T1900202690

A LADY OF CONSCIENCE: REFORMIST THOUGHT IN THE FICTION OF ELEANOR DARK

by

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

Date: December 8, 1997

ABSTRACT

The general aim of this study is to throw new critical light on Eleanor Dark's work by proving her to be a more consistent, serious and complex writer than has been appreciated previously. It demonstrates that she was essentially a vigorous social reformer with both a romantic sensibility and a convinced utopian outlook who yet tempered her idealism with practical commonsense.

In giving voice to her protests, Dark's novels accepted human existence as a journey, and human beings as questers, with the goal a progressive, humane society in which the individual could develop to full potential. In a world dominated by reason, the leaders of society have placed along the way various historical and social impediments which hinder the questers, while certain spiritual factors which are capable of acting as supporting agents are all too often ignored. These obstacles and aids are the subject of the recurring themes which the study traces across the ten novels.

Chapter 1 consists of a brief overview of the novels. The major portion of the thesis is contained in Chapters 2-12. Chapter 2 discusses the journey. Chapters 3-7 examine the obstacles to progress and Chapters 8-11 deal with the aids, as indicated in the Chapter headings. Chapter 12 is concerned with the goal of the quest.

The study concludes with the proposition that Eleanor Dark's fiction, with both its creative and socio-historical content, has contributed to Australian literature a body of reflective and significant prose which is still relevant to our own times.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to extend my thanks to my principal supervisor, Associate-Professor J. S. Ryan, whose patience, understanding, and stimulating advice, together with his careful readings, have been of invaluable assistance, and to Dr. R. McDougall, my second supervisor, whose comments proved to be most salutary.

H. M. Doyle

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signed .....[redacted]...

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List of Novels in Chronological Order of Publication

Slow Dawning	London, John Long, 1932
Prelude to Christopher	Sydney, P. R. Stephensen, 1934
Return to Coolami	London, Collins, 1936
Sun Across the Sky	London, Collins, 1937
Waterway	London, Collins, 1938
The Timeless Land	London, Collins, 1941
The Little Company	Sydney, Collins, 1945
Storm of Time	Sydney, Collins, 1948
No Barrier	Sydney, Collins, 1953
Lantana Lane	London, Collins, 1959

A Note on Editions Used and Standard Abbreviations thereof

SD	*Slow Dawning*	London, John Long, 1932
PC	*Prelude to Christopher*	Adelaide, Rigby, 1961
RC	*Return to Coolami*	London, Collins, 1961
SaS	*Sun Across the Sky*	London, Collins, 1946
W	*Waterway*	Sydney, F. H. Johnston, 1946
TTL	*The Timeless Land*	Melbourne, Collins, 1980
TLC	*The Little Company*	Sydney, Collins, 1945
ST	*Storm of Time*	Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1980
NB	*No Barrier*	Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1980
LL	*Lantana Lane*	London, Collins, 1959

PREFACE

Eleanor Dark (1901-1985) was a modern thinker and social reformist writer whose novels were best sellers during the 1930s and 1940s, that period in which 'Australian artists and writers made their first real contact with twentieth century sensibility.'[1] Despite the limitations of publishing in Australia and the spread of mass entertainment at the approaching mid-twentieth-century, she was able to capture an audience not only here, but also in Europe, the United States and Canada, with some of her books being translated into French, German, Italian and Swedish. Her novels were neither highbrow nor lowbrow, and her use of some of the techniques of the popular novel - such as the 'love triangle' - together with the richness of the plots and the multiplicity of characters perhaps accounted for their original popularity.

Then, apart from the historical trilogy, Dark's novels - together with those of most of her contemporaries who, like her, were writing the genuinely Australian literature of the time - slid into a seeming obscurity for many years. It is probable, and also ironic, that the very considerable popularity of her books contributed to their exclusion from the study lists of the 1950s. During the course of the twentieth century there developed an estrangement between the concepts of popularity and the academy's esteem, so that in cultivated circles 'best-seller' was a pejorative term and Book of the Month Clubs were suspect in that they tended to standardise taste at a less than middle-brow level.[2] Upon publication in England in 1934, *Prelude to Christopher* had been chosen as *The Evening Standard* 'Book of the Month', while, in the United States, *The Timeless Land* was distributed by the Book of the Month Club in October, 1941.

In the Cold War period a Government nervous of leftists influenced the moral and social attitudes of many of the country's unadventurous academics. Australian universities then were dominated by Anglocentric literature teachers[3] who dismissed, along with most Australian writing,

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1 R. Haese, *Rebels and Precursors, The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art*, Ringwood, 1981, p. viii.

2 See Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Rise of the Reading Public*, Harmondsworth, 1979, pp. 41-2 and 44.

3 See also L. Dale, *The English Men, Professing Literature in Australian Universities*, Toowoomba, 1997.

creative work which espoused radical politics, while at the same time literary critics held that metaphysical concerns rather than ideological issues were the stuff of 'good' literature. Consequently ideological novels - and Dark's were to be grouped with these - were left off university reading lists, and such 'traditional' omissions have constantly influenced publishers' decisions regarding their reprinting. After *Lantana Lane*, which was published in 1959, Dark wrote no more fiction, perhaps because by then the idea that literature could effect social change had become unfashionable.

When, in the late 1960s, opposition to the Vietnam War and the anti-racism movement erupted, there began in the universities some investigation into certain neglected areas of the country's past fictional narratives. These were, in particular, works which dealt with the working class, women and blacks, the social and existence-threatened concerns of whom had been pushed to the periphery both in these institutions and in capitalist society as a whole.[4] Then, too, as a result of the more urgent and practical activities of the international women's movement and the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, feminist literary criticism developed, and, in Australia, the work of several women who had been disregarded as minor writers began to be carefully revalued and republished in helpfully priced format.

