

## **Aileen Palmer's Getting of Wisdom**

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This talk will be partly about Henry Handel Richardson but will also concentrate on her intersection with three other women, two of them writers. Richardson's correspondence with Mary Kernot, her contemporary at Presbyterian Ladies' College, Melbourne, will feature and the two writers are women who attended PLC in the years after Richardson left there. One of these was Nettie Palmer, the Australian writer and critic who first brought Richardson's name to Australian literary attention; the other was Nettie's elder daughter, Aileen Palmer, for whom Henry Handel Richardson provided inspiration in several ways and who is the subject of a biography I recently completed and which was published last month.

HHR once wrote something that has become quite a famous quotation of hers: 'How I do hate the ordinary sleek biography! I'd have every wart & pimple emphasised, every tricky trait or petty meanness brought out. The great writers are great enough to bear it.' She wrote this in a letter to Nettie Palmer in 1932, not about herself as is often assumed, but when asking if Nettie was going to write about George Eliot. As it happened, Nettie Palmer did become Richardson's her first biographer, in 1950. And Nettie was perhaps kinder to Richardson than I am going to be in this paper.

For Aileen Palmer, Nettie's daughter, the fascination with Henry Handel Richardson all started with her novel, *The Getting of Wisdom*.

When Laura Tweedle Rambotham approached the Presbyterian Ladies' College on her first day of school there she found the imposing building that glowered over the Fitzroy Gardens in East Melbourne 'vast in its breadth and height, appalling in its sombre greyness'. The heroine of Henry Handel Richardson's novel, *The Getting of Wisdom*, was thirteen. So was Ethel (Ettie) Richardson when she started at the school as a boarder in 1883. One of the friendships she formed there was with fellow student, Mary Robertson, which lapsed after Richardson left school and moved to Europe with her mother and sister, furthering her studies in piano at the Conservatorium of Music in Leipzig. There, Ettie Richardson married John

George Robertson, a Scottish student studying German Literature, and they settled in England in 1903 after George accepted a chair at University of London. *The Getting of Wisdom*, a satirical story based on her years at PLC and Richardson's second novel, was published in London in 1910 under her male pseudonym. In life, too, she was no longer Ettie, but Henry.

After *The Getting of Wisdom* came out, Mary Robertson (now Kernot) wrote to her old schoolfriend and told her of the Melbourne reaction to her novel: 'the college people ruffle and hump themselves like outraged turkeys when the Book is mentioned...you'll never be elected President of the Old Collegians Association'. The two PLC 'old girls' resumed their friendship and a long-ranging correspondence between London and Melbourne began. Cupid, a character in *The Getting of Wisdom*, was based on Mary. 'A plain girl, with irregular features', Cupid was three years older than Richardson's semi-autobiographical Laura. She was clever and loved reading and 'had a kind of a dare-devil mind in a hidebound character, and was often very bold in speech'. She usually referred to Laura as 'Infant'. When Laura was invited to join the boarders' Literary Society, it was Cupid who told Laura to stop writing 'wooden, second-hand rubbish', then said her attempt at truthful writing was 'dull and long-winded', finally conceding on her third attempt: 'I believe there's something in you after all...Anyhow, you know now what it is to be true, yet not dull and prosy'. Laura, however, knew that not a word of her story was true, 'but every word of it might have been true'. Thus HHR warns her readers not to treat her writing as transparent autobiography.

The women in Nettie Palmer's family had a strong association with Presbyterian Ladies' College too. Her aunt, Ina Higgins, had been a foundation student when the school opened in 1875, eight years before Ettie Richardson started there. Nettie Higgins, as she was then, became a student at PLC in 1900. She returned there in 1912 to teach Modern Languages while her fiancé, Vance Palmer, was establishing himself as a journalist and writer in London. She seems to have been unaware of *The Getting of Wisdom*, possibly because she had been overseas pursuing her own further studies during the furore at PLC surrounding the book's publication. When Nettie Palmer published her book *Modern Australian Literature 1900-1923* in 1924, it was HHR's old schoolfriend, Mary Kernot, who alerted her to the writing of Henry Handel Richardson, which was not discussed in the Palmer book. Nettie became a champion of Richardson's work, writing about it before it was known that the author was a woman and not divulging her identity even when she was asked in 1929, the year HHR's gender did become public.

