

Aims

Marjorie Barnard's and Flora Eldershaw's Letters to Nettie Palmer 1930-1964: Complete Edition.

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Aims

This is the first time the complete letters from novelists Marjorie Barnard (1897-1987) and Flora Eldershaw (1897-1956) to critic and confidante Nettie Palmer (1885-1964) have been analysed, edited, framed and annotated with a focus on their relationships and shifting literary, political, social and personal concerns. Just over 200 letters from Barnard to Palmer and a much smaller number (less than 20) from Eldershaw are held in the Palmer Papers in the National Library of Australia. These date from 1930 — the year following publication of Barnard and Eldershaw's first collaborative novel *A House Is Built* — to 1964, the year of Palmer's death. The letters represent a highly significant documentary source on Australian literary culture from the 1930s to the 1950s. To date, only a few selected examples drawn from the correspondence have been published, so the principal aim of this project is to produce a complete edition for publication. The project builds on my on-going work on the literary collaboration of Barnard and Eldershaw (see below) and continues my research into methodological engagements with archival sources such as personal letters (see **The Intimate Archive** <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/womens-studies/staff/avickery-intimate-archive.php>).

Background

Barnard and Eldershaw rank among the most influential writers of Australia's interwar and immediate post war period. Theirs was the longest and most productive collaboration in Australian literary history: as 'M. Barnard Eldershaw' they produced five novels, three historical studies, a volume of literary criticism and a host of lectures, articles and stories. Active at a time when women dominated the Australian literary scene, Barnard and Eldershaw rapidly became influential figures in the literary circles of the 1930s and 1940s and played significant roles in the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Eldershaw, the more outgoing of the pair, twice served as President of that organization and was an influential figure in the Commonwealth Literary Fund. Throughout their careers, Barnard and Eldershaw maintained close friendships and professional alliances with the leading writers of the period, including Frank Dalby Davison, Eleanor Dark, Jean Devanny and Judah Waten. Despite most of their work being out of print, their writings and their wider cultural activities continue to engage the attention of scholars of Australian literature, politics and history and attention to the dynamics of their extended literary partnership is now international.

Nettie Palmer's reputation as the most important non-academic Australian critic working in the inter-war period is widely established. Her reputation derives principally from her sustained efforts to map the contours of the emerging national literature in her essays and journalism and from her role in initiating and maintaining correspondence with a wide network of her literary contemporaries. Nettie and Vance Palmer formed probably the most significant Australian literary couple and intimate partnership of the last century and the Palmer Papers (NLA MSS 1174), from which these letters are drawn, are of immense importance and the collection is one of the most frequently accessed by scholars.

Works such as Carole Ferrier's *As Good As A Yarn With You* (1992) and Marilla North's *Yarn Spinners* (2001) amply demonstrate the extent to which women writers of this period utilised correspondence as a crucial avenue to build support, to test ideas and to negotiate and debate personal, political and cultural affiliations. As Drusilla Modjeska highlights in *Exiles at Home* (1981), through her network of correspondents Nettie Palmer took on a pivotal role as arbiter and critic for a generation of Australian women writers. Discussing the centrality of correspondence to an understanding of Australian literary life across these decades, Barnard observed in a letter to Nettie Palmer that 'the only literary club of any value in Australia was composed of the people you corresponded with'.

The correspondence I am editing was initiated by Palmer who took it upon herself to contact the young authors following the appearance of their celebrated first novel. It was a number of years before the three met in person. In spanning more than three decades the proposed edition of letters offers the opportunity to trace the trajectory of Barnard's and Eldershaw's individual and joint literary careers from their earliest tentative responses as fledgling novelists honoured by the attention of an established critic, through their success as fiction writers to their later disappointments and frustrations with their shifting personal circumstances and with what they saw as an increasingly indifferent reading public and hostile political culture. Not only do the letters provide significant detail on the development of each of their fiction and non-fiction works, they provide insights into the ways in which Australian writers' lives and careers were shaped by broader cultural conditions, including Anglo-Australian publishing relations, the fragile state of local publishing, and shifts in literary taste both locally and overseas. At a time too when marriage and motherhood were considered the most appropriate goals for women of their class, Barnard's letters in particular contain valuable insights into how the economics of writing necessitated her striking a delicate balance between independence and family support and between personal and creative fulfillment and paid professional endeavour. They also reveal glimpses of the pressures single women faced pursuing intimate relationships in an era when social mores dictated that women's access to sexuality be ordered exclusively within and around the institution of marriage.

As neither Barnard nor Eldershaw preserved their letters from Palmer, the surviving correspondence is one-sided. Virginia Woolf notes, however, that 'a good letter-writer so takes the colour of the reader at the other end, that from reading the one we can imagine the other'. Through their scope, continuity and detail the letters offer an unparalleled insight into the formation of Barnard's and Eldershaw's individual and joint literary careers, into Palmer's role in the nurturing of individual literary talents and into important contemporary debates surrounding an emerging national literature across the critical decades of the 1930s, the Second World War and the Cold War. Barnard's letters are colourful, discursive and of high literary quality. She used her letters to rehearse critical ideas, invite opinions, and to exchange literary gossip. While Palmer maintained a large circle of correspondents, Barnard clearly occupied a special place and was treated with considerable care, concern and fondness. Indeed, Barnard once observed to Palmer: 'you are a magnificent correspondent — a card, a 22 page letter and two substantial postscripts. I can only give you a very poor return for so much, but I love getting your letters, they make me feel like the lady of Shallot, watching the world go by in a mirror, a clear & steady one'. While Eldershaw's letters in contrast are generally briefer and more

business-like, they nevertheless add the occasional critical insight into the Barnard-Eldershaw collaboration and Palmer's place in the personal and professional lives of the two women. Further, Eldershaw's letters contain vital clues to the division of labour between the collaborators and to the intricacies of the literary and cultural politics of the day, especially through her participation with Vance Palmer in the Commonwealth Literary Fund. Moreover, Barnard's later struggles with the perception that the Palmers ultimately held Eldershaw in greater esteem are thrown into relief by the presence of Eldershaw's letters here too.

Here you can find an article on the editing of this correspondence. [[link to PDF Antipodes article](#)]

For more about Barnard and Eldershaw, see:

Dever, M. 1989, 'The case for Flora Eldershaw', *Hecate*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp.38-48.

Dever, M. 1991, "'No time is inopportune for a protest": Aspects of the political activities of Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw', *Hecate*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 9-21.

Dever, M. 1994a, "'Conventional women of ability": M. Barnard Eldershaw and women's cultural authority', in Maryanne Dever (ed.), *Wallflowers and Witches: Women and Culture in Australia, 1910 to 1945*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, pp. 133-46.

Dever, M. (ed.) 1995a, *M. Barnard Eldershaw*, Australian Authors' Series, UQP, St Lucia.

Dever, M. 1995b, "'No mine and thine but ours": Finding "M. Barnard Eldershaw"', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 14, no.1, pp. 65-74.

Dever, M. 1996, 'Reading other people's mail', *Archives and Manuscripts: Journal of the Australian Society of Archivists*, vol. 24, no.1, pp.116-129.

Dever, M. 2004. 'The bonds of friendship: The demise of "M. Barnard Eldershaw".' *Hecate* 30:2, 129-47.

Dever, M. 2005. "'A friendship that is grown on paper": Reflections on editing Marjorie Barnard's letters to Nettie Palmer'. *Antipodes*, 19: 1 (2005), 13-19.