From the first, Dark was intensely concerned with the position of all disadvantaged women in society, and it can be argued that her novels and the work of these other 'minor' writers of the early twentieth century, were part of the first wave of the new feminism. Drusilla Modjeska, in aligning Dark with M. Barnard Eldershaw and Dymphna Cusack, perhaps oversimplified when she suggested that the feminist protests of these writers were diverted into the political arena with the looming threat of Fascism.[5] Although, at the time, a complete picture of our country's unthinking oppression of women had not emerged, nor any feminist ideological stand been taken, in the interwar years women were reacting to the hitherto closed power world of men and of political thought, convinced that it was morally wrong to exclude them from it. Thus Dark's novels continued to oppose vigorously what she

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[4] C. Ferrier, 'Introductory Commentary: Women Writers in Australia', in C. Ferrier (ed.), *Gender, Politics and Fiction, Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels* (1985), St. Lucia, 1992, p. 1.

[5] D. Modjeska, *Exiles at Home, Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, Sydney, 1981, p. 13.

saw as destructive policies aimed at both married women and women in the public workforce. She can be seen as a trailblazer who exploded the myth that women were emancipated after the Great War, when, instead, the enfranchisement which was apparently bestowed on them with the vote was appallingly absent in practice. Trapped in the system herself, her voice was poignantly heard reminding women that life is a growth process, and that their lack of adequate education and economic autonomy need not exclude them from using their intuition to escape from the distasteful social bondage in which they were held, in Australia, by unthinking males who were largely unaware of the inhibiting discrimination which they were enforcing. Dark was much more than a feminist, however, and feminism was only one strand in her work, as this thesis proposes to show.

In conducting an analytical survey of her considerable fiction, this study intends to trace the writer's recurring themes across the ten novels, referring, when relevant, to her short stories and ancillary writing, in which her expressed ideas contribute much to the interpretation of the novels. It is not suggested that Dark's ideas were original. Accepting the proposition that all writers are moulded by the forces of their time, and that opinions coalesce in an era, I have thought it a valuable exercise to compare her work with that of other Australian writers who shared the same physical environment and social traditions and engaged in the same current communal ideas and critical arguments, and this is done with specific contemporaries at appropriate points in the study. Such a survey exposes the emotional tensions generated by the writer's involvement with society and can only deepen the readers' understanding of her work.[6] John Hallows observed that the 'cultural life is an affair of the mind, not geography',[7] and Dark's novels can also be seen to relate to a world-wide tradition, one in which there can be identified 'common answers to shared aesthetic, philosophical, metaphysical and historical dilemmas'.[8] Thus I shall draw certain valid parallels between

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[6] See, for example, the letter from M. Barnard to Dark, dated 25/8/1945. Referring to M. Barnard Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* and Dark's *The Little Company*, Barnard wrote, '... we were both tearing at the same knot with different fingers'. Quoted in C. Ferrier (ed.), *As Good as a Yarn With You, Letters between Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw and Eleanor Dark*, Cambridge, 1992, p. 130.

[7] J. Hallows, *The Dreamtime Society,* Sydney, 1970, p. 117.

[8] J. Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites, Intellectual traditions in Sydney and Melbourne*, Sydney, 1974, p. 77.

Dark's work and that of particular European writers.

Although it may appear naive to link Dark's fiction and life, in this study I choose to accept the author as an actual presence in the novels, and not merely because of post-modern theories of narratology. As she discussed the realities of the times in which she wrote, the tone of her writing indicated the intensity of her own interest in the themes with which she dealt, just as the way in which she made her characters act and think inevitably revealed her own values and her own theorised and then practised philosophy of life. This conviction that she was ever present in the novels is further encouraged by her writer-characters' insistence that they must feel and care about the issues which they address: as her Elsa Kay expressed it, 'If you write with only half of yourself, you are only half writing.' (*TLC*, p. 192)[9]

Dark saw the movement and the patterns of history as supremely important to both the individual and society, as one of her remarks in an interview made clear:

> History is to a community what memory is to an individual. Without memory we should be unable to learn from our past experience, and a knowledge of its history is in the same way indispensable to a nation.[10]

While acknowledging that Australia's First Settlement had been well documented by European men in the First Fleet Journals,[11] she was not satisfied with existing and orthodox male historiography. 'That they recorded faithfully what they saw cannot be questioned; that they placed the correct interpretation upon it is not so certain' (*TTL*, p. 7), she wrote, continuing:

> The characters of many of the officers are to be discovered between the lines of their journals and letters. I have tried to portray them as I found them there, realising that another

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9 Cp. A. K. Thomson, *The Timeless Land*, Brisbane, 1966, p. 30: 'Actually, none of Mrs. Dark's main characters, historical or otherwise, can be divorced from their creator, because they have been constructed to represent a portion of her own insight, to suggest a portion of that view which the novel as a whole represents.'

10 Hazel de Berg Collection, NLA, transcription of Tape 92.

11 Dark, 'Preface', *The Timeless Land*, p. 7.

> student of those same documents might find quite different men. (*TTL*, p. 9)

In the powerful historical trilogy she presented her view with personal intensity and concern, seeing issues in sharp outline, but today's hindsight shows that they were never as clear-cut as she portrayed them. As R. H. Tawney observed, every generation must write its own version of history, 'and draw its own deductions from that already written', for '[d]ifferent answers are required, because different questions are asked'.[12] Modern historians still continue to question the accepted version of our history, and the present study will include, as appropriate, many illuminating latter-day opinions.

The novelist once told an interviewer,

> You don't get any picture unless you have all the pieces. For example, the relationship between my novels and Eric's *Medicine and the Social Order* is very clear.[13]

Therefore this thesis incorporates some discussion of the relevant writings of the novelist's husband, Dr. Eric Payten Dark, whose text, *Medicine and the Social Order* (1943), criticised the way in which, he believed, capitalism gave rise to social evils which warped human nature.[14] It will be shown that the interweaving of the opinions of an artist and a scientist had important literary consequences.

Dark was not just a powerful novelist. She was interesting and astonishingly like ourselves, having been too modern for her own contemporaries. She was the product of a critical household, a writer of 'problem' fiction, taking both past events and more recent social situations and mercilessly underscoring the flaws in their hitherto accepted morality. She was a liberal in her attitude to marriage, war and political structures,

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[12] R. H. Tawney, 'Literature', in R. Hinden (ed.), *R. H. Tawney: The Radical Tradition, Twelve Essays on Politics, Education and Literature*, London, 1964, p. 184.