As I indicated, Nettie Palmer became Richardson's first biographer in 1950 when *Henry Handel Richardson: a Study* was published, written after HHR's death in 1946. The reviewer of Palmer's biography in the *Australian Women's Weekly* (9 September 1950) noted that her failure to reveal Richardson 'the woman' was not 'through any fault of Mrs Palmer's, but through the impenetrable reserve of Henry Handel Richardson'. Nettie Palmer, however, was not given access by Mary Kernot to her revealing private correspondence with HHR for the biography. Had she been, she might have reconsidered her decision to write the book, for reasons that will become obvious.

In 1929, Nettie and Vance Palmer's two daughters, Aileen and Helen, were enrolled at PLC just as the world was sinking into recession after the Wall Street stock market crash. Soon girls would begin disappearing from the school's ranks when their parents became unable to pay the fees as the Depression set in, but Nettie was able to finance her daughters' school fees through the stipend she received from her Aunt Ina to write the biography of her late uncle, Justice Henry Bournes Higgins, whose lasting legacy was his establishment of the minimum wage in the Harvester judgement of 1907. Later, as Sir Justice Higgins, he established the Arbitration Court.

Aileen Palmer was on the cusp of fourteen when she was enrolled at PLC in 1929. It was more than four decades since young Ettie Richardson had first walked through the school's formidable gates, but her shadow would both haunt and inspire Aileen during her three years at the school. She was familiar with the expatriate novelist's writing through her mother's critical interest in her work and, by the end of her first year at PLC, both Aileen and her new friend, Brenda Linck, were poring over Nettie's copy of *The Getting of Wisdom*, each determined to write her own school story. Aileen felt a great affinity with Richardson's heroine, the rebellious Laura, the girl who was convinced of her intellectual superiority but made cruelly aware of her social inadequacies, who became obsessively infatuated with an older female student and who had a younger sister who was sweet-natured and more popular than herself (as was Aileen's sister Helen). Aileen was to emulate HHR's sardonic style in the novel she would write a few years later about her own experience at PLC--a manuscript it is doubtful she ever showed her parents.

Aileen's first homage to the writer she revered was a sonnet, 'To a Portrait of a Famous Woman', which was accepted by the school magazine *Patchwork* in mid 1930:

Is this the face of her who is proclaimed  
By half the world the greatest of our age?  
Whose books will be our noblest heritage,  
Long after others have been widely famed;  
Careless of whether critics praised or blamed  
Nor stayed nor faltered her courageous pen  
Through decades of obscurity, and then –  
Suddenly the whole world acclaimed.

No one would guess her cramped and thwarted youth:  
Her lofty brow betrays no sign or frown,  
Her hair is ebon-black, her lips are curled  
In half-contemptuous pity for the world;  
Her watchful, dark, round-lidded eyes have known  
And looked with quiet courage on the truth.

Nettie Palmer shared her daughter's amusement at being asked by the editors of *Patchwork* who was meant by the poem before they would accept it. *The Getting of Wisdom* was not held in the school library, nor was Richardson's portrait among those that graced the school corridors. Aileen's sonnet is clearly based on a portrait of its subject and the one she would have been familiar with was sent by HHR to Nettie in early 1929 to accompany articles she was writing about her.

Through her mother's association with Henry Handel Richardson, Aileen received a polite response from the author herself after Nettie posted her a copy of the poem and one of Helen's. Privately, HHR was more condescending. 'One of the poems is addressed to me!!' she wrote to Mary Kernot. 'They are early following in their parents' footsteps. The verses weren't bad, in fact they were too *good* for my taste. At that age young people shd be wilder'.

