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COUNTRY MATTERS IN *THE LITTLE (SOUTHERN STEEL) COMPANY*

In "On Appropriation: Two Novels of Dark and Eldershaw," Ian Saunders identifies a number of similarities between Eleanor Dark's *The Little Company* (1945) and Barnard/Eldershaw's *Tomorrow* and *Tomorrow* (1947), and makes the case that Dark borrowed much of the structure and plot of her novel from an outline Marjorie Barnard provided (287). My aim here is neither to defend nor support Saunders's claim (although I do think he weakens his case by ignoring information included in Barbara Brooks's biography, which indicates conclusively that much of the material in *The Little Company* stems from Dark's family background), but to suggest that Dymphna Cusack, too, might have gathered some of her ideas from Dark in writing *Southern Steel* (1953). Even though Cusack claimed (as did Miles Franklin and other writers on the "Left") that she didn't "like" *The Little Company* (Brooks 279) and told Bruce Molloy that "the novel 'never hit her'" (51), it certainly struck her in some ways, for the similarities between the novels seem too numerous to be coincidental. Admittedly, given the texts' shared historical time frames, some comparisons might be obvious. Dark's novel takes place between 1941 and 1942, Cusack's solely in 1942, with the bombing of Darwin figuring prominently in each. Both texts also document, to a greater or lesser extent, the "Yank invasion" of Australia and the advent of wartime measures such as blackouts, brown-outs, food shortages and rationing. The texts also depict women knitting khaki socks, serving enlisted men at canteens, and making their entry into war work — the munitions industry in *Southern Steel* and the WAAC in *The Little Company*. Characters in both texts also express surprise that Australia — especially Newcastle, with its massive steelworks on the coast producing munitions — should suddenly have become so vulnerable, so threatened by an enemy that had, until 1942, seemed so remote. Nevertheless, both novels attest to the kind of complacency that prevailed among Australians, including members of the military:[1] Cusack, for example, refers to Navy men as "little pip-squeaks running around in white socks and short pants, worrying about their laundry and their liquor and whose turn it is to make love to who next" (166), and arguably, Dark's entire novel addresses the subject (although not in military terms). Both writers are also concerned about the lack of information given to citizens about the war. Cusack writes in her posthumous autobiography, *A Window On the World* (1991), that young people were taught "nothing of the circumstances" which had led to World War One (165), and that the nation had been committed to a war that most people, "except for a few well-informed specialists" (*Window* 166), knew nothing about, whereas Dark, too, lamented in an unpublished essay, "The Peril and the Solitude," that while "the

novels and poetry between the wars were full of warnings about another war ... nobody took any notice, [sic] they listened to politicians instead. The world was in a mess because the politicians had no idea what they were doing" (cited in Brooks 234).

The central protagonists in each text, both men, also have a lot in common: each was raised by a surrogate mother and single-parent father (dead mothers abound in Australian women's fictions of the First and Second World Wars); as adults, each man is socially conservative and financially secure. Dark's middle-aged Gilbert Massey runs a religious bookstore in Sydney and writes on the side, often from his Katoomba cottage in the Blue Mountains: his seven novels have earned him a modest literary reputation. Cusack's thirty-something Bar Sweetapple is a top-notch metallurgist with Southern Steel; at the beginning of the novel, he and his wife Roz have just returned from a year-long stint in England and America, where Bar has been studying steel production with other experts in his field. Both men are married to status-conscious wives who have uneasy relationships with their sons (although the fathers do not). Both protagonists have brothers who are card-carrying members of the Communist Party. Both embark upon affairs with young, waif-like women on the night Japanese submarines invade Sydney Harbour in *The Little Company* and the Japanese shell Newcastle in *Southern Steel*.[2] Although both men soon discover that their lovers are shallow, insincere, lacking in compassion, and uninterested in current events, neither makes any effort to end the relationship because these women fulfill both their emotional and physical needs. Both men are eventually spurned by their lovers, however.

Both texts, which adhere loosely to the conventions of the social-realist novel, are also concerned with issues of class; each presents members of the working class as virtuous, morally upstanding, and inclined to give more to their country than they get in return, whereas the rich or upwardly mobile either lack integrity or are downright villainous. Dark's Gilbert, for example, discovers that his father, Walter Massey, has been a slum landlord when he inherits at his death a number of rundown properties. Appalled to learn that these rents have paid for his affluent upbringing and expensive (although useless) education, Gilbert vows to renovate the hovels and lower the rents. Cusack's Bar, by comparison, remains haunted by his failure to have come to the aid of his impoverished sister and her family when they were evicted by a cruel landlord during the nineteen-thirties. Bar's refusal to take a stand has caused a permanent rift between him and his two brothers, but wartime events bring him to realise he was in the wrong. Both men suffer the loss of a family member caused in part by his neglect, but both are exonerated from guilt because their selfish, social-climbing wives are largely responsible for the tragedies that ensue. Although neither text can be considered feminist in its approach

(and thus I would argue both writers were cowards in their war efforts)[3], Dark's is critical of a society which fails to educate women to participate fully in a democracy (Brooke 285). While each text offers brief glimpses into the lives of young, enlightened women who represent the next generation, both are minor characters: Dark's twenty-something Prudence remains silent about her father's extra-marital affair, and both she and Cusack's youthful Annie are eager to engage in pre-marital sexual relationships; Annie also helps a friend obtain an abortion. Prudence, who privileges ideas over physical appearance and material possessions, runs her own bookstore, and the down-to-earth Annie becomes a card-carrying a member of the union at the munitions factory where she works (although the text suggests she is radical only "for the duration," since what she most aspires to is marriage and motherhood).