[13] J. Devanny, 'Writers at Home. Eleanor and Eric Dark', in *Bird of Paradise*, Sydney, 1949, p. 251.

[14] See S. Walker, *The Poetry of Judith Wright, A Search for Unity,* Melbourne,1980, for another example of a writer having an affinity with her husband's writings, in this case Judith Wright and the writer and philosopher, J. P. McKinney.
See also F. de Groen, 'Dymphna Cusack's "Comets Soon Pass": The genius and the potato wife', in M. Dever (ed.), *Wallflowers & Witches, Women and Culture in Australia 1910-1945*, St. Lucia, 1994, p.48, in which Cusack's husband, Norman Freehill, another supportive writer-husband, stated that 'Bill Blake was equally supportive of Christina Stead.'

exploring them all to discover their condoned evil and injustice. It would be difficult to find any modern Australian woman novelist who has thought more about women or treated them with such insight and sympathy. It will be demonstrated, too, that she was particularly fond of revealing the effects of ill-treatment, oppression and abuse or women's character. She lived in an uncongenial world, and she was massively committed to bearing witness to pervasive moral and political abuse in her own country. Small wonder, then, that it was long convenient to let her fiction remain out of sight.

INTRODUCTION

> It is the common habit of mankind - indeed, it is necessary to the preservation of his sanity - to compromise at least here and there with the times in which he lives; but it is only out of his occasional refusals to conform, his determination to alter such aspects of them as anger or revolt him, that changes are made - for better or for worse.[1]

Eleanor Dark's own words lend weight to the general aim of this literary study, which argues that this Australian novelist and consummate story-teller has never been fully appreciated for the desperately caring, provocative left-wing moralist and social reformer that she was. Protest was central to her work, yet it has never been accorded the critical priority it deserves. Yet a close reading of the novels reveals them all to be articulate and quietly impassioned denunciations of social evils, particularly as she saw them in Australia, with the failures and triumphs of her striving characters providing a profoundly moral and critical analysis of the social structures of her own times and a challenging dialogue with her more attentive readers. Although her writings show that she rejected the ideal of human perfectibility, they reveal, too, a humanist's belief in the individual's dignity and worth, and an admiration for the resilience and regenerative powers of the human spirit. Insisting that personal problems could not be separated from 'the vast, the bewildering, the menacing problems of all humanity, with which they seemed so alarmingly entangled' (*W*, p. 189), Dark contended that, on the journey through life, each individual must develop fully the potentialities of the self, not only for personal fulfilment but also as a contribution toward the achievement of humanity's goal of a truly enlightened, humane society.

This thesis suggests that, for the most part, to the present the evaluation of Dark's novels has been out of focus, distorting and confusing. The large issues about which she was writing were never really seen in bold outline by the generation for which she wrote. Perhaps full recognition of her concerns is only available now at an appropriate distance from her time for a more discriminating and thinking audience which sees the topics which she addressed as relevant to their own lives. There were few literary critics in Australia in the 1930s and 1940s and her novels were hard to classify.

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[1] Dark, 'Caroline Chisholm and her Times', in F. Eldershaw (ed.), *The Peaceful Army* (1938), Ringwood, 1988, p. 55.

Early commentators read her contemporary works as popular romances,[2] comedies of manners and social commentaries, while her historical trilogy fixed her firmly in an available niche as an historical novelist. Being placed severally in these various categories led to understandable critical misconceptions and helped to obscure the real purpose of her work. Colin Roderick, for example, slotted her 'psychological' contemporary works into his category of 'Novels of Character',[3] and Ian Reid grouped her with Xavier Herbert, Miles Franklin and Brian Penton as a significant angry historical novelist.[4] Curiously, Ron Abbey found parallels between Dark and Ion Idriess, Bill Harney and William Hatfield, contending that her seemingly simple prose 'passed in a direct line from the bush writers',[5] while, much more perceptively, Vincent Buckley placed her in a cluster with Joseph Furphy, Henry Handel Richardson, Herbert, Vance Palmer and Patrick White as sharing certain distinctively Australian characteristics.[6]

From the first, Dark's technique attracted attention, with Nettie Palmer struck by her use of interior monologues,[7] and M. Barnard Eldershaw - who saw her first four novels as love stories, 'romantic in the conventional sense [and] conventional in the romantic sense' - admiring her successful use of 'a difficult and involved technique, especially in respect to the handling of time'.[8] The nationalist, P. R. Stephensen, too,[9] while praising her

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2 The covers of the published novels encouraged the idea of Dark's contemporary works as 'women's novels'. For example, that of the 1961 Australian Pocket Books edition of *Prelude to Christopher* pictured a handsome male and a skimpily-dressed female; the 1961 Fontana edition of *Return to Coolami* showed a troubled, pretty young girl in the arms of a tall, good-looking male; while the 1946 Collins White Circle Pocket Novels edition of *Sun Across the Sky* presented, inexplicably, a conservatively dressed young woman with a package-filled shopping basket.
See also B. Brooks, Introduction to the 199- edition of *Return to Coolami*, in which the writer commented on the 'highly coloured, sensational, romantic cover' of the earlier Fontana edition of that novel.

3 C. Roderick, *An Introduction to Australian Fiction*, Sydney, 1950, pp. 141-43.

4 I. Reid, *Fiction and the Great Depression*, Melbourne, 1979, p. 118.

5 Quoted in G. Dutton, *Snow on the Saltbush*, Ringwood, 1984, p. 224.

6 V. Buckley, 'Towards an Australian Literature', in C. Semmler (ed.), *Twentieth Century Australian Literary Criticism*, Melbourne, 1967, p. 77.

7 N. Palmer's review of *Prelude to Christopher*, 'A Reader's Notebook', in *All About Books*, Vol. 7, June 12, 1934, p. 115.