Gossip and secrets often form part of the glue of friendship and the correspondence between Henry Handel Richardson and Mary Kernot appears to have served a variety of purposes, perhaps different for each woman. As well as indulging her obvious affection for her old friend, Richardson was able to obtain information about the reception of her books and the state of the literary scene in Australia in a more personal way than in her work-based

correspondence with Nettie Palmer. Kernot also promoted HHR's writing in Australia when her readership was mainly European; as I said, she first brought Richardson's novels to Nettie Palmer's attention. For Mary Kernot, living quietly with her architect husband in the seaside suburb of Beaumaris, the relationship with Richardson would have given her a privileged insight into the literary world and an association with the writers and literary critics who sought her out.

Richardson and Kernot shared sharp powers of observation and sharper tongues; reading the correspondence that survives is often like revisiting the gossip that was part of the currency of friendship among the schoolgirls at PLC, captured with such barbed accuracy by HHR in *The Getting of Wisdom*. And it seems Mary Kernot might have been the perfect person to engage with in this pastime. Henry described Mary's counterpart Cupid in her novel as possessing 'a gift' that she was lacking: 'the ability to expand infinitely little into infinitely much, so that in the end it seemed ever so much bigger than it really was – just as a thrifty merchant boils his oranges, to swell them to twice their size'.

Henry Handel Richardson showed a keen interest in the Palmers after Nettie had begun to promote her work in Australia. (They had never met – HHR in England and the Palmers in Australia.) Her spy, Mary Kernot, reported on their movements, including the Palmers' move back to Melbourne from Queensland in 1929. Henry responded to the news with more questions: 'Very glad to hear the Palmers are prospering...Tell me what they, the P[almer]s, are like to look at. He, with his tiny meticulous handwriting, & she with her ease of expression, & really *natty* journalistic talents. I'll keep your secret'. Mary's immediate response to this request does not survive, but in a subsequent letter in 1930 she relates a visit by Nettie Palmer to her house, telling Richardson of Nettie's determination to gather as much material as she could in the way of foreign reviews and even to borrow the German edition of HHR's first novel, *Maurice Guest*. (Nettie was a linguist and spoke fluent German.) She describes Nettie as 'active in mind & body & intensely interested in her husband's work'. Henry responds with glee: 'I laughed at your description of your day with Nettie Palmer, her earnestness & energy, & your relief when it was over'. Mary apparently related another of Nettie's visits, with her daughters, a few months later, but we only have HHR's reply: 'Your most entertaining letter of Sept 14<sup>th</sup> has just come. I do enjoy your pen-pictures of Mrs Palmer's visits. She sounds *most wearing*, & I begin to understand Vance better. Think of living with that always beside you – that paragon of energy & capability. Quite enough to

make a man shrink into his shell. The girls too – oh la la! I know the type that prefers to sit & listen to its elders talk’.

Vance Palmer had travelled to London in 1930 to promote his *Bulletin* prize-winning novel, *The Passage*, and while there paid a visit to Henry Handel Richardson at the home she shared with her husband and her companion, Olga Roncoroni, in Regent’s Park Road. Knowing of his daughter’s reverence for Richardson, he wrote a letter to Aileen about his visit: ‘I’ve told Mum about seeing H.H.R.. Would you be surprised to know that she drives a car, and is very fond of speeding? And of moving-pictures? - though she only goes to Russian and German ones’.

Richardson wrote to Mary Kernot of her first impressions of Vance: ‘He struck me as perhaps being a trifle *vain*. Correct me if I’m wrong; it may have been shyness’. On second acquaintance she liked him better, deducing he might have been scared of her at their first meeting. ‘People complain I have that effect on them; though God knows it’s quite unintentional. I am really both a simple & *humble* person. (The fault of my *nose*, I say; for which I can’t be held responsible.)’ She didn’t think Vance had achieved much in the way of impressing publishers and critics on his visit to England and personally she found his novels constrained and lacking in emotion. Declaring in her reply to HHR that ‘his women are of wood’, Mary considered Vance’s inhibition might stem from Nettie: ‘Perhaps it’s rather awful to have a critic at one’s elbow, even an adoring one’.

