

21 Peace Activist and Poet

In the years after the horror stretch of 1948-50, Aileen's life followed a pattern of periods of relative calm, periods of intense activity and then periods of hospitalisation. From time to time, she held down clerical jobs - at Australia-Soviet House, James Baird, Cheshire's and the Athenaeum Library – and once she lasted a fortnight in a teaching position. But mostly, in her well periods, she followed her two passions: political activism and writing.

While not turning her back on communism, she directed her energies more towards working for world peace, in particular, the prohibition of the atom bomb and the fight against the development of nuclear weapons. Just as she had deplored those she called 'base-wallowers' during the Spanish War, she was not prepared to watch from the sidelines on this issue either. In early 1957, she announced that she was joining the so-called Peace Fleet, a fleet of small ships that was preparing to sail from Japan into the Christmas Island atom bomb test area as a protest gesture. Katharine Susannah Prichard was another who committed herself to joining the fleet in the knowledge that all who sailed into the test area risked a slow death through radiation sickness. Katharine explained in a press statement: 'I feel that it is my duty to support any effort to stop further tests of atom and hydrogen bombs...This appalling danger confronts not only living people, but the generations unborn – if we fail to stop the criminal madness of these tests. They constitute a crime against humanity'.

The Peace Fleet project did not eventuate, but a few months later Aileen was invited to become one of fourteen delegates from Australia to attend the 3rd World Conference against A & H weapons to be held in Tokyo in August. There, she aided in translating for delegates speaking in Spanish and French and a photograph from the conference shows her at the microphone translating for Martine Monod, a cousin of Simone de Beauvoir. With other conference delegates she visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki and what she saw there made a deep impression on her. A press article reported on a talk she gave to the Kew Peace Group after her return: 'Miss Palmer said she had seen the effects of air raids on civilian casualties in England and Spain, but nothing comparable with Hiroshima had ever before happened in human history'. Aileen made a passionate plea in her own press statement from the conference after visiting the bombed cities: *Not only had cities been destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people slaughtered, but still untold people were enduring what could only be described as a living death. Many of these, to whom I spoke, told us they had wanted to die when they realised the extent and nature of their injuries. Now they are kept going by one*

hope: that the sight of their injuries may help mankind to understand its own danger, so that another Hiroshima will never happen. If anyone doubts the necessity for the abolition of nuclear weapons, let them see the victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki hospitals – a sight that will haunt you for the rest of your days.

After the conference, on the invitation of Chinese delegates, Aileen visited China with five of the Australian delegates and was enthused by what she saw there: *After 30 years of Japanese occupation and civil war, the Chinese people appear actively and enthusiastically engaged in peaceful reconstruction. From my impression, the last thing they want is war of any kind.*

Aileen was also writing poetry, the kind of verse she believed in as *a poet of conscience*. In the same year as the momentous trips to Tokyo and China, Katharine Susannah Prichard paid for a small volume of her ‘assorted verses’ to be printed. A basic mimeograph production, *Dear Life* by ‘Caliban’, includes two of the sonnets Aileen wrote during her first hospital incarceration in 1948 - ‘In Hospital’ and ‘The Swans’. As well as original poems, it also contains her translations of favourite poems by Pushkin and Heine and a poem that inspired her all her life, Aragon’s ‘The Poet to his Party’.

Other poems speak more directly to the political situation she found herself in during the mid 1950s. Intriguingly, one sonnet is simply titled ‘To J.V.S.’. When I realised the initials stood for Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, I was astounded. Aileen wrote this poem after Khrushchev’s secret report of the 20th Congress of the CPSU was published in the *New York Times* in 1956, detailing the mass killings and deportations of the Stalinist regime. The CPA refused any discussion of the report and those who did not comply, including Helen Palmer, were expelled from the Party. Aileen’s response was to write ‘To J.V.S.’, in which she mourns the dictator’s deviation from the *dialectical way* and says *no one saw you clearly until today*. Yet she maintains her faith in communism, stating:

*This brings no swift reversal of belief,
No discard of the works we once defended:
Whatever history holds of rage and grief
Our chances now are infinitely extended...*

Poems such as ‘Maralinga’ and ‘Straw in the Wind’ reflected her recent preoccupation with the nuclear threat, the latter beginning *I am a straw in the wind/ I have travelled far on the high winds of disaster*. Its conclusion speaks of the need to go on protesting whatever happens:

*The wind stirred, but I would not go with the wind
Small and obscure and woven into the grass
I feared the voice in the wind.*

There was death in the wind –

A new sort of death...