8 M. Barnard Eldershaw, 'Australian Writers', *The Bulletin*, November 17, 1937, pp. 188 and 195.

9 The Bunyip Critic (P. R. Stephensen), 'The Novels of Eleanor Dark', *The Publicist*, Vol. 15, 1/9/37, pp. 6-8, and 'Book Reviewing in Australia', *The Publicist*, 1/8/38, p. 9.

ability 'to idealise, without sentimentalising, the Australian', commended her technical expertise, with which latter opinion R. G. Howarth was to concur, choosing her as one of the 'most interesting' of the writers using 'the mental monologue'.[10] Critics hailed her psychological insights: an early unnamed reviewer drew attention to the pathological theme of *Prelude to Christopher*,[11] and Harry Heseltine saw the dominating themes of the earlier books as 'personal conflict and depth psychology',[12] while Cecil Hadgraft, concentrating on the narrative aspect, believed that *Prelude to Christopher* was 'a suspense novel as much as a psychological one'.[13]

In 1941, however, the American critic, Milton Rugoff, astutely recognised the larger protest implicit in *The Timeless Land* :

> It is ... not Britain alone that is implicitly arraigned here but the entire civilization which blandly assumed that even its worst vices were better than anything alien.[14]

Consciousness of her reforming zeal gradually evolved. G. A. Wilkes saw in her work a persisting 'strain of social criticism',[15] and H. M. Green recognised social reform as playing 'an important though shadowy part in the plot'.[16] Two years later, A. K. Thomson wrote of the social protest in all of Dark's novels,[17] and Humphrey McQueen identified the message of *The Timeless Land*, 'misread as a justification of European settlement', for what it was, 'a scarifying assault on the Australia of the 1930s'.[18] Drusilla Modjeska stated in 1979 that Dark made 'a political challenge to the dominant meanings served up in a mass culture',[19] a judgement endorsed by Brenton Doecke when he saw *The Timeless Land* 'shaped by a radical perspective

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10 R. G. Howarth, 'The Escape of Sir William Heans', *Southerly*, 3, 1946, p. 156.

11 'Editorial', p. 3, and 'Prelude to Christopher', p. 28, *Desiderata*, No. 21, 1st August, 1934.

12 H. Heseltine, 'Australian Fiction Since 1920', in G. Dutton (ed.), *The Literature of Australia,* Ringwood, 1964, p. 199.

13 C. Hadgraft, *Australian Literature, A Critical Account to 1955*, London, 1960, pp. 234-35.

14 M. Rugoff, 'The Birth of a Nation - Down in Australia', *New York Herald-Tribune Review of Books*, IX, 5th October, 1941, p. 5.

15 G. A. Wilkes, 'The Progress of Eleanor Dark', *Southerly*, Vol. 12, 1951, pp. 139-48.

16 H. M. Green, *A History of Australian Literature, Pure and Applied, Vol. II, 1923-1950* (1961), revised edition by D. Green, Sydney, 1985, p. 1164.

17 A. K. Thomson, *The Timeless Land*, Brisbane, 1966, p. 10.

18 H. McQueen, 'The Novels of Eleanor Dark', *Hemisphere*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, 1973, pp. 38-41.

19 D. Modjeska, Introduction to *Waterway*, 1990 edition, p. vii.

that confronts the existing order of things, challenging what "is" '.[20]

Dark was, however, widely regarded as a realist. Referring to Barnard Eldershaw, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Vance Palmer and Dark, Frank Hardy labelled them all as social realists, and himself 'a descendant of theirs',[21] while Elizabeth Perkins wrote of 'the good journalism' of Dark and some of her contemporaries, noting the way in which the novelist maintained 'that sound, plain, level which was a deliberate discipline of realist writers' in the 1930s and 1940s.[22] Susan Sheridan, reviewing Modjeska's *Exiles at Home*, said of Dark and the other members of the group discussed that 'as nationalists and as socialists they wrote in the prevailing mode of realism.'[23]

This consensus of leftist analysis does, however, overlook the novelist's romantic sensibility. The present study sees her social protest as that of a romantic rebel with a utopian outlook [24] and all the verve of a Shelley. Flaring out of Dark's novels was her energetic protagonists' 'enormous and passionate appreciation of life' (*SaS*, p. 64) as she exhorted her readers to live intensely, to offer an 'uninhibited welcome to life in any one of its beautiful and terrifying forms.' (*W*, p. 257)[25] In the face of the crisis of liberalism, at a time when the future of humanity was in doubt, in a world beset by 'the horrors of war and the dangers of peace', and riddled with the problems of

> ... luxury and poverty, and anti-semitism, and the status of

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[20] B. Doecke, 'Challenging History Making: Realism, Revolution and Utopia in *The Timeless Land*', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1995, p. 55.

[21] B. Molloy, 'An Interview with Frank Hardy (1973)', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, October, 1976, p. 356.

[22] E. Perkins, 'Quality Reprints', *Quadrant*, XXIII, No. 9, 1979, pp. 70-1.

[23] S. Sheridan, 'Women, Writing and War: Looking Back at the 1930s', *Meanjin*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1982, p. 94.

[24] See V. Buckley, 'Utopianism and Vitalism in Australian Literature', *Quadrant*, No. 10, 1959, pp. 39-51. This critic drew attention to Dark's 'preoccupation with the humanist utopia'.
See also Wilkes, 'The Progress of Eleanor Dark', *op. cit.*, p. 127, in which the critic referred to 'the romantic strain' seen in Johnny Prentice's story.
See N. L. Cameron, 'The Convict in the Australian Novel', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal,* No. 14, 1971, p. 48, in which the writer noted the move, this century, of convict novels 'toward romanticism and away from realism.'

[25] See M. Roberts, *The Tradition of Romantic Morality*, London, 1973, pp. 16 ,100, 216. Dark's continual emphasis on the significance of energy in the realisation of human potential suggest that she subscribed to what Roberts referred to as 'positive Romanticism', and which was inspired by 'energy of the soul' and 'force of spirit'. This concept was based on Blake's insistence 'that Energy is that without which a man can never realise his true nature as man'.

> women, and the machinations of capital and the counter-machinations of labour (*TLC*, p. 244),

this campaigner for reform was trying to uplift her readers with the reminder of feats of past endurance and to encourage their faith in the future.

