Book Review: ‘We Need a Nice New Goddess’


Deborah Jordan

Let’s state the obvious. Ink in Her Veins, the Troubled Life of Aileen Palmer, poet, translator, activist, and mad woman and psychiatric patient, is a biography that should be read by every Australian feminist, every Australian gay person and should find an international readership. It’s the enthralling tale of a woman caught out in the maelstrom of her times. The stories we tell ourselves about our lives, about our choices, and about our culture profoundly shape our decisions and our actions. In many ways Ink in Her Veins is paradigmatic. Let’s first outline the bare facts of Aileen Palmer’s life as so ably marshalled by Sylvia Martin, before delving into broader questions about how we may understand our past to better frame our futures.

Aileen was born in London, 1915, in the early, torrid days of the Great War; her parents Nettie and Vance Palmer, recently married, were two aspiring writers and freelance journalists in the early phases of establishing their stellar careers. With the preparations for a total war and the collapse of liberal journalism, the Palmer family returned to Victoria. Aileen was separated from her mother for a month when Nettie was hospitalised with the birth of a sibling; Aileen ‘lost’ her father for several years when he joined the army and served overseas. At the precocious age of five, Aileen declared she was a ‘feminist’; she was indeed living in a feminist household, with a great aunt, Georgina Higgins, close friend and co-worker with Victoria’s premier feminist Vida Goldstein.
On her father’s return from devastated Europe, the family returned to live in the Dandenongs outside Melbourne. Vance and Nettie were part of a vibrant radical intelligentsia marginalised and shaped by the Great War, which included Louis and Hilda Esson, Katharine Prichard, and the ‘radical’ poet Dick Long. Aileen’s was no ordinary upbringing as she ran wild in the mountains, and later in Queensland when the family moved to the small coastal township of Caloundra. She and her sister were home-schooled to allow their imaginations to develop as fully as possible, and taught, by ear, to engage with several languages – German, French and Greek—as very young children.

When aged nearly fourteen, Aileen’s uprooting to suburban Melbourne and the elite girls’ school, PLC, must have been momentous. The reader can begin to see what Aileen was to become in Martin’s decoding of ‘Poor Child’, Aileen’s manuscript about her school days. It tells the journey from the ‘shy but egotistical young girl, through a period of depression in her second year when she was in love with a teacher and possessed by thoughts of suicide, to her final year when she determines to relinquish the idea of her creative genius, forget romance, study hard and become a linguist’ (Martin 2016, 79). By her final years at school, Aileen was invited to take part in a Critics’ Club, the inner circle of senior students who all aspired to write. Here, the reader can begin to see the seeds of Aileen’s tragedy through her immersion in Freudian discourses about homosexuality. The long European fascination with altered states of consciousness and deeper levels of knowledge supposedly possessed by ‘mad’ people—and not fully challenged until Michel Foucault and his analysis of madness and civilisation—entranced her. And, as I will note below, perhaps also her mother.

In 1932 Aileen began her Arts degree at the University of Melbourne; in 1935 she gained first class honours for a thesis, in French, on Proust. During her years on campus, Aileen was involved with a group of women friends she called the Mob exploring homoerotic links; she was also very active in the Labour Club as editor of the Proletariat, and joined the Communist Party. It was the heyday of communists in Australia who were active in the broad united front against fascism, among other movements. Aileen became the first secretary to the International Writers’ League (Australian branch). After the completion of her degree, Aileen travelled to Europe with her family; she then took a job in Austria, as secretary and translator, and was accepted into the Communist Party of England. In 1936 she again joined her family planning to spend winter in Barcelona taking on work as a translator.
For the next intense years, first in war-torn Spain, then in London during the World War Two bombing raids, Aileen was on the frontlines. Only twenty-one years old, she joined the British Medical Unit and worked in Spain as translator and secretary in constantly shifting makeshift hospitals; in January 1937 her unit was absorbed into the International Brigades. Martin’s section of the Spanish chapter is riveting as we are given almost a first-hand account of the brigades’ violent, intense and dangerous experiences.

Back in London, Aileen protested the non-intervention policies of Britain and France on the footsteps of Downing Street; she was more interested in direct action than the politics of appeasement. Doing a final inspection of refugee camps in France for the Australian Spanish Relief Committee when World War Two was declared, she returned to London and took a job with the Auxiliary Ambulance Service. She was exposed to the full brunt of the impact of the Blitz; she formed a lesbian relationship and for a while moved in with her lover. Throughout this time her parents continued to encourage her to write; her full-length novel about the Spanish war seems to have disappeared. It is from those surviving fragmentary manuscripts, of diaries, poems, short-stories and novels, that Martin weaves her engrossing story.