Gossip usually promotes the gossipier at the expense of its subject and Richardson’s unkind comments about the woman whose indefatigable energy was devoted to championing her work reflect the hierarchies of the literary world. Although the work of critics and journalists was necessary to her survival as a writer, Richardson demeans it as lesser work than the creative work of the novelist, proclaiming herself bored with having to find ‘facts’. Of course, critics also have the power to write unfavourable reviews of a novelist’s work and Nettie was not always entirely complimentary about HHR’s writing. When she reviewed *The Way Home*, the second volume of Richardson’s trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* in 1925, she described it as having ‘a kind of faded charm’, words that would not have endeared her to its author.

Richardson mentions Nettie's 'journalistic talents' on several occasions, with mildly condescending comments such as 'The woman's a *born* journalist' and 'She has really a very neat pen'. Of Nettie's biography of her uncle, Justice Henry Bournes Higgins, which Vance had managed to place with a publisher in London, Richardson was scathing: 'That book left an *arid* impression...I judge from it that N.P. hasn't a touch of the novelist in her, or she wld have made her creatures live more'. With that, Nettie Palmer was put firmly in her place.

Five years after Vance met HHR in London, he was once more in England. Accompanied by his wife and daughters on this trip, he was trying to revive interest in his work among his London contacts. This time it was the literary critic Nettie Palmer's turn to meet the author whose work she had been reviewing and writing articles on for a decade in Australia. Nettie made two overnight trips in 1935 to Henry Handel Richardson's home, 'Green Ridges', near Hastings in East Sussex, where the author had lived with Olga Roncoroni since her husband's death in 1933. On the first trip in July, Nettie was driven from Hastings by Olga in Henry's car. After an afternoon and evening enjoying long talks with the writer, she went for a walk to the Old Coastguard station the next morning with Henry and Olga and was then taken for 'a dazzling drive... swift enough even for HHR, who's curiously modern in some of her passions' before leaving on the train for London at 5pm. Summing up her talks with Henry Handel Richardson in her published journal, *Fourteen Years*, Nettie wrote: 'Her alert talk is what stays in the mind, its vigorous questions, its firm outlines'. On Nettie's second visit in December, she found HHR 'perhaps more revealing, because more concentrated, in midwinter'. She observed of her: 'Always I felt her tautness, like a coiled spring'. Although she characterises Richardson as a woman who had 'few close friends' and 'no love at all for large groups', Nettie does not appear to consider that HHR's 'tautness' might have anything to do with her own presence.

In her letters to Mary Kernot, Richardson was less generous than Nettie in her account of their first actual meeting. After saying that Nettie Palmer was 'a very pleasant person', she proceeds to denigrate her as talkative and rambling, adding: 'How wrapped up she is in Vance & the girls, too!' Nettie must have confided her worries about the Palmers' difficult work and financial situation and Richardson comments, rather smugly: 'The poor things are having a hard time to make ends meet...In many ways I feel *very* sorry for her; & wish I cd do something. But sitting religiously aloof as I do, I've no power at all'. Nettie's second visit in December only served to cement HHR's unfavourable view of her. Telling Mary she was

going to London the next month, she writes: 'I shall make a point of seeing Vance and contrasting the two of them: he as silent as I am, & she one long dreary flow'.

Earlier, when *Ultima Thule*, the third volume of her (Fortunes of Richard Mahony) trilogy was published to international acclaim in 1929, Richardson had started sounding out Australian contacts such as Mary Kernot and Nettie Palmer about how they thought a reprint of *The Getting of Wisdom*, out of print for many years, would be received there. The English reprint came out in May 1931 and Richardson immediately sent Nettie a copy. To her favourable response, HHR wrote: 'I'm so glad *Laura* has reached you - and pleased you...I hope it will do well in Australia. Most of all, I should appreciate a few words from your pen. You have been one of its kindest and most enlightened friends'. Referring to the prickly reception the book had received in Australia originally, she added: 'A caricature, it was never meant to be. Just a merry and saucy bit of irony. How *can* people take it so seriously?'

