Sylvia Martin. *Ink in Her Veins: The Troubled Life of Aileen Palmer*. Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2016. 328 pp.
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This book's title invites readers to respond to the life of the elder daughter of Vance and Nettie Palmer as one of sadness and struggle. Indeed, emotional deprivation and unrealised creativity are recurring themes. Yet a further dimension, that of heroism, emerges as the narrative reveals Aileen Palmer to have been a woman of exceptional courage, strength and intellectual gifts. Born on 6 April 1915, she joined the Communist Party of Australia at seventeen and for two years in her early twenties fought as an interpreter and hospital organiser for the British Medical Unit and the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. She later declared: 'Spain stands out in my own life like a beacon-light' (qtd. Martin 279). From 1940 to 1943 she continued the fight against fascism by serving as an ambulance driver in the London Blitz. A widely recognised outcome of World War II was a temporary loosening of gender restrictions in Western countries. Even so, Aileen succeeded in living out adventures and friendships—and in dealing with frightful realities—that were denied to most Australian girls and women of her generation. Despite the miseries and tumults that afflicted her after her return to Australia in September 1945, Aileen Palmer's life should inspire as much celebration as regret.

Readers may nevertheless question if her achievements and effect on her world warrant the detailed attention that this biography provides; but both the principal and collateral benefits that Sylvia Martin gifts to her readers are substantial.

A principal benefit is the tracing of the fate of a lesbian woman who was forced to hide an essential part of her identity from her family, friends, workmates and acquaintances, while she searched in vain for a lasting love and connection. Reforms now in process or in place, and the current flood of LGBT relationships in films and on TV suggest that gay love is finally achieving acceptance if not normalisation in most Western countries. By contrast, this biography's third section, 'A Life in Fragments,' traces Aileen's periodic breakdowns, consequent incarcerations and unproven 'treatments' when, after the war, she returned to live with her parents in 'Ardmore,' their home in Kew (see drawing <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135769479/view>). Readers of *The Bell Jar* and *An Angel at My Table* may not be surprised, though they will certainly be appalled, that beginning in 1948, Aileen's experience of so-called remedies for mental illness tallies with those of Sylvia Plath in America and Janet Frame in New Zealand. The political point made by the tragic last third of Aileen's story therefore merits the enforcement that this book provides: readers will grieve at the consequences of sexual and gender prejudice. Hopefully their anger will strengthen future avoidance and resistance.

Except for translations of five poems by the Vietnamese revolutionary poet To Huu and the *Prison Diary* of Ho Chi Minh; a slim volume of poetry, *World Without Strangers?* (*Overland* 1964); and a few uncollected poems, Aileen Palmer's copious writings remain unpublished. Of the last-named the most significant are 'Poor Child,' a fiction inspired by Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* and based on Aileen's secondary schooling at Melbourne's Presbyterian Ladies' College; and 'Twentieth Century Pilgrim,' a stream-of-consciousness memoir that she wrote while resident in the private psychopathic hospital of 'Alençon' in Malvern. 'Pilgrim' is darkened by her vision of twentieth-century 'ugliness' but hope persists that a utopia of peace and equality will finally emerge (Martin 228-29).

One result of Aileen's breakdowns, electroconvulsive therapy, insulin, lithium, largactyl, psychoanalysis and other treatments was that she lost large chunks of her memory and with them the ability to compose sequential narrative. Martin demonstrates that Aileen's late prose writings consist of disconnected fragments. In this respect her experience parallels that of the Australian trans-gender author Eve Langley, who was likewise hospitalised for mental illness and whose late scraps of composition Suzanne Falkiner has described in a recent review as 'an obsessive tic' (31). The quotations, summaries and commentaries sprinkled liberally through Martin's biography therefore perform the primary service of recognising Aileen's literary achievement and facilitating evaluation of prose works that are unlikely to be published because they are jumbled or unfinished. The twin goals of Aileen's life were political activism and literary creation. As far as is now possible, *Ink in Her Veins* makes restitution for her loss of opportunity to achieve the latter.

A collateral benefit is the new perspective that Martin provides on the activities and intimate relationships of Vance and Nettie Palmer, Aileen and her younger sister Helen. This extends from the parents' first meeting in 1909 to Aileen's unnoticed death, as the last survivor of her immediate family, on 21 December 1988. Aileen seems to have imbibed the idealism that was central to her character from Vance and Nettie. In 1970 Harry Heseltine opened his critical biography, *Vance Palmer*, by asserting that '[t]he most remarkable feature of Vance Palmer's adult life was the subordination of his private concerns to the public interest' (1). Though this seems in the light of the present and other subsequent studies to overstate matters, it is true that Vance and Nettie Palmer's selfless fostering of Australian literature has proven over time to be even more valuable than the direct contributions they each made to it.

Vance's creative priorities, to which Nettie seems to have subordinated her own (Martin 56-57, 278; but see Jordan 179ff.), produced a chronic financial insecurity that may have nurtured resilience and breadth of vision in their daughters, as the family shifted residences across Victoria and Queensland, with interludes in England and Europe. Though the parents maintained conventional attitudes to sex and gender, all four Palmers were left-wing and caring by conviction. Except when overwhelmed by anxieties arising from Nettie's declining physical health and Aileen's mental illness, they also seem to have been loving and responsible towards each other.

Ink in Her Veins provides a first-hand perspective on such notable pre-war incidents as the 1934 visit to Australia of the Jewish writer and communist Egon Kisch (102-03), and Aileen's and her friend Angela Guest's pouring of red paint on Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's doorstep as a protest against his signing of the Munich Agreement (183-84). Since the names of well-known and lesser-known authors whom the family knew personally pepper the text, this is also a useful book for readers whose interest in Australian literature extends beyond the Palmers. Henry Handel Richardson, Louis Esson, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw, Katharine Susannah Prichard, R. H. ('Dick') Long, Frank Dalby Davison, Miles Franklin, Hugh McCrae, Clem Christesen (whose wife Nina features in Vance's *Golconda Trilogy* as Macy Donovan's lost love, Neda), and Aileen's paternal aunt Emily Bulcock are a small sample of the Australian writers who play their parts, large or small, in Aileen's story.

In the ways outlined above, *Ink in Her Veins* therefore contributes notably to the literary and social history of Australia and Europe, especially in the 1930s and '40s. If, in the interests of balanced assessment, quibbles are to be raised, my first is that expansions of the interpretations that form the transitions between chapters should perhaps replace the occasionally tepid details that have resulted from an exhaustive and no doubt exhausting research effort. The accounts of Aileen's activities in Barcelona and other parts of Spain, for example, might have benefited

from judicious cutting. This biography maintains an admirable openness towards its findings and distinguishes clearly between fact and speculation—'…she had apparently impressed on her parents her need for privacy' (145); 'Why were the Palmers' acquaintances so insistent that Aileen…should be urged to return home…?' (191); 'she does not appear to have had any more relationships' (210); 'which gives us a clue as to why analysis may have brought out "submerged resentment" by Aileen against her mother' (236). Moreover Martin provides answers when the evidence supports them, for example by ingeniously solving the identity of the mysterious 'B,' Aileen's London lover (208). Perhaps it is merely a matter of taste that I would have liked to see a greater number of risk-taking assertions and conclusions.

I emphasise that the issues just raised *are* no more than quibbles. Among other features of this book discussed above, they are counteracted by vivid descriptions of places and situations that draw the reader into imaginative participation, and by Martin's many implied invitations that that same reader will join her in conjecture and ongoing dialogue.

Cheryl Taylor, Griffith University

Works Cited

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