Poet, writer, translator, Aileen Palmer – eldest daughter of Vance and Nettie Palmer, sister of Helen – volunteered for service in the Spanish Civil War and for Ambulance work in London during the second World War. This vivid study highlights her courageous struggle for freedom and self-definition as a writer and political activist in Melbourne’s post war literary and arts community.

Sylvia Martin, author of the classic study of Ida Leeson, the Mitchell Librarian, has had unrivalled access to hitherto unexplored archives, and presents a memorable group portrait of interwoven lives. Vivian Smith, poet and writer.
Sylvia Martin is a scholar based at the University of Tasmania. Her previous publications include *Passionate Friends: Mary Fullerton, Mabel Singleton and Miles Franklin* (Onlywomen Press 2001), and *Ida Leeson: a life. Not a bluestocking lady* (Allen & Unwin 2006).
Sylvia Palmer
The Troubled Life of Aileen Palmer
Ink in Her Veins
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Introduction

Portraits

I’m looking at an old photograph of an oil portrait. A young woman’s head emerges from a sombre, undefined background. Short-cropped dark hair slicked back from a pale, angular face above a black high-necked sweater – the look is androgynous, bohemian. The artist has painted her subject in half-profile, as if caught in earnest conversation with someone just outside the frame on the right. Her left arm is raised, elbow perhaps resting on an unseen table, cigarette tucked nonchalantly between the fingers of her curled hand, ready for the next puff. The portrait is so immediately striking that you want to know who she is and when it was painted. Where could she be? In a cafe, in Paris perhaps? You feel almost as though you could meet such a young woman walking along a city street today...

I found this portrait when I was in Canberra burrowing through the chaotic papers of Aileen Palmer in the National Library archives. Actually, I had taken a rest from the chaos and was flicking through the photograph albums of the Palmer family in the well-ordered archive of her better-known parents. The portrait is in the background of a faded snapshot of Vance and Nettie Palmer, prominent in the world of Australian literature in the first half of the twentieth century but hardly household names today. They are standing in their living room at Ardmore in the Melbourne suburb of Kew, and look to be in their sixties, which would date the photo to around 1950. The portrait, in a heavy gold frame, hangs on the wall behind them.
When I first noticed the portrait in the background of the snapshot, I wondered if it was of Nettie when she was young. But the pose suggests the interwar period when a cigarette in an elegant woman’s hand denoted modernity and independence. Then it dawned on me that it was the portrait of Aileen Palmer I had read about in letters to her parents from London in 1938, but which I could not find among the realia of the Palmer archive. Aileen wrote that Australian artist Madge Hodges (a ‘Meldrumite’) had asked her to sit for her, explaining: She didn’t think I would be the kind of sitter who would ask her to lengthen my eyelashes, etc. thus more or less inducing her to falsify her work as some sitters do. Madge Hodges’s attitude would have suited Aileen, who cared little for her appearance and even less for the conventional trappings of femininity. Yet it must be said that, while the artist might not have lengthened Aileen’s eyelashes, she has certainly trimmed the lines of her sitter’s face and lightened her Palmerish profile, inherited from her strong-featured father.

I knew from Nettie Palmer’s diary that she had received the portrait when it was brought back to Australia by a family friend in 1940. ‘Remarkably good’, was her verdict. ‘Rather dominant – Napoleonic, conducting the world with a cigarette’. When Vance saw it, he too was impressed. ‘Daughters increasing in virtue’, noted Nettie cryptically after her husband’s response. Ten days later the portrait was framed and ready to hang – and there it is on the wall at Ardmore in a photograph of Nettie and Vance taken at least ten years later.

As I study this little snapshot, I see that the portrait hangs not only behind the couple but between them. Knowing what I do about Aileen, I am struck by the accidental significance of this arrangement. The earnest young woman in the portrait appears to be gazing at her father, who is half-turned towards her while smiling in a slightly aloof manner at the camera. Nettie, head turned away from the portrait and facing the camera, looks a little like a startled rabbit caught in the glare of headlights, but that could just be the flash.

