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ENVIRONMENT AND COLONIAL SHADOWS: GREEN ISLAND 1932

"... life as I see it, with every twenty four hours trailing its glories before my incompetence"
Nettie Palmer (Palmer n.d. 29)



"There is a good deal to be said" wrote Nettie Palmer "for letting the mind rest in one spot, small enough to hold the affections and, perhaps, be understood" (Palmer, 1988 484). For nearly a year, from April in 1932, the Palmers lived on Green Island, that "little grain of rice, that hyphen-stroke, that island Captain Cook already named Green" (Palmer n.d. 25), a coral cay in North Queensland. Ecological change happens swiftly and is registered plainly in bounded spaces such as islands. For Nettie, her nine month sojourn became a search to understand the meaning of the island, this small world, as well as the surrounding reef, and its relationship to the ocean. And, this conscious search for meaning was connected to the wider task seeking words and ways to write about it: "I had had time to watch, there, and to ask a few

questions, waking up to them day after day: and I think that was what the island meant to me in the end" (Palmer n.d. 2). While Vance Palmer left few direct autobiographical accounts of Green Island, for him, too, his stay was a time of re-assessment and renewal, a hyphen-stroke, an experience that was to shape his mature works. They were both in their late forties.

Students of literature in Australia are constantly at risk, Dorothy Green often remarked, of reinventing the wheel because they do not know the historical archive (Bird, xiii). Those who are ignorant of their history, as the saying goes, are destined to repeat it. There are recent calls, especially from those working in the scientific community, such as Libby Robin, for a new literature

footnote: Vance Palmer (Preproduced with permission from *Meanjin*. *Meanjin* is the University of Melbourne's literary journal.)

of the Australian environment. Yet we already have a rich legacy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmental literature. Nicholas Rothwell has some pertinent things to say about a *hidden* history, the alternative literary history of Australia, - "the evolution of art, and about form in writing, and the way that ... it fits in with sense of place"(14). So when Zeller and Cranston find the groundswell of eco-criticism originated in North America (9), they overlook the more complex legacy of writings about place and country in Australia. Where would we locate the *hidden* Palmers' eco-critical writings in Rothwell's frame? Like him, they claimed that "Australian ways of seeing, thinking, naming, and being are only just emerging from the shadow of the colonising, continent taking act." For Nettie, perhaps, one of the ways in which to see through colonial legacies was to "let the mind rest in one place". Vance, well aware of Australia's colonial legacy especially through his experience of the Great War, his involvement with the first Australians, and through his political and historical understanding, believed the responsibilities of intellectuals included writing about white Australians' sense of place. How the Palmers engaged with ways of seeing, thinking and naming in the process of decolonisation is the subject of the following pages.

It is fifty years, last year, since Vance died in 1959. Jack Lindsay thought his place in Australian literature would be "enduring" in his contribution to the special *Meanjin* edition on the Palmers: "Vance Palmer's work remains - through its poetic insights and its grasp of deep-reaching patterns of development - to give expression to permanent aspects of the human condition"(172). Yet Vance's reputation now is the lowest it has ever been. All of his books are out of print except *The Passage*, and none of Nettie's work is in print. How could Vance possibly have been, as C.B. Christesen claimed in 1959: "the most distinguished man of letters Australia has so far produced"? And, Brian Fitzpatrick was wrong when he thought later generations would praise the Palmers. Enid Moodie Heddle perceptively summed up Nettie's greatest strength as a writer and as a person:

she has always taken her status as a complete human being for granted; and so she has been able to capture the best of each environment in which she has found herself while remaining always keenly aware of her particular environmental heritage. This ability to find a spiritual home in one's environment is a rarer quality that most of us realize... (230)

Can we re-phrase this in contemporary parlance? Heddle is talking about connection, spiritual connection with place and the capacity to live deeply. It can take the form of ecological awareness. When Russel Ward commented that "in a hundred year's time Vance Palmer will be remembered as the writer who,

in the first half of this century, did more than any other man to explore and illuminate the nature of this elusive quality residing in Australians” (240) his concepts of Australianness need to re-phrased and related to environmental awareness and place rather than nationalism and nation states.