Nettie's daughter, Aileen, offered to review *The Getting of Wisdom* for *Patchwork* in 1931, but the Principal suggested she write a review of the trilogy instead, which she did and it appeared in the August edition. In one of her jocular reports to HHR, Mary Kernot relates being given a copy of the *Patchwork* issue during a visit to the Palmer household on a freezing winter's day when she and Nettie and Aileen sat in the only warm spot in the house – Vance's study. With her usual sharp wit, she provides a rather cruel, but probably accurate pen portrait of the sixteen-year-old Aileen: 'She was anxious to tell of her attempt to send in a review of *Laura*. Mr Grey (Principal of College) declined it – said he had never read the book himself, only dipped into it, but a review would displease some old Collegians! but suggested the Trilogy instead – All this Aileen told in nervous bursts. She really is a picture of robust-ness. I always feel nervous about her frocks, they strain. She is coming in these holidays to see me some day. I think all the holidays, playing tennis, hockey, etc would be excellent for her but evidently she is under the weather of her work poor girl!'

Not long after the reissue of Richardson's school novel in 1931, Aileen and her friend Brenda Linck (who was three years her senior and a boarder) burst into the Palmers' house one evening brandishing the novel Brenda had just written about PLC, inspired by reading Nettie's copy of the original edition of *The Getting of Wisdom* in 1929. Unfortunately, the manuscript of Brenda's story does not survive but Nettie noted in her diary that it 'will make

“The Getting of Wisdom” seem quite kind & smooth’. Vance thought enough of Brenda’s effort to read it and make suggestions for revision.

Aileen had started writing her own ‘school story’ at the end of 1929, showing it to Nettie as she wrote and asking her sister Helen for advice. But she soon tired of it and started writing a play called ‘A Feminist’s Heaven’, which she completed. The idea for her version of *The Getting of Wisdom* continued to simmer, however, and was reignited after she finished her final school exams and was preparing to start her Arts degree at Melbourne University in 1932. She was typing up a copy of Vance’s latest novel, published as *Daybreak*, during February when Nettie noted that Aileen was ‘writing something of her own in furious secrecy every evening’.

The structure of *Daybreak*, which takes place over a single day but with its events rooted in the past, had given Aileen the idea for the structure of her novel, to be titled ‘Poor Child!’. The central character, sixteen-year-old Vivienne Waller, leaves her house in ‘Helburne’ early one Sunday morning and wanders the streets around Hawthorn, sits on the banks of the Yarra River opposite the Kew asylum and crosses the bridge into the poorer suburb of Richmond. She eventually winds her way home at dusk. During her wandering she relives and reflects on her three years at PLC, charting her journey from shy but egotistical young girl who has a crush on her French teacher, through a period of depression in her second year when she is in love with her German teacher and possessed by thoughts of suicide, to her final year when she determines to relinquish the idea of becoming a writer, forget romance, study hard and become a linguist. The ironical subtitle of the manuscript -- ‘A Posthumous Novel’ -- immediately brings into question how seriously the reader should take Vivienne’s various melodramatic suicide attempts. Like Richardson’s character Laura, Vivienne is no traditional heroine. Described variously as obnoxious, conceited, plain or awkward, she is placed in situations where she is usually found wanting and which differentiate her from her peers. There is even a counterpart to *Wisdom*’s Cupid (who was based on Mary Kernot): Clothilde Franck is modelled on Aileen’s older friend, Brenda Linck, who refers to Vivienne as ‘Poor Child’ in the same way Cupid called Laura ‘Infant’ and Evelyn Souttar referred to her on their first encounter as ‘Poor little Kiddy’.

One of the central concerns of *The Getting of Wisdom* is Laura Rambotham’s intense infatuation for an older student at PLC. Evelyn was everything Laura was not: rich, pretty

and grown-up. Like Cupid, Evelyn was based on one of Ettie Richardson's fellow students, eighteen-year-old Constance Cochran. In her autobiography, *Myself When Young*, unfinished at her death in 1946, Richardson wrote that she 'deliberately weakened' her 'headstrong fancy' for 'Evelyn' in keeping with the light tone of the book: 'The real thing was neither light nor amusing. It stirred me to my depths, rousing feelings I hadn't known I possessed'. Similarly, Aileen Palmer's passion for 'Alexia Garran' (in reality, her young German teacher, Jessica Gilchrist) was intense and profound and is contrasted in 'Poor Child!' with her earlier girlish infatuation with her French teacher, 'Helen Raymond'.