In both texts, the wartime climate brings each protagonist to recognise that he inhabits a world rife with social and economic injustice and that he has become oblivious to and hence alienated from his surroundings. Both texts emphasise the extent to which the central characters' lives are impoverished by their lack of knowledge about Australian history and literature. Accordingly, the wartime climate propels each male protagonist into a political and social education, or re-education, although each undertakes his journey towards enlightenment alone: Gilbert's wife Phyllis is intellectually deficient and, like Bar's wife Roz, reluctant to relinquish her place in society. At the end of each novel, the marriages appear to have crumbled. Ultimately, both protagonists come to the realisation that they have been burdened by what Miles Franklin had earlier referred to as "the non-existence of the Australian mind through colonial servility and lack of exercise" (cited in Brooks 238). Claiming that she was too "weary" to tackle the subject herself, Franklin urged Dark, who had already raised the issue in *The Timeless Land*, to undertake it.

Nowhere is the notion of "colonial servility" more evident than in Cusack's autobiography, which offers an account of the writer's lengthy career as a high-school teacher from the 1920s to 1944, when she was invalided out. Whether she was shaping young minds in Broken Hill or Sydney or Newcastle she was, according to Debra Adelaide's "Introduction," "invariably ... disappointed ... that the schools in which she taught were oblivious to their surroundings and their history. Again and again she found the system she was part of, the curricula she was obliged to perpetuate, totally irrelevant to the lives and futures of her pupils" (1). Cusack also deemed the high-school curriculum "insane" because she had no time to teach students "the proper use of their own language, the most important thing in any culture. We wasted their time on ancient languages which, in the main, had no use educationally and culturally" (*Window* 91). Cusack was also frustrated because what she was being asked to teach varied little from what she had herself been taught: her own "high school

courses had contained little about Australian history, and what there was, was written from the colonial point of view" (*Window* 41). Furthermore, according to Cusack's husband and biographer Norman Freehill, Cusack found Sydney University also a "colonial-minded place: no hint of anything Australian crossed the threshold. Most of the professors were English or, what was worse, Australians who were completely Europhile and completely bogged down in the past": "'[s]o far as our own country was concerned,' she remarked, 'we might have been living on the moon'" (24). In her autobiography, Cusack writes (somewhat awkwardly) that "[t]hough in the twenties Australia had ceased to be a colony for over a score of years, she was to remain one mentally for another fifty years in many respects: a sycophantic worship of everything English and a slavish denigration of anything home-grown" (37). Moreover, in "How I Write," Cusack observed that there were no lectures on Australian literature at any university until 1939 (32), and while at teacher's college, she could find no library which offered access to any Australian books (*Window* 43).

Much of Cusack's despair at such literary and historical neglect stemmed from the recognition that her young country had good reason to be proud of its accomplishments. In spite of its "defects and deficiencies" ("Cringe" 80), from the 1850s onward, Australia had become "the most democratic country in the world" (80). She praised the "eight-hour day" introduced in that decade, and observed that "[a]ll the liberal ideals of Europe were first to become a reality here" ("Cringe" 80). In her autobiography, she further underscored that Australia was "one of the first to introduce universal suffrage for men and to give the vote to women as early as 1902" (41). Hence she was dismayed by the "'colonial'" type of education which taught students there was "nothing historically worthwhile in [their] own country," and no literature worth reading, either (*Window* 42), and angered that there was "no emotional involvement" with [the Australian past], no deep sense of "identification" with the land (*Window* 56).

Cusack was not the only writer to complain of the "cultural cringe," which persisted well into the 1940s, as Deidre Moore's recent article on the subject makes clear. Moore writes that, having won a lucrative scholarship in 1942, she planned to use it to write a "critique of the Australian novel" for her Honours (English IV) thesis. Although she assiduously worked her way through fiction by Mrs. Campbell Praed, Miss Ada Cambridge, Rolf Boldrewood, Marcus Clarke, Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, Miles Franklin, Henry Handel Richardson, Katherine Susannah Prichard, M. Barnard Eldershaw, and Christina Stead, a respected scholar in the English Department at Sydney University informed her in no uncertain terms that not only was there was "'so little'" fiction available, working on such material would be "'a waste of good critical ability'" (92). He advised her to seek a more "acceptable thesis topic" in American literature, a bias Moore

attributes primarily to the presence of the U.S. troops who had "Americanised" Australia almost overnight (90). The first Australian literature course was finally offered in 1955 (Cusack, "Cringe," 79), but the "cringe" did not end that year, for Elizabeth Webby, who held the first Chair in Australian Literature for sixteen years (until her retirement in February 2007), found that as an Honours student at Sydney University in the 1960s, she had no opportunity to study Australian literature, although she did "manage to get half a year of Australian history by 'hanging in' until third year" (unpublished keynote lecture).[4]