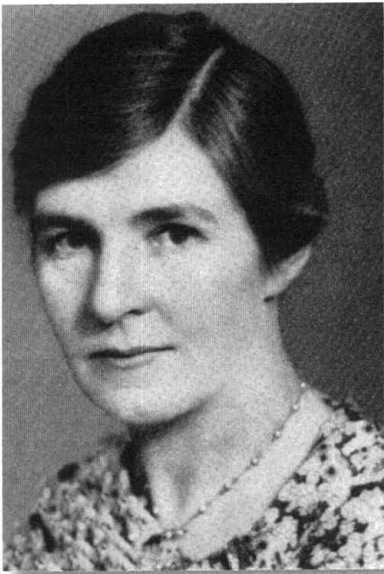
When the main literary and historical scholarship was undertaken on the work and lives of the Palmers, and many of their generation, in the 1970s and 1980s, environmental issues were extremely marginalised in most versions of critical theory.¹ The Palmers’ call for the importance of regional representation was too often misrepresented as some kind of nationalism, whether “radical nationalism” or even the “Vance Palmer-*Meanjin* nationalist internationalist tradition”, as summarised by Geoffrey Serle (119). The Palmers’ tropical sojourns are little known about; for indeed the very notion of arcadian exile challenged the framework of national progress and development in which the Palmers had been cast. The inevitable counterpart of the nationalist writer was a supposed lack of engagement with modern Australia. Vance’s writings about the bush were singled out in the emerging emphasis on the importance of Australian cities despite his novels being about Melbourne, Brisbane and Cairns. Further, those serious critics who did take into account all of his books, argued his fiction set in North Queensland and the Tropics was the weakest of his opus. *Legend for Sanderson* 1937 and *Cyclone* 1947 are both set partly in Cairns and surrounds. Vivian Smith describes *Legend for Sanderson* as a “tired book” lacking “as a whole a sense of creative necessity”. Despite “incidental descriptive felicities” “its failure may have been the result of fatigue or some falling off in imaginative conviction” (1975 78-79). Harry Heseltine finds despite images “dramatically realized and powerfully representative” the total impact of *Cyclone* is “disappointing” (120). Palmer’s fiction must be re-visited by those more familiar with the trope of the tropical imagination before any final critique can be allowed.

EARLY BIOGRAPHY

Acute ecological awareness might have been expected of Vance, who grew up in numerous small country towns in Southeast Queensland, where his father worked as a school principal. Edward Vivian (Vance) Palmer (1885-1959) was born in Bundaberg, educated at Ipswich Boys’ Grammar, and, before the University of Queensland was established, initiated into the ways of the outback on a pastoral property west of the Maranoa where he lived and worked with a large Aboriginal community in 1909. After deciding to become a writer, Vance chose adventure rather than trekking to the University of Sydney (Jordan, 2008 passim). Vance had also travelled extensively and intrepidly, across Russia and through Asia. In London he established himself before the Great War as a fiction writer and expert on international affairs, primarily on Ireland

and Mexico. On one return trip from London, he travelled by boat from Vladivostok, China and the Philippines, then through New Guinea and North Queensland to Brisbane. The detailed biographical work has not yet been done to unravel how often and where Vance travelled in North Queensland and what islands he visited before his marriage.