In mid 1931, around the time Aileen had written the review of Richardson's trilogy for *Patchwork*, Nettie Palmer noted in her diary: 'Aileen has written a sonnet to Mrs Percy Kernot today, about HHR & their old friendship'. This sonnet makes an appearance towards the end of the 'Poor Child!' manuscript, written almost two years later. Vivienne is depressed and self-doubting and wonders if she should give up the idea of herself as a 'creative genius' and settle down to being ordinary. She tears her transcriptions of Sappho and Heine down from the wall, turns to her own writings and starts to destroy them when her eyes fall on the poem 'The Shrine'. She had written it after her last visit to 'Mrs Russell, the friend of Sidney Schumann Davidson, the novelist whom Vivienne almost worshipped' (Mrs Kernot and HHR):

Perhaps if she had never been your friend  
You would not seem as young as now you do,  
You would have grown suburban in the end,  
And done as all good Helburne people do:  
Hated 'depressing' books, liked 'pleasant' things,  
Grown tearful at the name of Mr Lang,  
Gushed over Empire, yearned for English springs,  
Praised distant lands and let your own go hang.

But, as things are, you haven't lost your spunk  
(In this dear room you consecrate to her,  
I see you both again as once you were  
At school, where you, between your many chats,  
Read Ibsen over secret cigarettes.)  
You still are quite intolerant of bunk!

Vivienne then describes the room in Mrs Russell's suburban house that is devoted to the novelist: the portrait of the face that resembles Dante over the mantelpiece, the copies of every edition of SSD's work on the bookshelves and copies of all the reviews of her work. She writes of their twenty-year correspondence and concludes that 'the perpetual contact with SSD gave importance to what seemed to Vivienne an otherwise rather trivial existence'. She states perceptively: 'This was the real romance of Mrs Russell's life'. Without being aware of it, Aileen Palmer managed to be as candid about Mary Kernot (albeit without the malicious wit) as Kernot was about herself and the rest of the Palmer family.

Although Henry Handel Richardson set *The Getting of Wisdom* in the 1880s when she herself was at PLC and when, as she noted later in *Myself When Young* 'school authorities had not begun to look with jaundiced eyes on girlish intimacies', she wrote the novel twenty years later when she was a married woman who would have had some awareness of the work of the sexologists on perversion and 'unnatural' desire. Yet she writes about Laura's passion for Evelyn openly and without moral judgement. In *Myself When Young*, she describes the strength of her feelings for Connie Cochran at school: 'so strong that few others have surpassed it'. She also insisted that 'the affinity was mutual'. When Aileen was writing 'Poor Child!' as a student in the early 1930s, she became aware of Freudian psychoanalysis and the work of the sexologists; she also read Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, which created a furore resulting in a court case against the novel for obscenity when it was published in London in 1928. 'Poor Child!' consciously rehearses the contemporary debates around homosexuality as it follows Vivienne's growing awareness of her own sexuality with a mixture of elation, intense longing and despair.

Biographers and critics have either grappled with or ignored the question of whether Henry Handel Richardson's own relationship with her long-term companion, Olga Roncoroni, was 'sexual'. Henry first encountered Olga as a pianist, in white tie and tails, accompanying a silent film in Lyme Regis in 1919 and the young woman became part of the Richardson/Robertson household in London in 1921. Nettie Palmer, as might be expected, did not broach the subject in her 1950 biography, although her comment in her published journal that HHR was 'curiously modern in some of her passions' might be construed as ambiguous. While we will never know the answer, perhaps Henry Handel Richardson was able to accommodate more than one loving relationship in her life, with neither diminishing

the other. Aileen Palmer's autobiographical novel 'Poor Child!' indicates that at least one young woman in the early 1930s recognised the presence of same-sex desire in *The Getting of Wisdom* and was inspired to write of her own experience. She was also aware that friendship and homoeroticism may not be neatly contained within conventional sexual/non-sexual boundaries, recognising the 'romance' in Mary Kernot's friendship with Henry Handel Richardson.