*So I still must go with the wind
Singing my song down the wide lanes of the air
For where the new death rains no grass will grow
The grass, the intelligent grass, must keep on growing*

A review of *Dear Life* in *Overland* praised the collection: ‘Here is a poet who can take the shock of events that are contemporary and while they are still new, record an impression. The gift of musical line is hers and a natural, unstrained imagery’. The reviewer also noted a sense of misplaced self-deprecation: ‘The personal note of suffering is inescapable in the verses but it is compensated by a passionate insistence on the soundness at the core of life. Also one gathers sometimes a sense that the work is offered apologetically – in the pen name – the dedication and such lines as “verse is the only parlour trick I know” but a poet with courage enough to face up to such subject matter as that of the lines “To J.V.S.” is far from being tentative’.

Meanjin published one of Aileen’s poems a year later. ‘Song from a Distant Epoch’, is a moving piece that evokes the effects of nuclear radiation on future generations and is clearly inspired by her visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even the ancient culture of the gypsies who overcame oppression by carrying their own ‘iron house’ refuge with them proves no match for the deadly poison. (Aileen returns several times in her writing to the notion of the ‘iron house’ of the gypsies, which combines the ‘firm house’ she desired as a child with a nomadic life.):

*Because your grief was an old lament without frontiers
the gypsies brought their caravans and their music:
each carried with him his own iron house
intangible as a rainbow, dim as a ghost
(you feared for the wasting child, the dream without eyes)*

*because the air was a cluster of deadly blossoms
the gypsies poured their melodies into your silence:
their tongue was an ancient babble of tinkling symbols*

(child without hands, come and listen to the gypsies)

*'we will give you eyes', they said: 'our eyes are invincible –
Come to the free, wide spaces – the world without clouds'
(child without feet, let the gypsies take you riding)*

*each carried with him his own iron house
intangible as a rainbow, dim as a ghost:
but the clouds of poison were massed on the low horizon
and you found no refuge there from the wind and the rain
(child without ears, have you no more strength to cry?)*

Aileen became an active protester against the Vietnam War in the 1960s, declaring to Katharine Prichard: *I feel Vietnam is the Spain of the present moment*. But her interest in Vietnam started before that. Through her friends from the CPA, journalist Malcolm Salmon and his wife Lorraine, who lived in Vietnam in the late 1950s for two years, Aileen was asked to work on two unusual translations. The first was a volume of five long poems by the revolutionary poet, To Huu, whose work was known by heart by many people in his native Vietnam. Aileen translated them from French and the small volume with its delicate cover design of bamboo leaves was published in Hanoi by Foreign Languages Publishing House in 1959.

The other translation Aileen was commissioned to undertake was published in Hanoi in 1962 and received a much wider audience. Reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement* in England, it was later republished in the United States in the early 1970s and reprinted many times over the next two decades. This was the *Prison Diary* of Ho Chi Minh, President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and known to the people as 'Uncle Ho'. He wrote the poems during 1942 and 1943 when he was a prisoner of Chiang Kai-Shek's police, picked up while he was on his way from Indochina to confer with him about forming a common front against the Japanese, but suspected of espionage. The 115 verses trace his journey as he is marched from gaol to gaol in South China, often in leg irons, for over a year. He wrote them in a notebook in Chinese calligraphy rather than Vietnamese so as not to raise suspicion among his Chinese guards by writing in a language they did not understand. Aileen was provided with a literal translation of the Chinese word for word into English by the publishers

and asked to provide a poetic rendering of the quatrains and Tang poems. She preferred to think of her work as a rendering rather than a translation especially when Helen, after she received a copy, queried whether Aileen could be called a ‘translator’. Aileen did feel her work on *Prison Diary* was not as successful as the translation of the To Huu poems. As she wrote to Lorraine Salmon: *To have done a really good job, I would have had to know the music of the original, which you can’t know, unless you know the language fairly well.* The apparent simplicity of Ho Chi Minh’s verse does, however, create a distinctive music of its own:

Advice to Oneself

Without the cold and desolation of winter

There could not be the warmth and splendour of spring.

Calamity has tempered and hardened me,

And turned my mind into steel.

In an article American academic David Marr wrote in 1971 about Vietnamese sources on Vietnam, he remarks: ‘If the recent stirring reception for *The Prison Diary of Ho Chi Minh* (Aileen Palmer, trans., Bantam paperback) is any indication, then readers have a real desire to find out what the Vietnamese have said, and are saying, about their country’. It seems Aileen was eventually starting to gain some international recognition for her political activism and skills as a poet and translator through her rendering of Ho Chi Minh’s verse for an English-speaking readership. But her reception on the home front when she began her activist period in 1957, though also ‘stirring’, was much less positive.