By the 1920s Vance had gained renown as playwright, short-story writer and novelist. After marrying Nettie Higgins in 1914 in London where their first daughter Aileen was born in 1915, they settled in Victoria where Helen was born two years later. In 1925 they moved to Caloundra, then a small fishing village and holiday destination. When Aileen needed to attend secondary school the family moved back to Melbourne but they returned to Queensland frequently. In 1932, at the height of the Depression and the year he and Nettie went to Green Island, he was finalising his proofs of *Daybreak*. This novel, his ninth novel, is a study of a soldier unable to adjust back to civilian life after the Great War, symbolic of the whole state of Australian civilisation immersed in the Depression unable to pay its crippling war debts. Once completed, Vance would start work on his long envisaged novel *The Swayne Family* based on a Melbourne family, while he was in the North. He wrote regularly for the Brisbane *Courier* and the *Australian Journal*, among other newspapers and magazines. (Vance's mature reputation rests on those books which were to follow, that is his formative works on the Australian identity in *National Portraits* and *The Legend of the Nineties* and his fiction written after World War Two, primarily the Golconda trilogy).



Janet Gertrude (Nettie) Palmer née Higgins (1885-1964), was born in Melbourne and educated there at the University of Melbourne gaining an MA in Classical Philology. She later gained an International Diploma in Phonetics studying in Berlin, Paris and London in 1910. Her background was urban and cosmopolitan; her modernist poetry written in this period before her marriage in 1914 suggests, however, that she too spent a great deal of time in the natural world, and learnt to love the physical landscape surrounding Melbourne. Nothing was better than being on her "Wild Lone" at Dromana like Robert Browning's Pippa. In the interwar years, she was linguist, biographer, essayist,

footnote: Nettie Palmer (Preproduced with permission from *Meanjin*. *Meanjin* is the University of Melbourne's literary journal.)

reviewer, journal writer, indeed the most important non-academic critic working in Australia. In 1932 she was at the peak of her powers as a literary critic and just completed, *Henry Bourne Higgins*, an early political biography of the Arbitration Court Judge widely reviewed across the globe including by Robert Menzies, later to be prime minister. She had several regular newspaper columns and literary pages, in the *Illustrated Tasmanian Mail*, the Brisbane *Telegraph* and *All About Books*.

FICTIONAL PRECEDENTS

As a young man, much earlier, Vance dismissed the idea of allowing the mind to rest in one small place to engage the affections, for small spaces were the product of little men seeking escape. In *The World of Men*, he foreshadowed a powerful Conradian motif in his later writings: "A tropic sun, spicy scents new to the senses, raw, vivid colours, and liquor made for native throats alone, will play bitter havoc with any man, for a while at any rate, but if the few cherished laws of his being can be broken and swept away by such things, how can there be any stability at all?"(40) In the short story "The Light", in the modernist collection published in 1915, the first person narrator travels on a "tramp coming down from Manila" and meets Van Goyt the Dutch lighthouse keeper. The evocation of the landscape is not for its own sake in these stories, as Heseltine has found, rather in the behaviour of the human beings (34) - and in these stories, more centrally, it is the study of the response of the isolated man in his natural environment (35). The narrator is curious about Van Goyt's fall from navy captain to lightkeeper and speculates on what laws of his being he must have broken to shift from the gunboat's bridge to the lighthouse circular platform. Yet there he found poise and redemption. It was no different, concluded Vance, "from those other sanctuaries in which monks, artists and careful hoarders of the single talent find refuge from a world too complex and big for them"(41).

The Palmers' idyllic sojourn on a tropical island is foreshadowed in one of Vance's early Rann Daly novels *The Enchanted Island* published in 1923 for the mass market. To seek out her father, whom she has not seen since she was eight years old, Nina Brayne travels from Sydney to a remote trading post, presumably in New Guinea. It is partly the story of Harry Bingham, a trader and adventurer, preoccupied with the search for the haul of a foiled robbery, who rescues Nina from the uprising of indentured labourers when abandoned by her father. They escape to ride out the rising storm at sea, but the schooner has been sabotaged and they are shipwrecked. They survive several weeks on an idyllic coral cay.