Cusack found this continued neglect of Australian literature and history deeply troubling for, as she told Bruce Molloy, "[a]ll great literature has come out of its own soil — it's breathed the air" (49). While she paid tribute to writers like Lawson, Furphy, Franklin, Prichard, Esson, and Palmer who had produced a strong sense of "national feeling" by depicting life in the Australian bush, and also applauded "numerous poets who sang of Australia at the beginning of the century," she noted that their sentiments had "faded" during the First World War, which "had reawakened a spiritual colonialism" ("How" 32). By the mid-twenties, however, the country had "bogged down into a morass of social and sectarian bigotry and educational conservatism" (*Window* 41). At the same time as Cusack expressed her admiration for the "country type of novel" and wished to see it re-invigorated, she also felt that urban life had been unduly overlooked and declared that she wanted to write about the inhabitants of Newcastle ("Sense" 60) "as fully and authentically as our writers of the Nineties had described the life of our 'bush' ... and our bushmen" ("How" 32). In writing about Newcastle, Cusack was clearly writing against the grain, for according to Julian Croft, "the more common constructions are of the 'wide-brown land,' pastoralism, Aboriginal Australia, and the anomie of the suburbs of the twentieth century. Industrial landscapes, and the communities that arose around those heavy industries, are not what most people think of when they imagine Australia" (15). But the citizens of Newcastle were reputedly delighted with *Southern Steel* (which was, according to Freehill, "the only Australian novel about an Australian industrial city during the Second World War," 73), for as Debra Adelaide asserts, they had "never before found such a favourable portrayal of their city in literature" ("Introduction" 19).

Because Cusack took such a "voracious interest in the history of her surroundings" (Adelaide, "Introduction," 18) and was so "profoundly engaged in the world around her" (Adelaide, "Introduction," 22), she drew much of the raw material for her novel from her teaching assignment — one of her most satisfying, she claimed — in Newcastle. (Cusack joked that she had become such a troublemaker in the education system that "[w]hen news of Pearl Harbor broke, [the administrators] thought of the one place [she] was likely to be bombed and thus relieve them of the embarrassment of [her] existence, and

sent [her] to Newcastle" [145]). Although initially dismayed that the Broken Hill Propriety (BHP) was helping to fund Newcastle Boy's Technical High, she was soon relieved to discover that the company was not dictating the curriculum, but rather enabling the students "to find jobs rather than torture them into travesties of classical scholars" (Adelaide, "Introduction" 13). Once freed from academic pressure to study irrelevant subjects, these young men could "see some immediate connection between school and work and their futures" (Adelaide, "Introduction," 20).

Cusack also turned the people she met in Newcastle into characters who were "not even composites," but "taken directly from life" (Freehill 49). Her landlords, a close-knit, solid working-class family, obviously became the Boultons, and a couple of local historians Cusack befriended, whose "ready-made phrases" — that "Australian lingo" she was so anxious students claim as their own — make their way into *Southern Steel.* The speakers of this (admittedly very clumsy) "lingo," Hoppy Sweetapple, Bar's one-legged sixty-five-year-old father, and Jummer, his eighty-one-year-old friend, engage in a series of conversations which express disappointment that Australians should be so ignorant of the richly varied, "'tremendous'" stories of the city and the country, both past and present. Jummer claims, for example, that Hoppy sees the story purely as "'history — from convict to freeman; from wind-jammer to oil-burner'" (22), whereas Jummer's step-son Emmett finds "'poetry in machines and smokestacks'" (22). To Hoppy's son Keir, by contrast, the story of Newcastle is about "'steel and the power that goes with it'" (22), whereas to another of Hoppy's sons, Rud, a Communist union organizer who campaigns for the nationalisation of Southern Steel, the story is an "'endless process of change and the unendin' fight, for it's not only a special kind of steel they're making here in the south, but a special kind of people'" (22–3). While many of these old-timers' stories focus on the history of the shipbuilding industry, Jummer also bitterly recalls that his father — clearly one of those "special kind[s] of people" — had been "'[t]ransported for a crime that would have got him elected to Parliament today'" (21), and Hoppy, whose tales are sprinkled with references to other identity-forming historical events such as Gallipoli and the Eureka Stockade, insists that these stories, including those of the pioneers' heroic struggles against a harsh physical environment, would be of "'interest to anyone, anywhere'" (21). Furthermore, he insists that there is so much history in Newcastle that "'someone ought to write a book'" (20) about it (and his point seems well taken, for Croft observes that Newcastle is "'one of the oldest purely industrial sites in the world'" [15]). Regrettably, Hoppy cannot produce the book because he lacks formal education, and Jummer, who possesses the necessary background (his house is "packed floor to ceiling with books and papers and note-books" [21] he intends to leave to the Mitchell Library in Sydney [183]), is now too old. But even if Hoppy cannot pen a book, he certainly possesses fine oratorical skills,

