The novels of Eleanor Dark

Humphrey McQueen

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THAT Christina Stead has only recently gained any measure of popular recognition as a major novelist in Australia is partly attributable to her forty-year absence from this country and to the fact that only one and a half of her novels are set here.

The continuing neglect of Eleanor Dark is less easy to explain: she lived here all her life and all of her ten novels are set in Australia. The neglect is doubly puzzling when one remembers that for almost twenty years Eleanor Dark was undoubtedly the best-selling serious novelist writing in Australia.

Her second novel, *Prelude to Christopher* (1934), won the Australian Literary Society Gold Medal, as did her next book, *Return to Coolami* (1936). She gained an international readership when some of her later novels were translated into French, German, Italian and Swedish.

It is not correct to say that she has been completely neglected. There is always *The Timeless Land* (1941), which is the first part of a trilogy dealing in semi-factual form with the first years of European settlement in Australia. Indeed, the Australian Broadcasting Commission holds the television rights to this trilogy and has plans to make fifteen one-hour episodes for its first colour TV series some time around 1975. The trilogy is all that remains in print and *The Timeless Land* still appears on reading lists for senior school students.

In accounting for Dark's decline in popularity it is necessary to mention what may be considered limitations in her creative power. She had difficulty in writing successfully of people other than the middle classes, and she was something of a social realist. Moreover, she was most comfortable in presenting a clash of ideas, and her secondary characters occasionally assume puppet-like qualities.

While there are some glaringly bad examples of each of these failings, there are also instances of her ability to transcend them. The convict, Andrew Prentice, in *The Timeless Land* is a thoroughly creditable non-bourgeois figure, as is the Aboriginal, Bennelong. Almost all her novels include episodes of great excitement as complex physical events are portrayed—the sinking of a Sydney Harbour Ferry in *Waterway* (1938), or the bush fire in *Sun Across the Sky* (1937).

Stylistically, her novels placed her in world company in the 1930s and far in advance of any of her resident Australian fellow authors. While clearly aware of the development of 'the stream of consciousness', Dark did not adopt this technique but rather expressed her concern with time and causation by compressing many years' memories into one or two days' action, so that we see people at a crisis point when everything that has gone before reappears to influence the outcome.

In her 1945 novel, *The Little Company*, a novelist-character expresses what is clearly intended to be Dark's reply to her critics on this point:

> The writer's trick of presenting a life as the steady onward march of a personality, leaving the past behind, advancing on the future, must be, then, nothing but a lazy device to make his own task easier—a recoil of his mind from the technical intricacy of recording a man's existence as an endless present moment, moving snail-wise through time, carrying the past and the future on its back.

Concern with time as a problem for the novelist is most obvious in *The Timeless Land,* as the title demonstrates, and in *Lantana Lane* (1959). Some critics mistook this, her last novel, for a collection of short stories, but others were perceptive enough to see the parallels with Furphy's *Such is Life*—the method of plot construction in which was clarified in 1945 by A. D. Hope as being coherent because it 'gives us a picture of real characters whose life-stories only have unity and coherence in terms of the pattern of life into which they fit'. This is equally true of Dark's pineapple farmers, for whom historical time is tangential though menacing.

Dark's proven agility in the construction of her novels is but one element in her formidable intellectual powers. In presenting explicit social argument she never failed to sustain the range of opinions, all with equal force, so that there are no easy victories for 'her side'.

Perhaps this facility arises from the fact that she took no single side. She was clearly a radical, but no narrow dogmatist. As a heretic in Australian society she valued heresy within the radical movement. She was, however, totally incapable of presenting a creditable capitalist.

During the 'fifties her social views became increasingly unacceptable—one might say that social views *per se* became unfashionable in creative writing. But the late 'sixties saw a revival of social protest, and some of the issues which concerned Eleanor Dark in the 'thirties and 'forties are accepted as relevant once again.

Undoubtedly the most controversial of Dark's themes, one which runs throughout almost all her work, is what today is known as 'women's liberation'. The most outspoken statement of this appears in her first novel *Slow Dawning* (1932).

The central character is a woman doctor whose medical practice suffers because her morals are considered suspect. In one passage the doctor is revealed as thinking:

> I'm young, and I'm healthy, and I want to be loved. I have my mental and my physical needs, and desires—must they be forced back, and repressed till they twist me into something horrible? The mental ones must go hungry—but why can't I satisfy the physical ones with casual unions, as men do? I have money and I have knowledge; I could protect myself from disease and see that I didn't bear illegitimate children. But there are no facilities—

Once the fate of other and often less explicit novels is recalled, the 'shocking' nature of this passage is clear. The doctor also envisages an 'Army of

Women' who will fight over the centuries to regain full humanity for women.

Despite this novel's frankness, it is important to remember what it avoids. When a younger girl friend asks for instruction in the facts of life on her wedding eve, the doctor stresses the beauty of sex, but unlike Mellors in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* gives no explicit detail, even in clinical language.

Another book, *Prelude to Christopher*, deals with an intelligent woman driven to insanity and suicide because she cannot be a mother. Dark's ambivalent attitude towards the virtues of motherhood is paralleled in the writings of her father, the poet and short-story writer, Dowell O'Reilly. In subsequent novels the fate of the range of unfulfilled women is revealed with rigour and honesty.