The Enchanted Island is one of Palmer's early transitional novels marking the great

shifts in discourses about love, marriage and companionship between the sexes after the Great War and first wave of the women's movement, to its Freudian focus on the war between the sexes. The Palmers spanned the Edwardian and the Modern eras. The later generation of critics was extremely hostile; even Heseltine one of Palmer's most sympathetic critics described *The Enchanted Island* as "arguably the most disastrous work he ever put into print" and "total surrender to the simple romance of polite escapism" (61). Smith finds "it fails to engage the deeper levels of the personality" (21). Certainly the plot is within the romantic genre of the popular bestseller with its buried treasures, pirates and vulnerable maidens. There is no map for where the treasure is buried, only directions from a dying man. But a different reading is possible when we fore-ground the environmental dimensions of the book. While marooned on the tropical atoll, Nina undergoes a transformation:

Her life in the open had given her a new joy in the sensuous impression of things. She could lie for a long time with half-closed eyes looking at the slim bole of palm bending in the wind or the opal colours in the water by the beach. Her interest, too, had been awakened in the various forms of life that made the still lagoon seem like a tropical jungle. It was if she were becoming conscious of a new beauty in the world around her (187).

It is important not to dismiss Vance's exploration of this process of environmental awakening and transformation of human consciousness, as "escapism" given the current environmental impasse. Is morality merely a matter of latitude Nina asks? (188) When they meet again, Nina ensures that his professed desire for her was not merely a product of the idyll environment: "We were alone and away from the world..." (274).

In *The Outpost*, where Vance develops and uses similar material, the female character is positioned very differently. Reared on a remote coastal trading post, already is at one with her environment, she is capable of "living entirely in her senses", "a primitive being" (139). When she and the main character, Faulkner, are marooned on an island, again by shipwreck, their sexual passion leads to his ruin, given his responsibilities to intervene in a massacre going on elsewhere. While Heseltine finds that the "direct admission of sexuality... indicates a more mature adult intelligence being allowed to operate" (64-65), what is no longer directly explored is the changing human, and gendered, relation to the environment, that is when the affair is framed in terms of the war between the sexes and the masculine desire to dominate.



top: Jetty leading to Green Island 1932 State Library of Queensland.
bottom: Green Island 2009 (taken by D. Jordan)

TO GREEN ISLAND

"In story books you are always shown coral islands" Nettie wrote, with an indirect reference to Vance's previous island writing, and "no one reaches them except by being neatly wrecked on them" (Palmer, 1988 527). It was Nettie's first visit to North Queensland in 1932 and coral islands could "be reached on purpose". In April the Palmers arrived in Cairns from Melbourne by steamship, the *SS Dimboola*, and stayed with Jim and Lucy Quinlem, both writers and active in the Cairns literary and historical communities. "We want to know all about Cairns", recorded Nettie (Diary 14/4/1932). Lucy had written a local history of Cairns and was expecting her second child. Nettie and Vance joined the School of Arts and continued their freelance journalism on the big airy verandah overlooking the streets of central Cairns. They had planned to find a beach cottage or one on the Tablelands to rent, but after a visit to Green Island and discussions with W A Collins, the mayor of Cairns, negotiated to go out and stay on Green Island. Collins wrote them a "plenipotentiary letter" to give to the caretaker. 27 kilometres north east of Cairns, Green Island had been proclaimed a recreation reserve under Cairns Town Council control in 1906. In 1924 the first commercial passenger ferry service began, and the long wooden jetty was built in 1931. There was a regular steamer once a week running mail and stores.

Wunyami (Green Island and reef) is within the sea country of Guru-Guru Gungandji and Mandingalbay Yidinji Aboriginal people (Qld Gvt, 6-7). After European invasion, the Gungandji were moved into a mission on the nearby mainland at Yarrabah in 1892. Their cultural knowledge which includes peoples' relationships with the country and with all living things is passed on to younger generations through art, music, dance and stories in ceremonies on Wunyami (place of spirits). The island, a forested coral cay with a complex closed vine forest is full of life and light. Thirty eight species of land and sea birds use the cay, seven for breeding. The island is a relatively new island, formed of coral. Vance and Nettie set up a camp and continued their work as freelance journalists.