for his accounts of his (mis)adventures on sailing ships hold both his grandson Darrell (Bar and Roz's son) and the Headmaster at the private school in Sydney Darrell attends while his parents are overseas, completely spellbound. Freely admitting that he knows nothing about Newcastle, the Headmaster deems Hoppy's account of the development of a big industrial city "'fascinating'" and the amateur historian himself "'remarkably interesting'" (13). In suggesting that the Headmaster of one of Australia's most prestigious schools should be so unaware of Australia's history, Cusack appears to be harkening back to her own education at Sydney University, where only one professor offered any lectures on the settlement of Australia. According to Freehill, "[t]he result was that the graduates in Arts [even those who had travelled abroad] ... were rootless and discontented, knowing little of their country's history and nothing of its literature" (28). Freehill's remarks may also explain why the old-timer Jummer states so emphatically that if Australians are to "progress," it is vital to "'know now how we came and where we're goin'" (23), and why he is so angry that no one "'cares for history and culture in this profit-gluttonous country'" (21). Cusack infers, thus, that amateur historians like Hoppy and Jummer, who take so much pleasure and pride in the history of their country, are its real wartime "saviours."

One of the characters who cares little for either the history or culture of Newcastle is Bar's wife, Roz, a quintessential Cusack character who poses more of a threat to the country than the marauding Japanese. According to Adelaide, Cusack, who was "[d]emocratic to the marrow," detested snobs ("Introduction," *Window*, 11), especially those who derived their cultural and artistic standards from New York or London. True to form, Roz, ironically a former school teacher, toadies up to the American officers stationed in Newcastle, displays a preference for American fashion and hairstyles, installs her family in a "Hollywoodish"-style bungalow, and resents that her servants are not as efficient as the "beautifully trained" coloured servants in America! At the same time, she frowns upon the solidarity and commitment of the industrial personnel who struggle to obtain better working conditions. While Roz does not entirely object to Hoppy's re-telling of Australian history to her son Darrell, she does find his relationships with members of the lower classes (which include Bar's brothers, Landy, a fireman on a coastal ship, and the Communist agitator Rud), objectionable. Much of the plot turns on the schemes Roz (who rejects her birth name in favour of one she deems more sophisticated) sets in place in order to extricate her son and husband from Hoppy and his working-class mates. Roz attempts, for example, to eradicate her husband's past by insisting that he change his name from Keir to Bar and prodding him to leave Newcastle, a city she detests because it reminds her of her own humble origins. Although Bar goes along with most of Roz's proposals, he resists her attempts to force him to move to away from Newcastle, because his affection for the "untidy, smoky city" (4) is deep rooted, as the first paragraph of the novel makes evident.

Having been absent from the city for one year, Bar feels a "quickening of his pulse" as the plane which brings him to Newcastle flies over the expansive landscape and he sees "the cobalt of the Pacific, with its cotton-white fringe of surf; the ribbons of old-ivory sand; the chain of salt-water lakes like crinkled silver-paper in a matrix of olive green — Terrigal, Tuggerah, Munmora; then the sparkling expanse of Lake Macquarie, with the Catalinas droning in declining circles to the base at Rathmines" (1). Bar also recalls his happy childhood, particularly the excursions to the "sun-drenched strip of Beach Cave," where he and his brothers searched "for the primitive chart instruments on the ancient middens where once the aboriginal tribes came to feast" (1). As Croft observes, Cusack not only wrote about the "heroic and beautiful power" of the city's industry, but she also offered a "bravura description" of its "natural beauty" (16). Although Bar's first reminder of the city's "natural beauty" and memories of his idyllic formative years help him recognise the extent to which Roz has sealed off his past, he is not able to sustain his resentment because Roz is able to seize the anxiety and turbulence of the wartime climate — Singapore falls on February 15 and the Japanese bomb Darwin February 19 — as an excuse to get Darrell away from his grandfather and his working-class mates. She sends her son (reluctantly on his part) to an exclusive private school in the Tablelands, where he will not likely learn much Australian history, culture, or literature, but he will make all the right connections. Fittingly, Roz's plan backfires, for while she is busy settling Darrell into the private school, Bar falls in love with Myee, (distressingly referred to as a "nymphomaniac"). When Myee returns to her husband who has been fighting in Malaya, Bar is distraught, but much of his distress stems from the realisation that Roz has effectively closed him off from his Australian roots and the values of his unpretentious working-class family and their friends. It seems likely he will divorce Roz and reunite with them.

Although Dark was not, like Cusack, an educator, she was concerned with the well-being of children in Katoomba during the war. She volunteered (part-time) to look after those whose mothers were in war industries, and her husband, Dr Eric Dark, offered the children free medical attention. Dark organised fund-raising activities for the library and the local school, cared for evacuated children part-time, and used some of the royalties from her novels to help set up a free library for children (Brooks 254-55). The Darks arranged for the state Minister for Education, Clive Evatt, to open the library, and agreed wholeheartedly with the politician's remarks that education during the Depression had suffered, and hence it was vital that it should now show "the way out of darkness into light, out of illiteracy into knowledge" (cited in Brooks 255). According to Brooks, especially after the Darks had moved from Sydney to Katoomba, the writer had become increasingly fascinated, not only with the landscape of Australia, but by the stories behind the landscape and the sense of identity that came out of living in the country at that time. Like Cusack, Dark

railed against the "colonial attitude that regarded everything Australian as second rate" (Brooks 149), and agreed with many of her contemporaries that Australia need not be a "second-rate colony of Europe," but an "egalitarian society and lively culture" (Brooks 420). (These sentiments echo, of course, those of the 1890s writers Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, and the First World War correspondent and historian C. E. W. Bean.) Along with these writers, Dark believed that "[i]t was only when Australians came to grips with the country" that they could "fully live here, know themselves as part of the place and it as part of them" (Brooks 149).[5]