It is important to recognise that Dark, as reformer, resisted the temptation to succumb entirely to the idealism which is a natural counterpart of the romantic sensibility. In the Preface I drew attention to her remark about the relationship between her novels and *Medicine and the Social Order*, a work by her medico husband whose moral and intellectual outlook she shared. The literary result of this association meant that in her writing she was able to combine the 'creative energy of an artist' with 'the cautious scepticism of a scientist' (*SD*, p. 34), thus utilising both her imagination and her analytical and rational faculties. Moderating idealism with practicality - as Shelley did - she acquired the outlook of a 'practical idealist' (*PC*, p. 18), displaying what has been called 'commonsense mixed with vision and imaginative perception.'[26] Her protagonists were all practical idealists, courageous protesters who knew that 'all things were dreams before they became facts' (*ST*, p. 298), and that they must 'relate belief and action - theory and practice' (*TLC*, p. 209), thereby creating a 'marriage from which achievement was born.' (*ST*, p. 298). Conceding that all goals set must be within the limits of possibility,[27] they exercised flexibility in reconciling the ideal with the actual - the world of hard facts.

What Dark once called the 'majestic continuity of human life' (*TTL*, p. 24) was an over-arching theme in her work, and this she illustrated with the mythic device of the journey. As a romantic, she saw this 'challenge of humanity to the dreadful, the implacable mystery of its environment' (*W*, p. 40) as a daring, perilous quest, with these mortals, 'strange, foolish, magnificent creatures' (*SaS*, p. 137), striving to 'advance in knowledge of

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[26] Elizabeth Bowen used this phrase in V. S. Pritchett, *Why Do I Write? An Exchange of Views between Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and V. S. Pritchett*, London, 1948, p. 26.

[27] See G. A. Wilkes, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn, Literary Evidence for Australia's Cultural Development*, Melbourne, 1981, p. 144. See also p. 95, where the writer referred to H. H. Richardson's depiction, in *Maurice Guest*, of 'romanticism coming into collision with everyday reality'.

right and wrong'.[28] Dark's protagonists will be shown to have undertaken this journey 'with completely unstinted zest.' (*W*, p. 153) As they discovered, life refuses to 'bend meekly to one's shaping' (*PC*, p. 69), and it proved to be a worthy antagonist as they confronted 'a veritable mass of rich and varied experience' (*W*, p. 13) in a series of peacetime contests which had to be fought out if any progress were to be made.

Coping with worldly forces 'which could tear up and discard their little personal plans like so much waste paper' (*TLC*, p. 248), they were imbued with a sense of purpose and the courage to take risks, continually 'heading away from security into unimaginable adventures' (*RC*, p. 290) in which they were physically and morally tested. Energised by 'that robust conviction of ultimate survival' (*PC*, p. 160), they were inspired by faith and hope - faith as confidence in the worth of the goal, and hope that as a result of their striving, the goal was attainable. The ultimate goal of the journey, as the novelist saw it, was a society whose laws should be flexible and in which human beings would be able 'to live together in peace, happiness and goodwill'.[29] As the novels revealed, Dark saw as part of humanity's 'epic pilgrimage from the primeval mud' (*SaS*, p. 69) each individual's journey from birth to death, a heroic struggle inspired by the fundamental human tendency to strive and the elemental yearning in every being for self-actualisation. What mattered most 'was that one should use oneself and the power which was in one to its utmost limit', for that 'spending of oneself was the important, the imperative duty.' (*W*, p. 295) Each effort was of inestimable value, for, as the character, Professor Channon, insisted,

> What any human being as an individual might achieve was negligible; and yet, that it should be achieved was of ... colossal importance. (*W*, p. 294)[30]

In striving 'widely, colourfully, adventurously' (*RC*, p. 129), in displaying human resilience by refusing to be beaten by life's hard knocks, Dark indicated that there was to be found the spiritual fulfilment inherent in 'a capacity for joy in elemental things, a joy primitive and unashamed.' (*SaS*,

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[28] Dark, 'The Peril and the Solitude', undated fragment, ML MSS 4545, Box 10 (25).

[29] *ibid.*

[30] *ibid.* : There can be no 'mass advance' without 'individual advance'.

p.69)[31] Incorporating in her stance of life-affirmation her 'faith in the possibility of regeneration' (*TLC*, p. 67), the writer insisted that such effort was never wasted, and she used the imagery of the welling fountain to embellish the idea. As her life-loving doctor, Oliver Denning, observed,

> You live with vigour and enthusiasm, and death doesn't count because it can take nothing of you which is of any value. That must always remain to be regathered by the Fountain. (*SaS*, p. 175)[32]

With an holistic vision of life's possibilities on the life journey, Dark protested vehemently at the way in which people wasted their own opportunities. In a society dominated by reason and incalculated with the shallow false ideals which they themselves had put into place, she saw human beings constantly defeating themselves, misusing the possibilities of both personal and social affiliations by setting up massive historical and social obstructions which frustrated their efforts to progress. In *Storm of Time* Dark quoted Tom Paine's words, 'Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil.' (*ST,* p. 368) Throughout her work the novelist roundly condemned those overbearing, mediocre leaders of unduly authoritarian governments - whom the people in their foolish political ignorance had elected - who were unable to 'think ahead' of their particular 'stage of human evolution.' (*TLC*, p. 170) These she accused of asserting their power but failing to lead, even as they covertly aligned themselves with influential interest groups and financial and political institutions.[33]So the reader saw her character, the questioning Lesley,

> ... astonished and angry and alarmed when she became convinced at last that the world was not run by people of integrity - not even, for the most part, by people of intelligence. (W, p. 192)

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[31] Cp. C. Brennan, 'Philosophy and Art', *Southerly,* Vol. 10, No. 4, 1949, p. 203, where Brennan claimed that 'in every ... department of life, nothing is interesting which is not the expression of a living joy'.
Cp. also H. Ibsen, *Plays : One - Ghosts, The Wild Duck, The Master Builder,* translated by M. Meyer (1962), London, 1980. In *Ghosts* (1881), Act 2, p. 80, Oswald told his mother that people now 'feel it's wonderful and glorious just to be alive', and that 'everything [he had] painted was concerned with "the joy of life" ' .