Was this voluntary simplicity for conscience's sake, or was it partly driven by economic necessity? As freelance journalists and writers, the Palmers had freedom to travel, yet their income was precarious, and declining, given there was a world wide depression. They packed up their home in Hawthorn in Melbourne, no longer paying rent, and, given their two daughters were old enough to continue their education, they could live with Nettie's mother. Nettie hinted at the risky "burning of bridges" with "little assurance, beyond the automatic superlatives of embryo tourist departments". Nettie wrote that the "reasons for going to the island were simple enough: We wanted quiet, to write and read; and we wanted to know something about the mystery of coral

reefs, not as scientists but as seekers after the world's wonders" (Palmer, 1988 527). The logistics of the Palmers' work needs were not simple; they required ongoing access to newly published books, reading and research materials, and information.

Typically Nettie's writing on Green Island is part based on reading back through the past: "I've just been reading some old dreary statements about the North in a book by Stefan Von Kotze, a German who lived in Australia about thirty years ago with no ears or eyes except for its most macabre yarns – The book still sells in Germany" (Palmer 1977 72). Ion Idriess who had "gorgeous" material in his *Men of the Jungle* which deals with the coast just over the water from them was "pleasantly insincere" (Palmer 1977 77). Banfield's *Last Leaves from Dunk Island* was "a bit stodgy, but interesting" (Diary 24 May 1932). Could her daughter Aileen send up the "little paper green odd volume of Montaigne's essays" and buy a copy of Wood on the reefs and coral. The Palmers had clearly thought about what were the most precious books to take with them, and Nettie needed Montaigne. In an article "Peregrinatur: Books on an Island", she named the titles of those books "grinning in shy triumph from their highly improvised shelves": Johan Bojer, Donald Madonald and Marcel Proust. She wanted Dr Yonge's account of his scientific expedition to the Barrier Reef, a bird book and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Initially Nettie felt "out of breath with impressions" (Diary, 28 April 1932). "Whether there is a Freudian or Darwinian explanation of the common human desire to live on an island, I cannot say", she recorded. The reef was "calm and lovely" and she was getting to know it well through its moods. Every night the Palmers walked round the island last thing unless the tide cut the beach right out. "One thing, however is clear", continued Nettie, "the island, if it is to give us the satisfaction we want, must be small enough for us to grasp as a whole." Three days after their arrival the "lugger boys", "a thrilling little group" arrived. "Every sort of lugger puts in here" in rough weather, and "the divers and fishermen, mostly blacks, come ashore", she recorded, "Except on tourist-day, Sunday, there's nobody on the island, as a rule, except the caretaker and ourselves". And within the first week, Nettie was privy to her first corroboree:

To me it was all darkly seen, yet a revelation.

The corroboree helped us to find our own bearings; it had broken the Reef for us, as no maps or books of information could do. And Green Island no longer looked a mere tourists' delight, with loudsome murmuring about a precious stone set in a silver sea: it was a fisherman's island, a sailors' inn, a place

of call for the lugger-boys working up and down the reef, and the sails and outboard engines that passed outside the reef or entered the lagoon on week-days came to mean as much as the purposeful tides running up under the beach trees and pausing just under our ears as we lay awake in the tent.

The maps were beginning to come clear to us. Green Island with its surrounding reef was itself a part of the Reef intermittent, not a mere island inside a walled sea. In this latitude the Reef was rather like a honeycomb of cays, cay after cay with its tiny island seated on its separate reef. Between these cays and their shallows, there were channels, sometimes miles wider of water that was deep indigo, indigo-deep (n.d. 120).