This is a very difficult story to tell, and Martin’s accounts of Aileen’s achievements in social protest movements, as a grass roots activist, show great receptivity. Again and again we see Aileen, as an adult, choosing the path of direct action, direct engagement, with a ‘real’ physical enemy, and refusing work once it became more office-bound. It’s never easy to write about women who put their bodies on the line and undertake joint action, about ‘unsuccessful’ women who sacrifice their ‘careers’ for what they see as our joint future and stay on the ‘wrong’ side of the barricades. Was the red paint poured on the steps of Downing Street her only piece of street theatre? Frame this slightly differently and can we see it as poetry in action? Even better handled is Martin’s account of Aileen’s lived experience of lesbianism. While never criminalised like male homosexuality, it was as late as 1973 when the Australian Medical Association removed homosexuality from its list of ‘illnesses’. When lesbianism was adopted as a political strategy in the mid 1970s, both Aileen and her sister Helen’s lesbianism was spoken of openly in Melbourne left circles. Perhaps through the publication of this biography other of Aileen’s lovers will emerge.
The last third of *Ink in Her Veins* Martin devotes to Aileen’s dark night of the soul; on her return to Melbourne, mainstream Melbourne, to live in her parents’ Kew home. Martin shows how she was unable to integrate the trauma and intensity of her decade overseas in her daily life. This section of the biography deals with the harrowing story of Aileen’s incarceration in a series of psychiatric institutions across Melbourne, and of regular, weekly at times, shock treatment. With extraordinary insight, Martin works through Aileen’s autobiographical fragments ‘20th Century Pilgrim’ which she finds a ‘richly allusive text’ full of ‘anger, sardonic humour and painful self-reflection’ (Martin 2016, 228).

It should be no surprise that Aileen’s ‘mental health difficulties’ began in 1948, at the height of ‘red-baiting’ during the Cold War with the tensions between the Soviet Union and the capitalist West, given her commitment to communism and her membership of the Party. After World War Two, with the conflation of homosexuality and rising anti-communist fervour, the discourses of homophobia and communism became entangled. Three years later in 1951 the Liberal government under Menzies sought to ban the Communist Party of Australia. What of the extent of intervention and support of the Party in member’s lives? Aileen’s deviations became ‘manifest, nameable and describable’, and following Foucault (1972, 40-49) there was a threshold beyond which exclusion was demanded. The burden of explanation was transferred to psychoanalysis. Martin appears not to have had access to case notes and mental health files to gauge more fully the extent of psychiatric and political abuse.

In her careful and impressive construction in *Ink in Her Veins* Martin draws extensively on Aileen’s unpublished autobiographical writing to present Aileen’s representation of events as the mostly chronological narrative of her life unfolds. Aileen’s voice comes through clearly, that is the stories she told herself and of how she represented the world to herself. Martin peels back the veils of time to reveal the living voice, and Aileen does come ‘alive’ through this biography. This long neglected voice is privileged. Aileen emerges as a paradigmatic figure, as the outspoken and radical poet rejected by society, representative of other twentieth century pilgrims alongside Sylvia Plath; Janet Frame; Virginia Woolf; Lucia Joyce, the daughter of James Joyce, and more.

Yet this approach has dangers as well as advantages. In biography Johan Galtung wants to see three parallel lives: the public, private and inner person (Galtung 1997, 75). Dorothy Green, the Australian critic, wanted at least four lives including the further dimension of the mythic pilgrim.
Galtung argues the private life, ‘the gossipy micro-history’ is only interesting when the linkage between public and private lives is worked out in some detail; one of the dangers of biographies of ‘neglected’ women can be the tendency to inadvertently downplay their public life and achievements. Martin is particularly interested in the emotional relationship between mother and daughter, but what of the challenge of thinkers like Green and Galtung who call for the story of the progress of the spirit, the inner struggle of the subject? My unease with Martin’s biography of Aileen is in her rendition of the social context and parallel story of the Palmer family which Martin elaborates on just when the layers of Aileen’s psyche are beginning to reveal themselves, and just when they are all caught up in a collapsing vortex of conservatism.