[32] On the headstone of Eleanor Dark's grave in Blackheath Cemetery, New South Wales, is the inscription, 'ENOUGH - THE FOUNTAIN WILL REGATHER THEE'.

[33] Cp. D. Horne, *The Lucky Country Revisited*, Knoxfield, Victoria, 1987, pp. 155-61.

Dark lashed out, too, at the apathetic populace, the so-widely found 'fence-sitters' (*TLC*, p. 258) who would not think for themselves; at the onlookers, in Graham Greene style 'gaping in glassy-eyed equanimity' (*TLC*, p. 289) as social injustices were perpetrated; and at those who, 'neither friend nor foe' to life, went on 'existing torpidly, a mere mass of functioning flesh, seeing nothing.' (*W*, p. 107) Along with the well-meaning character, Lady Hegarty, who realised that 'she had wasted and worse than wasted her life' (*W*, p. 271), the writer indicted all those who failed to fully appreciate life and who realised too late that they had taken no action to improve the human lot.

I would emphasise, also, Dark's role as a moralist. In a letter to John Galsworthy, Joseph Conrad called the former 'a humanitarian moralist',[34] a description which aptly described Dark. As she presented her characters in a moral light, it was obvious that her convictions regarding human behaviour were few and simple. All her novels demonstrated an acceptance of the fact that social and moral laws, although connected, are not identical,[35] and that there is a moral order which transcends all social ideologies,[36] so that her characters were seen constantly searching for 'some sense of fundamental rightness' (*W*, p. 78), one tested and proved by their own most honest thinking.

'Must the citizen ... resign his conscience to the legislator?' a wise man once asked, then deciding, 'I think we should be men first, and subjects afterward.'[37] In her writing Dark suggested that the laws and values which control the community, rather than being imposed by external society's often outdated ideas and 'museum mentality' (*TLC*, p. 212), must satisfy the individual's own system of values. Thus her protagonists rejected the 'tyranny of custom' (*TLC*, p. 16), and adopted the moral dictum, 'To thine

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34 R. Church, *British Authors, A Twentieth Century Gallery*, London, 1943, p. 49.

35 See also M. Boyd, 'Preoccupations and Intentions', in N. Keesing (ed.), *Australian Postwar Novelists, Selected Critical Essays*, Brisbane, 1975, p. 16.

36 See also I. Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (1957), New York, 1970, p. 24.

37 H. D. Thoreau, *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*, quoted in F. C. Giffin and R. D. Smith (eds.), *Against the Grain: An Anthology of Dissent, Past and Present*, New York, 1971, p. 110.

ownself be true', assuming the personal responsibility of making intelligent choices which did no harm to their fellows. Implying, then, that ethical judgements must not be based on a single set of inflexible rules, Dark challenged those restrictive social patterns which encouraged people to hold fast to convention and thus reject the chance to take the direction in life indicated by their own inner restraints and impulses. She protested that such imposed patterns frustrated growth by repressing the development of the innate ethical potentialities of the individual.

Dark's work consistently had other claims to distinctiveness, ones mostly overlooked by commentators. Few of the writers of the time could equal her skilful application of modernist techniques, involving experiments with time shifts and the use of a psychological approach.[38] Much Australian writing of her time was somewhat myopic in its preoccupation with 'Australianism' and local concerns. For example, Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, writing as M. Barnard Eldershaw,

> ... saw themselves as belonging to the vanguard of the second generation of 'Australian' writers, direct inheritors of the Lawson-Furphy tradition [and] identified strongly with the rural, working-class construction of Australian life found in the work of Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and Bernard O'Dowd.[39]

Referring to Prichard, Frank Dalby Davison, Vance and Nettie Palmer and Barnard Eldershaw, the critic, A. A. Phillips, declared that they were dominated 'by a slightly oppressive sense of responsibility', and seemed 'to engage in the act of artistic creation because they feel they have a duty to procreate ideas'. He went on to state perceptively that 'they lacked the artist's sense of energy', and that the

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[38] See J. Croft, 'Responses to Modernism', in L. Hergenhan (ed.), *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Ringwood, 1988, pp. 415-16. Earlier Australian modernist texts were Chester Cobb's *Mr. Moffatt*, London, 1925 and *Days of Disillusion*, London, 1926. Other Australian novels which reflected modernist influences were H. H. Richardson's *Maurice Guest* (1908), L. Meller's *A Leaf of Laurel* (1933) and C. Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934).

[39] M. Dever (ed.), *M. Barnard Eldershaw*, St. Lucia, 1995, p. xiv. Barnard Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947), however, displayed a much wider vision.

> ... lack appeared most obviously in their technique - in a prevailing pedestrianism of style, and in a lumpiness and conventionality of form, which seldom in their work grows freshly out of the individual nature of the conception.[40]

On the other hand, Dark's novels revealed a rich, multi-faceted response to her society, an ability to look at her subjects from all sides, for, like Ibsen, she was unable to offer an idea for reform without indicating the possible worth of its opposite. Her novels were less radically nationalist and more politically forceful than those of her contemporaries and displayed, despite their Australian forms, a more moralistic, European response to social evils.[41]She told an interviewer that, for her, 'Australia is as interesting, no more and no less, as any other country to write about', and although she was firm in her conviction that 'Australian writers should contribute something of value to the literature of their country', she insisted that she was not 'advocating a narrow nationalism', but rather that 'Australia should be realised as part of the world.'[42]

The historian, Manning Clark, who much admired her, saw Dark as 'someone looking out, not looking in'.[43] She well displayed this grand sweep of vision in her clear-sighted, sophisticated perception and intellectual grasp of the interrelationships between nations, and of global political and economical forces and their impact on individual lives. Convinced that all 'people ... want to be made to feel what things mean in terms of individual human experience' (*TLC*, p. 147), she connected fictional situations with the concerns and developments of the real world, and, probing below surface events to the ultimate sources of social evils, showed the trials of her characters to be 'manifestations of a social disorder.' (*TLC*, p. 19) This was a relatively novel stance, and such an international perspective was rare in

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[40] A. A. Phillips, *Responses: Selected Writings*, Kew, Victoria, 1979, pp. 53-4.