FISHING COMMUNITIES

Within the first week of living on Green Island, “a flat oval of jungle covered coral sand” (Palmer 1948 81), the idea of a tropical island as an “escape”, a “retreat” as “too virginal, too far from all problems, too inhuman and therefore unreal” was completely overturned for Nettie. Green Island was not a “small spot”. By June she was getting to know “the North” from this vantage point “strangely better than we could on land”. She told Miles Franklin, how she began to feel its “fascination” (Palmer, 1977 72). Nettie writes more of the different sea communities in her journal *Fourteen Years*. Some of the regular visitors were the Aboriginal people from the nearby mission at Yarrabah, who arrived by the mission lugger. It was these people, the custodians, who corroborated. A second group of fishers were from the bigger fishing boats working Thursday Island and Torrens Strait, diving for trochus shell and beche-der-mer on their way to and from the south. The *Binabin* was owned and worked by an islander group from Townsville. Then there were the fishers working out of Malaytown [Cairns], including members of the legendary Pitt family, the Malays and Tinos the Greek. The Palmers developed a remarkable friendship with Bill Millard, skipper of a trading vessel the *Mosman*, who was to take them on extended tours through the islands. Then there was the visiting ocean yachts. On board the green painted *Gullmarn* was Dora Birtles² on her way to Singapore recording the journey for her book *North West by West*.

Vance and Nettie both wrote a number of newspapers articles about the three different fishing communities. Vance’s insightful descriptions contextualise the visiting boats in context of the economies of the fishing industry, and weather. “Luggers at Anchor” outlines the activities of the trochus fishers when they come ashore in a storm: “And how they play!” With races in the lagoon, climbing coconut trees, spear fishing, their main task was to collect wood to feed the fires

for the boiling of the beche-de-mer. They rehearsed corroborees, or "dances" as they prefer to call them" and "strange how many beautiful voices one finds among them, and how many striking songs". Vance was interested in their reality "... one gets information from them with difficulty... If you are thwarted by conversations... it is your own fault. You have framed your questions like affirmations; they are unwilling to disappoint you". He speculated about their lives and their boats:

Like birds in flight they take the wind, and in a little while you see, instead of those interesting bare silhouettes like leafless trees along the reef, three or four full-sailed ships, clouds of white on the horizon. They are making northwards, and Torres Straits is their headquarters; but all these seas are theirs, their factory, their workshop, their hunting field, some-times their playground.

SHELTER ON THE CORAL REEFS
The Black Sailors Of The Torres Straits --: By Vance Palmer

WHEN the white is in the south and the sun is setting gently with an orange glow, the black sailors of the island, with a woman before them, are sitting on the edge of the water, waiting for the tide to rise. The white man sits on the edge of the water, and the black man sits on the edge of the water. The white man sits on the edge of the water, and the black man sits on the edge of the water. The white man sits on the edge of the water, and the black man sits on the edge of the water.



A black and white photograph of a Black man, likely a sailor, sitting on the edge of the water. He is wearing a simple, light-colored garment and is looking towards the camera. The background shows a body of water and a distant shoreline.

Vance also devoted a full article to the Yarrabah mission boat crew's corroboree. In a further article "Shelter on the Coral Reefs: The Black Sailors of the Torres Straits" he was more explicit about the racial tensions between the different groups and the white racism of the fishermen congregating onshore during a storm.

Clearly Green Island was not a place of exile for the Palmers. Given they were living in a tent, with relative permeable walls, they were accessible to visitors. They both listened to the stories. The legendary figure of Douglas Pitt, the fisherman from

Cairns, was renown for his survival in a cyclone, washed over the reef at Green Island and landing safe on the shore (Palmer, 1948 99). Nettie was particularly fascinated by Tinos, the "Sardine King". Also living on the island was the ranger, Petrie and his wife. A group of labourers and their overseer, Jorgensen, were staying there building the new kiosk. And there were plenty of day visitors and campers from Cairns, and later when the tourist season started even more. In October 1932, an American industrialist, L Plass, took a holiday from his work at Mount Isa and snapped some photographs, with the Palmers' tent in the background. Fifty schoolgirls from the Presbyterian Ladies' College, where

bottomed boat over the “coral gardens” (Diary 14 May 1932), they began to explore further out into the lagoon and around the island in a small rowing boat, the “flattie”. Both were engaged with the physical manifestation of biodiversity on the island and appreciative of the cultural diversity.

