

*Nettie Palmer and her Daughter Aileen Palmer,
Two Australian Women and One Aim: 'Aidez L'Espagne'*

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This facilitating and supporting of others, this burying of her identity in another's runs deep in a woman; to achieve for her husband, her children, is to achieve for herself. The failure of those others is felt as her failure.ⁱ

The literary work produced by women in Australian literature was not considered essential in the definition and creation of a literary canon at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was during the 1920s and 30s that Nettie Palmer, an Australian poet and writer, committed her literary criticism to giving a voice to young Australian women. During those years, she 'worked as a catalyst'; by analysing their writings, she broke their silence. In this way, a generation of Australian women writers became visible.ⁱⁱ By then, writers such as Katherine Susannah Prichard and Henry Handel Richardson (pseudonym of Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson) were publishing their works. All these women became part of the Australian National Literature Nettie Palmer had been trying to define.ⁱⁱⁱ Due to her commitment to Australian literature, Palmer became a well-known literary critic both in Australia and in England, where she, and her husband Vance Palmer, studied for a period of time.

In 1935, the Palmers decided to leave Australia and move to Europe. Nettie Palmer spoke French, German and Greek,^{iv} so she was able to travel comfortably around Europe while resident in London. The Palmers embarked on this European adventure with their daughters Aileen and Helen. At that time, Aileen Palmer had graduated from Melbourne University. This trip gave her the opportunity not only to practise the languages she had studied during her major, such as French, German, Russian and Spanish, but also to make contact with the Communist Party in several European countries.

In May 1936, the Palmers went to live in Montgat, a small village on the coast of Catalonia, as they were looking for a quiet place, where Vance Palmer could devote his time to writing *Legend for Sanderson*. On the one hand, while in Spain, Nettie Palmer started to learn Spanish and became interested in Spanish literature.^v On the other hand, Aileen Palmer, who had been studying Spanish in Australia, came to know Spanish people to the point of becoming actively involved within the Catalan Communist Party. She even

attended the meetings the Party organised in town. Moved by the curiosity Nettie Palmer felt about seeing what her daughter was doing within the Communist Party, Nettie and Aileen Palmer went together to a meeting in Barcelona. Nettie Palmer explained their intention to her mother, Katie Higgins, in one of her letters: 'Tonight, Aileen and I are going to a meeting in the town...The speeches will be in Catalan, not Spanish: we'll do some hoping + pick up a few sentences if we're lucky'.^{vi} The fact that Aileen Palmer mastered more than one European language enabled her to communicate with people of different nationalities. Moreover, her political commitment and her linguistic ability led her to collaborate as a translator in the organisation of the Popular Olympiad^{vii}.

The Popular Olympiad was to have been held in Barcelona on the 19th July of 1936, as a response to the Nazi Olympic Games that were celebrated in Berlin. That day, the Spanish Civil War broke out. At that time, Aileen Palmer had spent some days in Barcelona because she was organising the opening ceremony with other volunteers. Her parents, who were staying in Montgat, did not receive any news from her during that week. Nettie Palmer recorded that she became aware of the revolution that was taking place in Barcelona thanks to the milkman. It was then that the parents decided to go into the city to look for their daughter.^{viii}



Monsolís street ('Carrer del Marquès de Monsolís' in Catalan), where the Palmers lived in 1935-1936.



View of Barcelona from the village of Montgat

Spain, and specially the village of Montgat, was chosen by the Palmers because of the quiet enjoyed there. Once the Spanish Civil War broke out, the village became a noisy and insecure place. When the Palmers met their daughter in Barcelona, they were forced to move to London following the recommendations given by the British government.^{ix} Back

in England, Aileen Palmer felt driven to go back to Spain and help the people, so she contacted the British Medical Unit and left with the first group of volunteers to be sent, regardless of her parents' opinion.

A month later, her parents went back to Australia. From then on, the Palmers were committed to helping the Spanish people to defeat fascism. Whereas Aileen Palmer was actively working at the front, back in Australia, the Palmers were asked to give talks to explain what the situation was like in Spain. As time went by, Nettie Palmer felt increasingly committed to helping the Spanish people actively, just as her daughter was doing at the front, rather than simply explaining and condemning the situation in Spain. The fact that she was not a single woman like her daughter, but married, with a series of embedded social obligations, made her look for an alternative way to help the Spanish people from Australia. That is why she became the President of the Melbourne branch of the Spanish Relief Committee. This was the first time Nettie Palmer took up a political stance. She moved from being a literary critic to being a more overtly political writer who collaborated with the Spanish Relief Committee publications.^x In fact, she 'assembled a pamphlet within weeks of returning home' entitled *Spain! The Spanish People Present their Case*. It contained articles dealing with the situation in Spain written by different writers or activists, such as Helen Baillie and Len Fox, apart from herself.^{xi} Through the pamphlets the organisation published, and the stamps designed for charity campaigns, the Committees around Australia were able to collect funds and send medical aid, equipment such as ambulances, and food.