[41] V. Buckley, 'Towards an Australian Literature', *op. cit.*, p. 78. Buckley suggested that Dark had 'a greater affinity with several English novelists of this century than with any Australian who preceded her.'

[42] J. Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

[43] M. Clark, *The Quest for Grace* (1990), Ringwood, 1991, p. 162. See, for example, also, in his *A History of Australia, Vol. VI,* Carlton, 1985, pp. 440: 'Eleanor Dark had her eye on the way forward'; and pp. 499 -500: '... novelists such as Patrick White, Eleanor Dark and David Malouf ... provided food for the hungers of the human heart, and ministered to the desire of the human mind to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for.'

contemporary Australian writing in her own time.[44]

With a romantic's deep consciousness of the past, Dark was an historian *manqué*, and her panoramic vision not only encompassed the whole of Australian history but allowed her to place contemporary international affairs in their historical context. This conveyed to her readers a sharper sense of their own times which had 'their own sombre and exciting magnificence' as part of 'the whole history of mankind.' (*W*, p. 78) Thus the fictional Conor insisted that

> ... one must hold fast to history no less than to one's own small lifetime; walk there not with ghosts but with men and women; sift its mass of accumulated legends as one tried to sift the crowding events of personal existence ... [and] hold all time together, saluting your ancestors and your descendants as though they were living friends beneath your roof. (*ST*, pp. 199-200)

So the novels' sweep stretched back to the memory of primeval times when the human being, 'a hairy and uncouth creature', had solved problems 'very simply with a club.' (*SaS*, p. 52) It lingered in the age in Australia when 'an ancient people had seen spirits God only knew how many centuries ago' (*RC*, p. 291), and then examined the years of first settlement with Governor Phillip's vision of a nation in the making. Deeply concerned with contemporary problems in which Dark herself was engaged, through the past and present problems of her great gallery of characters and the account of events, the novels then offered both an overview of intellectual and political life in Australia and an account of the thought of the western world in the first half of the twentieth century.[45] At the same time they looked forward to the developing atomic age and to 'the unlimited possibilities of uncountable tomorrows.' (*SaS*, p. 192) The broad spectrum of her themes, the use of a multiplicity of interacting viewpoints [46] which permitted insights into the feelings and thoughts of an extensive cast of characters, her respect for social and political theories which often opposed her own, and her tolerant

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[44] Yet Xavier Herbert could be said to display a cosmic vision in his *Capricornia* (1938).

[45] See also Heseltine, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

[46] See A. Huxley, *Point Counter Point*, London, 1931, in which the novelist, Quarles, outlined the advantages of this technique.

exploration of male and female societal stances - all demonstrated the generosity of an outlook which provided a comprehensive field of comparison and judgement and the temper of one of Australia's most humane writers in her first two hundred years.

In order to understand why Dark wrote as she did, it is useful to look at the contingent circumstances which so shaped both the writers and readers of the period. Malcolm Bradbury suggested that

> ... there are decades which invite attention ... periods of social or intellectual ferment when human environment and men's ideas seem to crystallize certain themes and focus on certain propensities for change and debate, periods which remarkably cohere styles, moods, and aesthetic tendencies.[47]

For Australia, as for the western world, these decades could well be the 1930s and 1940s, when there occurred what one of her writer-contemporaries called 'a crisis of modern thought and knowledge so violent and so far-reaching as can hardly be found in any known period of history'.[48]

Born with the twentieth century in 1901, Dark was wholly involved with those troubled times which suffered the Great War, the Great Depression, international socialist movements, the Second World War, Hiroshima and the nuclear threat. For most Australians, however, it was the international disaster of the Great Depression which personalised history[49] and brought forth the conviction that the excessively materialist capitalist system which had allowed such a calamity to occur was fundamentally unsound. In that society moral values and caring leadership were lacking, so that, in a climate of class antagonism, anxiety and social disillusion, there was a sense of helplessness and 'an ominous note of capitulation and despair.' (*TLC*, p. 125)

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[47] M. Bradbury, 'The Novel in the 1920s', in B. Bergonzi (ed.), *The Twentieth Century*, London, 1970, p. 180.

[48] C. Christesen, 'War on the Intellectual Front', *Meanjin Papers*, Vol. 8, 1942, p. 3.

[49] See Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

Even though Dark saw persecution as an inevitable consequence of radical thinking, she believed that a conviction 'was a powerful and sustaining thing to have' (*W*, p. 200), and she was certain that the duty of a responsible writer was, as Graham Greene put it, to be 'a piece of grit in the state machinery.'[50] With her first novel, *Slow Dawning* (1932), Dark made her stand as a reformer,[51] committed to 'cleaning up the muck-heap.' (*TLC*, p. 88)[52] In Australia in the late 1930s, the increasing threat of a Japanese invasion and a repressive, conservative government aroused radical discontent, and Dark, together with many other contemporary writers, moved further to the left, while already Prichard and Jean Devanny were well ensconced in the Communist Party. Both Communists and radicals were brought together in the Popular Front Against Fascism, of which from 1935 on Dark, Nettie Palmer and Marjorie Barnard were part.[53] In this disenchanted milieu there was 'a social space for dissidents',[54] and many writers, including Barnard, Davison and Penton, became pamphleteers, with Dark herself contributing an article[55] to the ultimately unpublished 'Writers in Defence of Freedom'. [56] She continued to use her novels as a voice, not only to entertain her readers, but to encourage them to consider whether, in the cause of human progress and harmony, there were not a better way to

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50 Quoted in Pritchett, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

51 The idea of being committed to reform rather than remaining a spectator was held by many writers of the 1930s and 1940s. See P. White, *The Living and the Dead,* Harmondsworth, 1941, p. 354: As Eden left to join Joe, who was fighting in Spain, Elyot mused, 'The arch-enemies were the stultifying, the living dead. The living chose to oppose these, either in Eden's way, by the protest of self-destruction, or by ... an intenser form of living'.
See also the novels of Graham Greene who, like Dark, displayed a strong sense of political commitment and a concern with the plight of the individual in an oppressive society. He, too, was aware of the dangers of social conditioning, and he revealed a conviction that individuals must establish, and adhere to, a saving moral code. See, for instance, *It's a Battlefield* (1934) for an example of social injustice in which political opportunism was responsible for the execution of the worker, Jim Drover. See also *England Made Me* (1935), which showed Anthony and Minty irrevocably conditioned and limited by their English public school education.