ECOCOMMENTARY

How do we define this genre of their writings about the island and surrounds? The Palmers’ work about long days spent exploring the coral reefs evokes powerful images of a wonderful seascape. It was hardly “science”; most of the small output of research papers by Australian scientists across all the fields was absorbed by American and British journals. Nor was it “landscape writing”, nor “investigative journalism”? In many ways their writing was an early form of “narrative scholarship”, especially Nettie’s. “Are we in Arden? Miraculously we are” (*Argus* June 1932). Their respective writings, although using similar material, were different from each others. Nettie chronicled her personal journey of discovery; she was concerned to explore the meaning of the island and understand its relationship to the sea through and beyond the divides of nature and culture. Again and again she raised questions about the shadows of colonisation. In one instance, she contrasted the [white] Australian’s acquired taste for eucalyptus with their response to “jungle trees” that needed no initiation, for “you feel you are looking at the originals of ancient engravings of the Garden of Eden”: “you... have no sense of the challenge to your sympathy that emanates from the glitter of the downward-hanging leaves of a eucalypt; you are comforted in advance by the rich sheltering beauty of evergreen trees with lush green leaves.” And, she sought to savour the experience.

While Vance’s specific work on the island was less strongly environmentalist as those of his earlier writing about the Sunshine coast, he wrote with the same lyrical eloquence. His eye for journalistic detail was stronger than Nettie’s; some of his writing contributed to the developing interest in tourism. Was he facing a crisis in the use of his imagination given his fascination with the reef?

So many people on land seem to exhaust their environment very quickly: they feel that they know it backwards and forwards, and that it has nothing new to offer them. In most cases that is a failure of the imagination, of course. The observer, the naturalist (amateur or professional) never finds any region monotonous, no matter how tame it seems to the ordinary eye. But along the reef a man does not need either imagination or scientific training to be stimulated by the strange world revealed to him day by day. Nothing of a naturalist myself I confess to getting an absorbing pleasure from beachcombing, poking

among the rubble for the shells and fragments of coral washed up by each tide. And out on the water there is keener pleasure still. Pulling about in a boat, one can gaze down for a clear fathom and feast his eyes on a world stranger than any he could invent with his mind...

NERVES AND SENSES

Nettie made a distinction between the realm of the senses and that of “nerves”:

It’s queer how city-bound people always imagine that if they like to take a week off from their more important matters they could at once live the simple life, experience all it had to offer, effortlessly go native! As if they had not forfeited most of their natural birthright long ago! It takes a long time to lay claim to any of it. We may seek it carefully with tears (Palmer n.d. 180).

How are we to explain this in contemporary parlance? Warwick Mules’ work on a material environmental aesthetics reminds us that our lives as modern globalised human beings are as much conditioned by experiences formulated in and around our local endeavours to maintain a sense of well being to others and ourselves as technological, scientific and economic discourses and practices. Our experiences initiate and partake of trajectories of sense, woven in and around the ordering of life. Life in cities dulls our senses and sharpens our nerves argued Nettie: “The first few months in a place like this are taken up with the reversal of this process”. Sense reaches into the open, a place not yet formed or inhabited. The task of such an aesthetics finds Mules is to ground sense in the open as a new space in which to re-establish a relation with the earth. Later in the journal Nettie writes directly of her experience of the island and the immanence experienced where the world and the earth coincide.