When Aileen's character Vivienne in 'Poor Child!' rereads her poem 'The Shrine' and reflects on how Mrs Russell (Kernot)'s 'ordinary' life was made richer by her association with HHR, she realises that she cannot ignore the influence of her upbringing by writers who were at the forefront of the Australian literary scene. Consequently, she will never be ordinary. Vivienne vows to get a scholarship, go to university and become a communist. At university, Aileen was accepted into an exclusive group of young women known as the Mob who were studying Arts. They wrote *billets doux* to each other and shared a cryptic diary in which the currency of their desire took the form of transcribing poems by poets such as Christina Rossetti ('My Heart is like a Singing Bird') and songs in Middle English. The young women discussed their favourite authors, who include the Brontës and Shakespeare. Aileen tried to 'convert' the leader of the Mob, who was a tutor in the English Department, to the novels of Henry Handel Richardson, but the worldly-wise tutor said she found her 'too restrained, even in 'The Getting of Wisdom''. Aileen vowed to lend her *Maurice Guest!*

Aileen Palmer was awarded a first class Honours degree in French Language and Literature at Melbourne University, where she also joined the Communist Party. She later spent two years as an interpreter with the British Medical Unit supporting the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War against General Franco. In London, she drove ambulances during the World War II. Later, back in Australia, she published poems and articles in literary journals such as *Meanjin* and *Southerly* and left-wing journals like *Overland* and *The Realist*. In 1964 Stephen Murray Smith, editor of *Overland*, published a volume of her original poems and translations, *World Without Strangers?* All in all, a far from ordinary life.

Aileen never met Henry Handel Richardson, although they were both in England during the war. But when she returned to Australia, rather reluctantly, in 1945, HHR replied to a letter from Nettie: 'So glad to hear you are getting Aileen home. Nine years – can it be possible?' Richardson died the following year.

Aileen Palmer remained single, but her coded diaries hint at relationships with women, both at university and later in London during World War II. Unable to reveal openly her unsanctioned predilection for women, she at least found and responded to an early, non-judgemental representation of her desire in Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom*. Sadly, Aileen died in 1988 after years spent in and out of psychiatric institutions in Melbourne.

On a mild, sunny morning in Canberra in December 1993, a memorial to the Australians who had served in the Spanish Civil War was unveiled at Lotus Bay on Lake Burley Griffin.

During the ceremony, a poem of Aileen Palmer's was read:

*Danger is never danger  
till the blood running over the street  
is the blood of your own heart's crying:  
the love you were coming to meet.*

*Death is not death till you  
hear all planes pass in fearing:  
not my own love they'll strike!  
Not my own love they're nearing!*

*War is not war till you  
find in the shattered stones  
flesh of your own love's flesh,  
dust of your own love's bones...*

A rare poem of Aileen's to combine the personal and the political, this became one of her most popular from the *World Without Strangers?* collection. But it is not directly autobiographical, nor was it written during Aileen's time in Spain as was incorrectly stated at the memorial unveiling. There was a myth among the Realist Writers Group that Aileen had been traumatised by the loss of a lover (implicitly male) during the Spanish war and that the poem referred to that loss. Aileen actually wrote 'Danger is never danger' in 1958, after a few whiskeys and just a day or two before she was admitted to Sunbury mental hospital as an involuntary patient. She had suffered similar fears to those expressed in the poem when she

was with her unnamed female lover in London during the Blitz, but she never lost a lover in Spain. There are echoes here of Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* when Cupid commended Laura's writing with the words: 'I believe there's something in you after all...Anyhow, you know now what it is to be true, yet not dull and prosy'. Laura, however, knew that not a word of her story was true, 'but every word of it might have been true'. Thus Richardson warned her readers not to treat her writing as transparent autobiography. Similarly, the immediacy of Aileen Palmer's poem 'Danger is never danger' is intensely moving but, like so much of her writing, it contains a layer of secrecy that she took with her to her grave.

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