A weakness in these novels arises from Dark's attempt to recreate — even isolate — the process of falling in love. In a period when the world's literature was increasingly concerned with inhuman relationships this was an heroic if hopeless task. Her failure in this is a measure of the world's failure to actualise love, Hollywood notwithstanding.

No more popular was her approach to the Australian Aborigines. *The Timeless Land* is unsparing in its assault on the devastating impact of the Europeans upon Aboriginal society. Not content with this, Eleanor Dark pictures Aborigines as being capable of complex and subtle responses to social issues. This has been criticised as putting sophisticated ideas into the minds of simple people. In other words, some of the critics revealed their own prejudices by rejecting her portrayal of the Aboriginal as a full human being.

(National Library of Australia)

The Aboriginal, Bennelong, was successfully evoked in Eleanor Dark's work.

Aboriginal society is used to present the other aspect of Dark's major concerns, namely, the corrosive effects of Western civilisation. At a surface level her distaste for the wonders of civilisation

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can be seen from the recurrence of car accidents in her novels, while in *Sun Across the Sky* she has a troublesome husband killed off by a vacuum cleaner.

The Timeless Land offers the opportunity to contrast Australia before European settlement with the ravages that civilisation makes within the space of four years. Dark's views are given by Australia's first Governor, Phillip, when he is about to depart from Sydney:

> He saw them driven by their reckless greed, and by an obscure urge for conquest of so aloof and invulnerable a foe, exhausting her earth, fouling her rivers, despoiling her trees, savagely imposing upon the pattern of her native loveliness traditional forms which meant beauty in other lands. He heard them crying out to her insatiably: 'Give! Give' and was aware of her silent inviolability which would never give until they had ceased to rob.
>
> How did one learn to know a country such as this? Not by building a squalid little England here upon the shores, and clinging to it!

But it is in comparison with the nature of undisturbed Aboriginal society that Dark makes her most telling points. The Aboriginal woman who becomes wife to an escaped convict experiences her husband's hatred of his own tribe:

> He had made her understand that they hated him, too, and would capture and kill him if they could. Her instinct taught her that a tribe so divided against itself was a tribe whose foundations shook, a tribe into which no woman could wish her children to be born. Her blood warned her that so fixed and implacable a hatred of man for man became, all too easily, hatred of man for life, hatred of man for himself, a terrible inner decay, spelling ruin and disaster.

In the stress of fear during the second world war, *The Timeless Land* was misread as a justification of European settlement when it was, in fact, a scarifying assault on the Australia of the 1930s, torn as it was with the ravages of economic depression and class warfare.

The position of women in each society is dealt with in a comparison which is unfavourable to the Europeans. Although the Aboriginal women are frequently physically maltreated by their husbands, they have an inestimable compensation in the community of tribal life, while the European women are ill-used and isolated. And the Aborigines are deeply perplexed because the Europeans have two sets of laws—civil and religious—which are in conflict and neither of which is obeyed.

There can be no doubting Dark's intense love of the Australian landscape or of her ability to evoke it, for as John Manifold testified in a 1959 tribute to her in *Overland:* in the London of the late 1930s he 'found the best antidote to the foreign-ness and the sub-Arctic climate . . . was to crouch over the gas fire with *Sun Across the Sky* or *Prelude to Christopher* . . . for the feel of sunlight and the smell of boronia'.

Yet she was no crude chauvinist. Her attachment to the countryside and her fond hopes for its inhabitants cannot add up to political nationalism. Civilisation stands as a barrier between her love of Australia as a natural phenomenon and her rejection of Australia as a socio-political manifestation; a barrier between her patriotism and her nationalism.

Clearly she did not despair of their reconciliation, and her novels are partly intended to awaken Australians to the task of an entirely new kind of nation-building. There is little indication of how this is to be achieved on a political level. However, the creative artist has a special power.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Sun Across the Sky,* which contains a characterisation of the poet, Christopher Brennan, as Patrick Nicholas Kavanagh. The forces of malign civilisation are epitomised by the real estate developer, Sir Frederick Gormley, whose title and fame result from his despoliation of a surf beach into the state's foremost tourist resort. The one remaining blot is the fishing village owned by Kavanagh.

Gormley sometimes dimly guessed that 'there could be in a man . . . qualities of mind, which so enriched him that he could stare in an absent way while you spoke of money . . . that man possessed surely a strange and a dangerous and a subversive power'. Just before the car accident which kills Gormley, he is momentarily blinded by the sun. In the split second in which he closes his eyes he sees 'Right across the sky . . . that black and clear and arrogant signature—Patrick Nicholas Kavanagh'.

While Dark never sank into pessimism she was well aware that the triumph of the artist is far away, that artists in Australia are, to use the title of her wartime novel, *The Little Company.*

Dark's concern with ideas rather than with action placed her outside the mainstream of Australian fiction, but as authors such as White, Porter and Keneally are accepted it may be that Dark will acquire a new generation of readers who will gain wisdom from her attempts to grapple with those issues which once more beset Australian consciences. She can provide a more than useful point of departure.

Her stature will remain diminished until her early novels take their place alongside the justifiably lauded *Timeless Land.*

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