Aileen represented her mother as an unfulfilled poet. Even more, she thought, that if she, Aileen, had not been born, Nettie would have been a poet. Martin tends to reinforce Aileen’s views and a strand of feminist writing that argues Nettie’s true vocation was indeed as a poet and that she ‘sacrificed’ her life to that of her husband. Elsewhere I have argued that this view is not supported by the evidence (Jordan 1999, 179ff). The high peaks of public achievement of Nettie, Helen or Vance for the audience who hardly knows who they were is deemed not necessary in the age of Google. If we don’t accept, however, Martin’s endorsement of Aileen’s views of her mother, as an unfulfilled poet rather than a wonderful poetic and lyrical prose writer, then the implications must be addressed. How could Aileen get the story of her mother so very wrong? Was it merely because familiarity clouds one’s view?

Why is the assumption so widespread in Australia that women sacrifice their potential when they have children? Too often in writings about women writers we see a conflation of poetry and spirituality, as if poetry were the only one path to emotional and spiritual realisation, and, as in this instance, motherhood cannot be or has no part of it. We should substitute anything deep and creative for ‘poetry’ as does Galtung. A too common assumption in the West is/was that the psyche is already constituted as a set of potentials, which remain consistent throughout the life, and the task of the individual is to realise that individualistic potential. Aileen made very different choices from her mother about her sexuality, children, family, her audience, her ethics and economics (Jordan 2008, passim). Surely we don’t need psychoanalysis to tell us Aileen’s fragmentary stories about her family are more about her relationship to her own body, and to the word, imbued with the cultural assumptions of her times rather than any careful rendition of others. But
perhaps we do need to be reminded that every woman in Australia in those times did sacrifice their potential ‘career’ when they married, given the marriage bar that stipulated married women were not to be employed, albeit primarily in the public service. This was not overturned until the late 1960s.

So while *Ink in her Veins* is a classic biography of a tragic figure and a cautionary story of family dynamics, of post traumatic shock, of failed potential as a public figure, Aileen’s story must also be a story of celebration of survival and inner growth despite and through the struggle to fight fascism and the mental health profession. How could Aileen’s life have been any different? When thinking about Aileen I can’t help but see how her life followed a logic of identification with certain values as she faced the great challenges of her age—modernity and colonialism, fascism and war, capitalism and loss of the sacred. That all three Palmer women saw some hope in the powerful process of psychoanalysis and failed to understand the dangers of entrapment by the mental health system must still sound warning bells when we read one of the most important French feminists, Julia Kristeva, claim that psychoanalysis is the *only* way to reconcile the warring forces of the unconscious.

When I first met Aileen Palmer in 1976, mental health issues didn’t have the same stigma associated with them as today. And Aileen didn’t stand out as particularly strange among all the ‘odd’ women I interviewed. I remember visiting Jean Campbell in an old ladies’ home and being shocked when she begged me to give her copies of her own novels, second-hand copies which I had picked up cheaply. Another interviewee sat in a very dark and grubby house in Toorak, with an electrical heater, its red bar glowing, hoisted up on the armchair opposite. I didn’t find Aileen a particularly reliable source on her mother or even her parents’ work. She introduced me to even more strange elderly women; Esther Levy author of *This Bed My Centre* was in bed in another old ladies’ home; Jessie MacLeod and other of Helen’s friends would drive out to visit with Aileen in the backseat. Aileen always had her own and very powerful agendas; about world peace and maintaining the rage against war mongers, about communism, about sharing her story of Spain and London, about the damaging experiences of psychiatric incarceration, and caring for her friends and fellow inmates. And finally after these long years here is her story.

This latest biography by Sylvia Martin about our own home-grown Sylvia Plath, mad woman poet, must be welcomed. Aileen’s own writing,
especially her poems are very difficult to track down according to poetry critic Phillip Hall in his review of the biography; is it only too common for past writers, men and women, Indigenous and settler to be out of print, unknown and neglected. Martin is an award winning biographer of Ida Leeson, and *Passionate Friends: Mary Fullerton, Mabel Singleton and Miles Franklin*; she is one of our very few biographers working in an impoverished cultural heritage when it comes to different, ‘radical’ women who are neither celebrities nor politicians. UWA Publishing needs to be congratulated on this beautiful production. Some-time ago we might have been able to call for UWA Publishing to republish a selection of her poems and essays and see it happen; at best is all we can hope for now is that some print on demand edition comes out before a global digital corporation gets hold of the copyright?

“We need a nice new goddess, not

Born armoured, out of old Jove’s brain,

But someone sunny, folk in pain

Might speak with from a murky spot (Palmer 1964, 178).

References


**Author biography**

Dr Deborah Jordan, historian, is a senior research fellow (adjunct) at the National Centre of Australian Studies at Monash University. She has published widely in Australian cultural history and women’s history. *Loving Words, Love Letters between Vance and Nettie Palmer 1909-1914* is to come out next year.

Email: deborah.jordan@monash.edu