52 See G. Giuffre, 'Eleanor Dark, Dr. Eric Dark interviewed by Giulia Giuffre', *Southerly,* Vol. XLVII, No. 1, 1987, p. 81. Cp. the attitude of Eric Dark toward making a stand: 'I only wrote when I felt a real compulsion, that this has got to be said.'

53 Modjeska, *Exiles at Home, op. cit.*, pp. 12 and 115.

54 Modjeska, 'Introduction', *The Little Company, op. cit.*, pp.xii and xiii.

55 See Dark, typed copy of article, 'Women and Fascism', Fellowship of Australian Writers papers, ML, uncatalogued MSS 2008, Box K22104.

56 This was to have been published by Angus & Robertson in association with the Fellowship of Australian Writers in 1939. Publication did not eventuate, however, because of the outbreak of war and wartime shortages.

live, whether they should reject present conditions and put into place fairer and more cohesive ones.

Referring to her own belief in the creative writer's 'function of feeling what he sees and hears, of finding his own personal emotions involved', and of interpreting this to readers, Dark wrote:

> That means that he must have ... formed some convictions, and made for himself some philosophy of life. It may not be very profound or original ... . It may be, in fact, a poor thing, but it is his own, and until he has it, all that his eyes and ears have taught him will remain merely a jumble of unrelated sounds, images and impressions.[57]

The continual discussion of ideas had formed part of the background of life for Dark and her family circle.[58] Arguing that, for a writer, 'it's necessary to break one's own intellectual trails', she had her character, Marty, in a plea for original thinking, explain that she did not mean 'original in an absolute sense', but 'original for oneself'. Marty continued, 'Never mind if you have an idea and then discover that Solomon had it when he was a boy - it's still your own.' (*TLC*, p. 148)

With a mind sharpened by much intelligent reading, and in the light of her own social and moral experience, Dark selected and adapted those ideas which she believed would most effectively show her readers how all human beings should live and behave toward one another. In acknowledging her European slant of vision, I would suggest that her ideas had much in common with those expressed by the drama of the conscience which Ibsen, Shaw, Pinero and Galsworthy[59] were writing at the turn of the century. These social critics had seen the significance of the responsible theatre - much as she saw that of the novel - as a social and moral force,

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[57] Dark, 'Drawing a Line Around It', *The Writer*, Vol. 59, No. 10, October, 1946, p. 324.

[58] See H. O'Reilly, 'The Timeless Eleanor Dark', *Outrider,* Vol. 6, No. 1. The writer, Helen O'Reilly, is Dark's second cousin, and she stated that 'as an adolescent [Dark's] imagination was fed by listening into the political and philosophic discussions of her father [the writer, Dowell O'Reilly] with friends like Christopher Brennan and John Le Gay Brereton.'

[59] I am indebted to J. Clarke and B. Brooks for a list of the contents of the bookshelves at 'Varuna', the Darks' home in Katoomba, where works by Wells, Ibsen, Shaw, Galsworthy, Huxley and Brennan figure prominently.

entertaining without being mere escapist diversion,[60] and they were ever re-evaluating the moral and social orthodoxies in an attempt to reshape the thoughts of their readers and audiences. Like Shaw, Dark had both moral passion and spiritual vigour. She was, however, more like Ibsen, an angry, introspective interpreter and projector of intense bourgeois *Angst* and moral anger at the individual suffering caused by the social pressures of popularised false ideals. Accepting that there was 'always a new set of circumstances that [ideas] have to be related to' (*TLC*, p. 148), she recognised clearly in the 'new' society in Australia so many of the injustices which these European writers found in 'old' societies. She was also obviously stimulated by two writers who exerted a major impact upon the era's young intelligentsia,[61] H. G. Wells and Aldous Huxley - Wells with his sense of history and both writers with their interest in new technology and its almost inevitable misuse. Another significant influence would surely have been that of the Australian poet, Christopher Brennan, whose European line of thought was reflected in *Sun Across the Sky* with its interest in the effect which the exploration of the unconscious mind had on the artist.[62]

The purpose of this study, then, is to throw new critical light on Eleanor Dark's novels by proving her to be a much more consistent, serious and complex writer than has been appreciated previously. This study proposes to do this by demonstrating that she was essentially a vigorous social reformer with both a romantic sensibility and a convinced utopian outlook who yet tempered her idealism with practicality. In voicing her several protests, the novels treated human existence as a societal and personal journey, and human beings as all questers, with the goal a progressive, humane society in which the individual would be able to develop to full potential. The texts, in their totality, presented a world in which reason dominated feeling, and in which society's leaders had placed along the course of the journey various

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[60] In the 1930s, plays by these writers were staged in Sydney and Melbourne. Dark was interested in the stage, and the script of a play, 'The Return of a Hero, A Fifteen Minute Play', by Patricia O'Rane (one of her pseudonyms), was published in *The Home*, 1st February, 1932, pp. 40-1 and 58-9.

[61] See A. Grove Day, *Eleanor Dark*, Boston, 1976 , p. 45, who wrote that '[Dark] recalled with pleasure the probing earlier novels of Aldous Huxley, such as *Antic Hay*.'

[62] See Giuffre, *op. cit.*, p. 85, where Eric Dark said that '[Christopher Brennan] was a great friend of Dowell O'Reilly. They often used to meet and Eleanor used to listen to their talks.'

historical and social obstructions which hindered the questers. Such leaders and, sadly, all too many questers, remained blind to certain emotional and spiritual factors which were capable of supporting them on their way. I intend to trace the way in which Dark sustained and developed these themes throughout the panorama, historical and societal, of her fiction.