At that time Nettie and Aileen Palmer, mother and daughter, were fighting for the same aim: "Aidez L'Espagne." By doing so, they were becoming active subjects fighting for the same ideal: to defeat fascism.^{xii} The letters that Aileen sent to Nettie Palmer are an excellent source for knowing what kind of aid was required in Spain. Nettie Palmer as well as other members of the Spanish Relief Committees who had relatives in the war used their letters as a source for organising their campaigns.

Aileen Palmer was working as the Secretary of the First British Medical Unit in Spain. This position required writing reports explaining the situation at the front as well as informing as to the material that was needed. These documents were sent to London where the main branch of the British Medical Unit was established. Moreover, as I have just mentioned, through the correspondence that she established with her mother during the War years, aid was sent from Australia. An instance is a letter she wrote to her mother in 1937 in which she asked her to send food and some material through the Spanish Relief Committee:

- No beers
- Coffee & sugar
- Plenty of soap, nude washing-soap, but not soap flakes (not useful for the Spanish method)
- Plenty of tinned milk, not all 'Unfit for Babies'
- Plenty of butter, as oil is short, and people are getting used to butter.
- Plenty of fruit, apples, etc., oranges are not scarce, but practically no other fruit is ever seen here.^{xiii}

As the list here shows, Aileen Palmer was not producing a mere list, but she was adding comments on what type of material was needed. Thus, the material Australians were going to send covered their needs in an effective way. The fact of being between two cultures, the Australian and the Spanish, enabled Aileen to pay attention to a series of details that could be considered irrelevant, but that could make life much easier for those who were at the front. For instance, one of the reasons why Aileen Palmer asked for butter was the fact that the volunteers of the International Brigades were from different cultures, where butter was more frequently used for cooking than oil. Moreover, Spanish people had become used to cooking with butter, as olive oil was scarce.^{xiv}

Aileen Palmer's letters were not only asking for aid to be sent, but also making comments on any help they received from the Spanish Relief Committees in Australia. In December 1936, this organisation sent 4 nurses to Spain: three Australians, Mary Lowson, May MacFarlane, Agnes Hogdson, and one New Zealander, Una Wilson.^{xv} Some months later, Aileen Palmer wrote to her mother and congratulated her and the Spanish Relief Committees for the tasks they had been carrying out: "Of course, the sending of four nurses in itself all the way from there was a terrific achievement, with I believe about 100 pounds worth of equipment."^{xvi}

During the period Aileen Palmer spent at the British Medical Unit hospitals, there were times where there was no communication regarding the War effort between herself and her mother. As a result, she became aware of what the Spanish Relief Committees were doing from Australia through newspaper articles, or by speaking with people who had read them. That is why she sometimes wrote back home emphasising that she would have liked her mother to explain in her letters the campaigns the Relief Committees were carrying out from Australia: "I read in the *Daily Worker* the other day that "The Defense of Madrid" had been a great success in Melbourne, and crowds had been turned away, and that 28 pounds had been collected for Spain."^{xvii} The correspondence between Aileen and Nettie Palmer was regular, and continued to be so during the two years Aileen was at the Medical Unit Office in Barcelona, and at the different hospitals near the front in Zaragoza, Albacete, and El Escorial.

When Aileen left Spain and went to London against her will following the orders of the British Medical Unit in mid-1938, she continued to work for the Spanish People at its headquarters in London. During that period, she was still in touch with the comrades that were in Spain with the International Brigades. Once the war had finished, Aileen went to France where she stayed for a while at the Refugee camps, from where she wrote a series of reports about the situation of the Spanish people. Moreover, once the War had finished and the Republicans had been defeated, Nettie Palmer, together with the Spanish Relief Committees, edited a pamphlet entitled *Australians in Spain*^{xviii}. It gave a voice to the Australians who had been volunteers in 'The Last Great Cause'^{xix} working in the different sections organised by the International Brigades, such as hospitals, medical support, houses for children. In this pamphlet, she also recognised the role of those Spaniards who had migrated to Australia and went back to Spain to fight against fascism. An instance is Ray Jordana whose father was President of the Innisfail Spanish Relief Committee. At the end of the pamphlet, she stated that her aim was to try to give a voice to all the volunteers. For this reason, she devoted a section to the 'Nameless Ones', those Australians who were

fighting in the War but whose names were unknown: "This pamphlet is dedicated to them - to those we have named and those who remain nameless."^{xx}