In *The Little Country*, Dark's Gilbert Massey shares her affection for the country, and he has been, albeit unconsciously, searching for what it means to be Australian. Dark infers that his uncertainty about his nation's history and his place in it has led him to a kind of "creative paralysis," or writer's block. Like the Darks themselves, who began to read history vociferously at the outbreak of war, Gilbert, too, endeavours to inform himself about the history of Australia, and his musings on the subject take up a significant amount of the text. Gilbert reflects, for example, in one of his many interior monologues, upon the numerous difficulties settlers faced when they first came to Australia: theirs was a history of "obstinate striving, of hardship, ugliness, loneliness, success and failure, effort and more effort" (67). Moreover, he recognises that their history was all about fighting, about staving off "the heat and the cold, the drought and the bushfires, the bad soil, the floods, the solitude" (67). But above all, Gilbert believes, they "fought the conception of themselves that had been imposed upon [them], the tradition of servitude" (67-8). As a result of their struggles, Gilbert concludes, they were not a "docile" people (66). Gilbert further notes that

> [t]his was not, thank God, a country living on its past, but still struggling away from it. It had begun badly; it grew up the hard way. Physically, mentally and spiritually handicapped, it had sweated and blundered its way out of the dark era when human flesh and blood, having suffered the deterioration of poverty, having endured nightmare voyages in the hell-ships of the day, had still by some miracle lived to tread a new earth, and kept enough vitality to reproduce itself. Human minds, warped, hardened, illiterate, and full of hatred, had still clung to the idea of survival and perpetuation. Human spirits, damned almost to impotence by the tradition of their own worthlessness, had kept alive, instinctively, a spark of faith in the possibility of regeneration. (66–7)

Since the history [of white settler/invaders] in Australia had been so brief, the people were not caught up "helplessly" in "the grip of a legend, or bemused into imagining that they could ride triumphantly into the future on the back of the past. Their ancestors were only their grandfathers, or at most their great-grandfathers, and such national memories as they had led them not

very far from the life of their own knowledge and comprehension" (67). It is inconceivable, Gilbert believes, that during the Second World War, they should go back on all they had struggled to attain in such a short time (68).

Because of their nation's history, Dark and some of her contemporaries had a "dream" about the kind of country Australia could be (Brooks 420). Prior to the war, however, they had begun to feel that the people were letting them down: they had not "done enough to justify [their] occupation of [their] country," and not enough to justify "calling themselves Australians" (Brooks 420). In part, Dark's text argues, Australians had become too contented, for while World War One proved to be a "nightmare" which awakened people, most then simply "roll[ed] over with a sigh of relief and [went] to sleep again" (18). Gilbert believes that

> those few who had not returned to their pillows, but had, with tiresome, persistent, and ill-mannered vociferousness, disturbed the slumbers of the majority with warnings, had been unpopular people — agitators, scare-merchants, war-mongers. A few light sleepers (among whom he humbly recognised himself) had been roused by the clamour to listen, at first sluggishly, reluctantly, and then with rising anxiety, to the hullabaloo. Another bad dream called Depression had awakened a further batch with the shocking ruthlessness of a douse of cold water; but there were plenty who were still snoring — yes, even now, when the second nightmare was already twitching their limbs and distorting their mouths with grimaces of pain. And some, whose sleep had drifted into coma, would never awaken. Let them die in their sleep, [Gilbert] thought with sudden fury — so long as they die! (18)

It was crucial, Dark believed, that Australians shake off their smugness, because if they did not, they risked being colonised by either the Americans or the Japanese: "During the war, the American presence reminded Australians they were part of the Pacific rather than tied to Europe. They lived in a big country with a small population, hanging off the edge of the huge land masses of Asia. How could they defend their coastline?" (Brooks 258). Brooks further observes that the alarming situation contributed to Dark's choice of title: "it stood for those who defended the Christian West against the barbarians, also for embattled minority groups, for the people who stood up for their beliefs against the majority" (258).

