Are Human*. Nettie Palmer went on to develop a form of ecowriting about the history of landscape, (notably her book *The Dandenongs*), and Vance and Prichard addressed key critical environmental issues, such as mining—through the lens of different characters—in their classics set in Western Australia and Queensland: *The Roaring Nineties* (1946), *Golden Miles* (1948), *Winged Seeds* (1950) and *Golconda* (1948), *Seedtime* (1957) and *The Big Fellow* (1959). The literary fiction of Vance and Prichard, and the critical work of Nettie Palmer, is best located in an international body of literature, a corpus that reflects the global struggle for access to country and control of natural resources such as timber, water and mineral earths. They should be celebrated as regionalist writers rather than 'nationalist'.

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