The Palmers were forerunners in this field of empire and environment and culture. Since then our awareness of the importance of the environment in thinking about Australian history and literature has been transformed, that is our understanding about colonialism and habitus, about place and narrative. Since then, there has been a shift in our understandings of high and low culture, national and transnational discourses and bibliographical research has started to uncover the extent of the Palmers’ freelance journalism. The Palmers were initially recognised in ways that focused their quest for human rather than environmental justice and sustainability; their quest for a so called “national” literature rather than their call for an ethical relationship with place, a recognition of the role of mediation in representing the environment. Their ideas about an ethical relationship with place did not rely on a discourse of

authentic belonging to the land. Theirs was a vision of aesthetics committed to politics, and aesthetics based in the human love of nature.

LEAVING GREEN ISLAND

The Palmers left the island on the 6 November 1932 travelling south on the *Mosman* stopping off at the islands Fitzroy, High, Dunk, Hinchinbrook and camping overnight and exploring with their friend Bill Millard, his wife and children to reach Townsville. To affirm being through joyous affirmation risks recapture into subjective modes of consumption finds Mules. The experience of living on Green Island was such a powerful one they hoped to share it more than just through their words. By 1934 an eco-tour arranged by Vance and Millard on the *Mosman* had been fully subscribed for May. The travellers were to be accompanied by Vance. The *Mosman* and its skipper Bill Millard, however, were tragically lost in the severe cyclone of March 1934. The cyclone crossed the coast north of Green Island and the fishing fleet of luggers, pearlers and trochus boats were caught out at sea. Over eighty fishers and even more lost their lives as many of the boats the Palmers were familiar with sank (Jones 450). Adelaide Pitt got ashore, but her sister drowned (V. Palmer 1934). The Palmers' plans to return never eventuated. Five years after their stay, and journalistic outpouring, Green Island, including the foreshore and reef within one mile of the low water mark, became the first island national park in Queensland.

When we re-visit Vance's novels about Cairns, especially perhaps *Cyclone*, the powerful autobiographical elements gives any reading a new intensity. One of the central characters runs a small trading vessel; the narrative tells of the experiences leading up to the cyclone, the cyclone itself and its impact. Just as in 1934, after the cyclone, Tom McDonald took off to search and rescue by air, so does another of Vance's characters. There are further echoes in the character of Donovan of the legendary Douglas Pitt who spent two days in the water swimming to the mainland from Green Island, during an earlier cyclone. Vance's writing is grounded in the embedded knowledge of place. More than this, his characters represent living people in whom the spirit of place becomes expressive and individualised. We can even begin to understand the trajectory of his work differently – these two novels very much delayed because of his own personal association with the tragedy which unfolded. *Cyclone* was published in 1947, thirteen years later. Yet Vance believed in the importance of this work about the tropics as evidenced by the re-issue of *The Hurricane*. In the interim, Vance turned to a different genre in historical writing, motivated by compassion for the Australian working people, opening up debates about the Australian identities with their colonial shadows, which were of such importance in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the years immediately following her experience on Green Island, Nettie developed and wrote what must be regarded as one of Australia's very important early environmental histories, *The Dandenongs*. Later she sought "to bring back that year" when the island, "would seem the nearest way out of the present maddening rhythm" during World War Two, that is to express the island seascape she carried inside her head. What were the questions she was asking while waking every morning on the island? When we re-read her collection of essays published in 1932 *Talking It Over* and realise it was finalised, typed and proofed on Green Island, we can begin to understand the basis of the powerful environmental message in her belief about the human birthright and the central importance of the human relationship to nature, as the fundamental driver of literature, art and civilisation in the urge to recreate it.

ENDNOTES:

¹ That is just as the environment was becoming increasingly politicized. Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism, Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, USA, Blackwell, 2005), p. 3.

² Dora Birtles was a teacher before sailing from New Castle, on the cutter *Gullmaw*, to Singapore in 1932 and an author. She lived in Asia and Europe for a number of years. Her books include *North-west by north: journal of a voyage* (1935), *The Overlander* (1946) and *Bonza the bull* (1949). She was married to the writer Bert Birtles. <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1618690> Accessed 19/03/2009.

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