Dark argues that Australians had become self-satisfied because they had been poorly educated, not taught to challenge established values or to think for themselves. Gilbert's education, for example, and that of his younger sister, the writer Marty Ransom, had consisted primarily of the rote learning of useless facts. Like Dickens's Gradgrind children in *Hard Times*, they had not been allowed to use their creative imaginations or taught to "question, to investigate,

to read and think" (19). Gilbert recalls in particular one "little dried-up spinster" who had "not one single qualification except gentility" to run a school (25). She encouraged her students only to memorise facts, to recite worthless scraps of knowledge, and then struck them with rulers when they refused to obey her instructions (25). He concludes that the Education System was a "misbegotten monstrosity" that turned its students "loose on the world at fourteen with no more sense of values than a bunch of chimpanzees" (207). Anticipating Cusack, Marty laments that even though she had been born at a momentous period in Australian history — December 31, 1900 — she had never been taught to believe that she was "living in history," or to comprehend the "significance of the events in which she had participated" (38). Both Marty and Gilbert come to realise that the education system has not equipped them to contest the values inculcated in them by their father, Walter Massey, a teetotalling, God-fearing, judgmental, self-righteous and bigoted Christian who refuses to countenance opinions or values not of his own making; he regards Trade Unions and Labour governments as "disastrous" for the country, and upholds everything British and imperialistic. (His wife was also a missionary).[6] Even the name Massey has bestowed upon his home — "Glenwood" — is hypocritical, for there is nothing "natural" about it. Rather, it is an "old, square stone house" on the North Shore which is as "solid as a gaol" (93), and just as confining to its inhabitants. (In her depiction of this archly conservative patriarch, Dark appears to have combined the personalities of the fathers of both Eric and her father, Dowell O'Reilly, both of whom presided over "repressive, almost fundamental Christian households" [Brooks 46]). Although Modjeska refers to Walter Massey as "no more than a token" (xiv), given the harmful effect he has on his offspring, hers seems a misreading. After Massey's death, which occurs just before the novel opens, both Gilbert and Marty embark upon a kind of trip down memory lane, in which both recall that their childhood and adolescent years had been characterised by confusion, darkness, repression, intolerance, and duplicity.

Much of the novel, then, concerns how Marty, Gilbert, their younger brother Nick, and Gilbert's wife, Phyllis (who became part of the family when her mother, also a missionary, was hired as Massey's housekeeper after his wife died), have turned out after such an oppressive upbringing. Phyllis, the only one who acquiesces, develops into a prim, stiff, disapproving and narrow-minded adult. Conditioned by her surrogate father, Walter Massey, to aspire merely to domestic servitude and motherhood, Phyllis has become, according to Gilbert, the type of female who could be the subject of a thesis titled "Sex Ignorance and Female Parasitism as Factors in Maintaining the Capitalist Status Quo" (291). Denied formal education, Phyllis is unable to grasp any kind of intellectual content (she cannot understand Gilbert's novels and arranges the books in their living room by height); nor can she come to grips with what is happening to her

family during the war. Frustrated by Gilbert's increasing neglect, she joins The Christian Watchers' Circle, where, presumably, her thinking is done for her.

During the war years, Gilbert realises that he has, for decades, been married to a woman he detests, although in a brief moment of insight, he comprehends that Phyllis is not to blame for her ignorance: "[i]nstead of being educated like a human being she has been domesticated like a cat" (132). Moreover, he recognises that he himself has "take[n] a hand in that training" (132), for he has, like his father, accepted as "natural that [Phyllis] should have no thoughts beyond caring for [his] physical comfort, and looking after the children" (132). Although Gilbert declares that when he succumbed to writer's block and recognised the need to re-educate himself, he tried to "drag" Phyllis along with him (132), but nowhere does Dark indicate that Gilbert made any such effort: rather, both he and his sister Marty constantly hold Phyllis up to ridicule, ignore her needs, and treat her cruelly. Dark's condemnation of Phyllis is curious, for she had insisted publicly that we have "to find ways for women to participate in making decisions about the community and the nation, not just the family and the house" (233), yet she offered no policies or platforms or ideas of how to achieve this goal in her novel.[7] In addition, Dark's assertion (which echoed her father's), that "[i]f women's main duty is motherhood... then men's first priority is fatherhood" (Brooks 232-33), also rings hollow, for Gilbert pays attention only to Prudence, his "thinking" daughter who runs her own bookshop, and ignores the pretty, but empty-headed and far from virginal, Virginia. Gilbert suffers only a twinge of guilt when Virginia dies of an ectopic pregnancy, and within weeks of Phyllis's incarceration in a mental institution (she has so little understanding of the Australian bush [a sure sign of character weakness] that even her attempt to kill herself there after learning that Gilbert has had an affair fails), Gilbert and the other members of the family, including his son, seem to have forgotten either woman ever existed.

If Phyllis's lack of rebellion leads to madness, however, Dark points out that Nick's decision to become a Communist, which would have been anathema to his father, is also misguided. Although Modjeska argues that Nick is a "pivot for concepts and ideas," that his "position in the novel allows the exploration of political ideas, strategies, and positions" (xiv), and that "he is the only character with a clear position on a number of issues" (xiii), her reading is again erroneous for, convinced that his views are unassailable, Nick has, ironically, become just as dogmatic, unbending, judgmental, and resistant to change as was his father. As Marty reflects, while Nick's certainty may give him a kind of "rigid strength," it also leads to a "certain weakness," as well (49). In addition, Nick has not tested his theories against differing circumstances: the "one size fits all pattern" he clings to does not hold for all societies, wars, or circumstances. In creating a character like Nick, Dark seemed to be reflecting her own opinions of

those who become members of any organisation, for while she was sympathetic to socialism, she "never joined any party or group, just as Eric had never joined the Communist party. Institutions, she believed, destroyed the very ideas they were set up to propagate" (Brooks 430). In *The Little Company*, then, only Gilbert and Marty manage successful rebellions (the words "rebel," "rebellious," and "rebellions" occur dozens of times in the opening pages), but they do so by sheer accident, and their victories are temporary.