After the Spanish Civil War, Nettie and Aileen Palmer, who had been aiding Spain for two years, were committed to different causes and organisations. Nettie Palmer underwent a crisis as a writer, so she decided to continue with the political stance she had taken up in the Spanish Relief Committee and reflected it in her analysis of literature. She shifted from considering the process of writing as an 'aesthetic phenomenon' to that of a 'political tool', by which the writer could position him/herself as a critic of his/her own society.^{xxi} The fact of being in Spain, and collaborating in anti-Fascist campaigns organised by the Communist Party back in Australia, changed her political views and awoke her desire to defend her principles. In fact, she had been involved in feminist groups, when she was a student at Melbourne University, but had left them after her marriage to Vance Palmer. However, her involvement in the Relief Committees, made the preoccupations of a woman who had so far remained flourish politically.

Aileen Palmer's experience in Spain during two years of the War had a strong impact on her, to the point that this country became a constant point of reference all through her life. When she went back to Australia in 1945, she had been involved in the medical units two Wars: the Spanish Civil War, and WWII. In 1964, the editor of the literary journal *Overland*, which she collaborated with by means of a series of poems, published a volume on Aileen Palmer's poetry entitled *World Without Strangers?* In this collection of poems, the reader is able to see the influence that the War in Spain had in her life through "Remembering Garcia Lorca."^{xxii} Aileen Palmer wrote this poem for the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the War, held in 'El Hogar Español' in Melbourne in 1962. Her poetry became a means by which she could voice her personal experiences of the War and denounce the injustices that were taking place in other conflicts around the world. In fact, her poetry became a political tool by means of which she could position herself.

It could be said that Nettie and Aileen Palmer's involvement in the Spanish Civil War, both from Australia and at the front, are an instance of how the War influenced the identities of members of the same family. In fact, it affected the lives and political stances of all those involved. The Palmers went from being two women who fulfilled the roles of dutiful wife and daughter to speaking out as individuals in the public sphere, defending their ideals in 'the Last Great Cause', and supporting the call of 'Aidez l'Espagne'. They continued to defend these ideals until the very last days of their lives.

ⁱ Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at home. Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2001.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* Chapter 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vivian Smith (ed.), *Nettie Palmer*, St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1988, p. xxiii.

^{iv} Smith, xi.

^v Modjeska p. 65.

^{vi} Nettie Palmer to Katie Higgins, 22 June 1935, Palmer Papers, NLA. MS 1174/5083.

^{vii} Modjeska, p. 65.

^{viii} To be found in Nettie Palmer's personal diary *Fourteen Years* in the book edited by Vivian Smith *Nettie Palmer*, p. 223.

^{ix} Judith Keene, 'A Spanish Springtime: Aileen Palmer and the Spanish Civil War' in *Labour History*, 1987.

^x Modjeska, 69.

^{xi} Amirah Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987, 61-94.

^{xii} The idea of mother and daughters fighting for the same ideal in order to create a better place is explored by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as experience and institution*. New York: Norton, 1976.

^{xiii} Aileen Palmer to Nettie Palmer, 1937, Palmer Papers, NLA. MS. 6759. Box 1. Folder 10.

^{xiv} Aileen Palmer to her family, 7th February 1937, Palmer Papers, NLA. MS.6759. Box 1 Folder 10.

^{xv} Inglis, p. 61-62.

^{xvi} Aileen's letter to her parents, June 1937, Palmer Papers, NLA. MS 6759. Box 1. Folder 10.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*

^{xviii} Nettie Palmer, *Australians in Spain*, 3rd Spanish Relief Committee, Sydney: The Printing Trades.

^{xix} Stanley, Weintraub *The Last Great Cause. Intellectuals and the Spanish Civil War*, London: W.H. Allen, 1968.

^{xx} *Ibid* p. 29.

^{xxi} Modjeska, p. 72.

^{xxii} David Martin ed., *A World Without Strangers?* Melbourne: Overland, 1964, p.29.

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