As adolescents, they are befriended by Janet, daughter of the free-spirited bohemian poet and labour politician Scott Laughlin, a character Dark obviously modelled on her father.[8] Both the fictional Laughlin and the real-life O'Reilly encourage their daughters to read whatever books they like, and in both households, "[t]here were always arguments raging, and convention was less important than independent thought" (Brooks 64). (Dark's father told her that the only thing she couldn't question was the weather! [Brooks 181]). In *The Little Company*, the Laughlins inhabit an untidy, run-down home (ironically owned by Gilbert's father) which overflows with books, music, poetry, Australian art, and outspoken friends who hotly debate the state of the nation, their discussions animated by the consumption of alcohol. Both Marty and Gilbert, who are warmly welcomed into the Laughlin household, are astounded that their home life should be so different from Janet's, but thrilled when Laughlin treats them like intelligent young people and volunteers to help foster their creativity by critiquing their writing. As a result of his encouragement, their word choices become less imitative of the British and more inclined to rhyme with "wattle." Laughlin's "roadside" classes, which he holds under a gum tree (112)[9], resemble those conducted in the Irish hedge schools. Gilbert's and Marty's educations are cut short, however, when Janet's mother Denny runs away with Gerard Avery (Brooks posits Avery was based on the writer Brian Penton [266]), and takes their friend Janet with her. (Denny, a pianist too burdened by domestic duties to practise, also seems modeled on Dark's mother.) Although both Marty and Gilbert continue to write after their contact with the "egalitarian society" and "lively culture" at the Laughlin household is severed, neither produces works which have much literary impact. Gilbert recognises that none of his novels had challenged "existing conservative values," and Marty (who, like Dark, gives wartime radio broadcasts and suffers from writer's block), often refers to the "dark side" of her education, to the "thick black curtain" (36) drawn between childhood and adulthood, and to the "black screen of ignorance" (38) which has governed her life.

Although Gilbert's and Marty's reading of history at the outbreak of war does lead them to discard convention, to re-shape their knowledge so that they readily see through measures such as the government's imposition of censorship and an imposed wartime paper shortage which facilitates the conservative government's

printing of what it wishes to print and nothing else, their creativity remains immobilised, and springs to life only after each comes in contact with a woman from the past who re-animates those heady and exhilarating days of learning about Australia at Scott Laughlin's "roadside school." Marty is inspired to pick up her pen after a chance meeting with a former classmate, Sally Dodd, whom her father had disapproved of because the Dodds were poor, the many children suffering from starvation. Although Sally's contemporary hard-luck stories (she now has too many mouths to feed herself) fail to move Marty emotionally (it is somewhat disquieting that Marty sees Sally as merely a blinkered housewife, incapable in her "ant-like activity" of grasping the point that her "little life" was "determined by remote political forces" [252]), intellectually, they appear to, for after their brief conversation, Marty rushes to her typewriter, prepared, we assume, to re-tell the sad story of Sally's life, but not to help overcome her impoverished circumstances. Gilbert's muse is Elsa Kay, Janet Laughlin's daughter, with whom he has an affair. During their adulterous relationship, Gilbert realises that he wants to write about the Laughlins. He suffers a brief setback when Elsa informs him that she intends to write a novel about her family, but both Marty and Gilbert conclude that Elsa has neither the intellect and the stamina nor the inestimable social vision to carry it off, and the novel ends with Gilbert racing to get the words, which now flood his mind, onto paper.

But Cusack and Dark might well now be spinning in their graves, for although Cusack wrote that by 1979, all nineteen universities in the country had established courses in Australian literature ("Cringe" 79), according to Rosemary Neill's 2007 newspaper articles, senior academics have recently declared that "a new cultural cringe is infesting our universities and encouraging the neglect of Australian literature" ("Neglecting" 1). In spite of the success of contemporary Australian writers — "Kate Grenville and Geraldine Brooks have won or been short-listed for the Pulitzer, Commonwealth and Booker prizes,"— and the "teaching and translation of Australian literature" is popular overseas ("Neglecting" 1), "British/European literary projects have claimed a bigger share of academic research grants than Australian projects" ("Lost" 1). Moreover, the country now boasts "just one permanent chair in Australian literature nationwide," and even that position was recently threatened ("Neglecting" 1). The numbers of students interested in Australian literature, including those enrolled in the honours program at Sydney University, has plummeted (about half the numbers are studying the subject now as did in the late 1980s and early 1990s ["Lost" 4), even though "Sydney University remains the sole tertiary institution where undergraduates can major in Australian literature" ("Lost" 1). Furthermore, the paucity of students at other institutions appears to have led to fewer course offerings and restricted programs. In 2006, for example, Melbourne University offered only two Australian works of fiction in their first-year literary studies course, devoted no first-year subjects to Australian literature, and of the

available thirty-one second and third-year subjects, only "three were specifically about Australian writing" ("Lost" 2). Even worse is the situation at James Cook University where, of the fifty available literature courses, only one was devoted to national literature ("Lost" 2).

A number of academics attribute the lack of interest in Australian literature to the hijacking of literature departments by post-modern, post-colonial, and cultural studies' theorists, none of whose courses "accord canonical works, Australian or otherwise, a privileged place ("Lost" 2). Elizabeth Webby (and others) blame the "marginalization of Australian fiction primarily on funding cuts"; Webby also points specifically to the federal government's preference for private schools over universities ("Lost" 3). The problems seem to extend beyond the lecture halls, however, for presses which published series on Australian writers have shut down ("Lost" 4), and many classic Australian novels are now out of print ("Lost" 4). The situation may not be as grim as Neill's articles indicate, however, for Elizabeth Webby's successor, Robert Dixon, who now holds the Chair in Australian Literature at Sydney University, dismisses Neill's arguments as overly negative; he offers a number of compelling arguments which insist that "the study of Australian literature is very healthy indeed" (15). But that the "cultural cringe" issue is once again on the agenda seems to indicate that there is some reason to be concerned. Thus it may be time to re-read (and teach) *Southern Steel* and *The Little Company*, if only to remind ourselves that "country matters" as much now as it did in the 1940s and 1950s.

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Endnotes

[1] A number of historians suggest that the Yanks found Australians' cavalier approach to war frustrating. John Hammon Moore, in *Over-Sexed, Over Paid, Over Here: Americans in Australia 1941–1945* (St. Lucia, U Queensland P, 1981), writes that Australians were eager to serve, but only from Monday to Friday, and then only if they were not required to forfeit leisure time, beer, or horse racing (231). Michael McKernan, in *All In! Australians During the Second World War* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1983), observes that Americans were frustrated by the presence of large numbers of Australian servicemen and began to wonder if Australians were "pulling their weight in the war effort or were leaving all the hard work to Uncle Sam" (204). For a further examination of the nonchalant approach Australians took to the Second World War, particularly in the Northern Territory, see historian Alan Powell's *The Shadow's Edge: Australia's Northern War* (Melbourne: MUP, 1988), and Timothy Hall's *Darwin 1942: Australia's Darkest Hour* (Port Melbourne: Mandaran, 1989). Maria Gardner's historical novel *Blood-Stained Wattle* (Piabla, Qsld. 1992) also documents how ill-prepared those in the Northern Territory were to defend Darwin from enemy attack. Most of these texts make the point that the "military brass" seemed to have forgotten the tradition of fighting prowess and ready initiative in a hostile environment that had been established by the Anzacs of their fathers' generation.

[2] Cusack also wrote *Shoulder the Sky*, a drama about wartime Newcastle, which appears in *Three Australian Three-Act Plays* (Sydney: Australasian P, 1950).

[3] See my "Damn(ed) Yankees: The Pacific's Not Pacific Anymore." *Antipodes* (December 2001): 123-28.

[4] The "cringe" persisted much longer, though, as I found when I came to Sydney in 1990 to do graduate research on Australian women's war fictions. When I asked where I might find works by Australian women writers in a well-known local bookstore, I was directed to the cookbook section (!), and later informed by a Sydney University librarian that if I wanted "that kind of material," I would have to look for it in the public libraries!

[5] Like Cusack, Dark also suggested that early settlers had made mistakes. In an essay titled "Australia and the Australians," she wrote that during the difficult period of white settlement, the people had invaded a land that was not "originally theirs" (cited in Brooks 294). In calling attention to this usurpation, Dark was echoing statements which have appeared in several of Cusack's fictions, such as *The Half-Burnt Tree* (London: Heinemann, 1967), and *Black Lighting* (London: Heinemann, 1964). Like Cusack, Dark also suggested that early settlers "'used the land too recklessly, overstocking it till pastures became deserts'" (cited in Brooks 293).

[6] For an examination of the sustained grip men like Walter Massey held in Australian educational institutions, see Leigh Dale's "Whose English — Who's English" *Meanjin* 51 (1992): 393–409.

[7] Cusack's novel is equally disappointing in its representation of women. Although she had complained that women had been left out of Australian history ("Sense" 64), she failed to give them any prominent role in her wartime novel, in spite of the fact that she had stressed the need to "give women a sense of their own worth" and to give them "courage" ("Sense" 69). Additionally, in writing novels which feature male protagonists, she was falling in line with women who wrote First World War fiction. See my "The Digger on the Lofty Pedestal: Australian Women's Fictions of the Great War." *Australia and New Zealand Studies in Canada.* 10 (December 1993): 1–22; and "Lesbia Harford's Homefront Warrior and Women's World War One Writing." *Australian Literary Studies* 17.1 (1995): 19–28.

[8] The atmosphere in the Laughlin home sounds like the O'Reilly's. Although we never meet Janet in the novel, she, too, bears some resemblance to Dark. Both adolescents lived in houses full of "silences and tensions" between their parents (Brooks 64), and like Dark, Janet grows up "in the space between her mother's frustration" and her father's "wild impracticality and fertile imagination" (64).

[9] For a further examination of the significance of the gum tree in the creation of national identity, see Ashley Hay's *Gum* (Sydney: Duffy, 2002), and Libby Robin's *How a Continent Created a Nation* (Sydney: University of NSW P, 2007).