On this particular research trip, I am in Canberra for a month, each morning walking to the library through parks golden with autumn leaves that swish and crackle under my feet, leaving again in the chilly twilight with my head full of the Palmers and, particularly, of Aileen. Each day brings new discoveries and more puzzles and
frustrations as the folders of incomplete (and sometimes illegible) bits of correspondence, the unfinished autobiographical fiction pieces that she called her semi-fictional bits of egocentric writing, the scraps of poetry, the incomplete diary entries and the envelopes of photographs offer glimpses of the child, the adolescent, the woman who was Aileen Palmer. Tantalising, yet always just out of reach. This is not only because of the fragmented nature of what has been kept; her writing is often oblique, her letters ‘abstract’ as her mother used to complain, her diaries full of coded initials. Secrecy seems to have been a way of life for this woman.

Aileen, like her parents, was a writer. Like her mother, she was a fine linguist too. She was also a political activist, joining the Communist Party while at Melbourne University in the early 1930s and then volunteering to join the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 as interpreter for the British Medical Aid Unit. Her one published volume of poetry is long out of print, but I discovered that several of her poems have recently appeared in an anthology of poetry by International Brigaders in the Spanish War. When I moved beyond paper archives and books into the newer technologies, I found one of her war poems, ‘Thaelmann Battalion’, being given a stirring reading in Spanish by a bearded young man on a YouTube video.

Intrigued by this woman who was described by one contemporary writer as the Palmers’ ‘tragic daughter’ because she spent many of her later years in and out of mental institutions in Melbourne, I followed a biographer’s trail, within Australia and across the world. I visited archives in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne; I took the tram to Kew and found the address for the family home ‘Ardmore’, now the site of a block of townhouses. Overseas, I sat for days in the library of Marx House in London, which Aileen frequented in 1935; I stood outside the house the Palmers rented in the village of Montgat near Barcelona in 1936; I travelled to the battle sites of the Spanish Civil War, from Grañén on the plains of Aragon to the mountain-top town of Teruel.

Why, I asked myself, would a young woman of twenty-one volunteer to risk her life in a foreign war? Why did her world then unravel when she returned to Australia in the 1940s? When she suffered her first breakdown at the age of thirty-two, Edith Young, a
friend of the Palmers whose London flat Aileen had shared for a while in 1939, wrote to them that she thought there were ‘two Aileens’: ‘the one practical and matter of fact and full of political zeal, the other, imaginative and subtle and unsatisfied emotionally’. She continued that she also thought that there would be a conflict between these two selves that might ultimately cause a breakdown. Reflecting on this idea and in order to imagine my way into her life, I wrote these pen portraits of the two Aileens based on my readings from the archives…

London, 23 August 1936: A vast crowd – 10,000 people, it will later be reported – is milling around the entrance to Victoria Station, jostling to catch a glimpse of the proceedings inside. They had gathered in Hyde Park to accompany the twenty-two volunteers of the British Medical Aid Unit along the route from the London Trade Union Club in New Oxford Street to the channel train, bound for France and eventually to aid the Republican forces in Spain. Well-wishers thrust bouquets of flowers into the arms of the volunteers as they passed along Buckingham Palace Road in a convoy of Daimlers lent by the London Cooperative Funeral Department. Now, on the station platform, a brass band plays as the Labour mayors of six London boroughs in their full regalia mingle with the members of the organising committee and the departing volunteers. Most of those leaving are young men, the bold red cross you can see emblazoned on the white arm and hat bands of their uniforms distinguishing them as medical personnel. A few figures in navy blue stand out among the splash of khaki. These are the female volunteers, wearing the regulation blue coats and caps of the nurses’ uniform.

Aileen Palmer, one of the young women in blue leaving for Spain on that Sunday afternoon was not a nurse, but a secretary and interpreter for the unit. Unlike the other volunteers, the twenty-one year old Australian was on her way back to Spain. She had been staying with her parents, Vance and Nettie Palmer, in the little coastal village of Montgat outside Barcelona when the July coup organised by four rebel generals was staged. The Palmers had been there since May on a working sojourn: Nettie writing articles for The Argus and learning Spanish, Vance writing a novel, and both of them working
on an abridgement of Joseph Furphy’s novel *Such is Life* that Vance had been commissioned to undertake. Aileen typed up completed sections of the abridged version, adding her own suggestions and comments along the way.

Her energies at this time were directed mostly towards Barcelona where she had been using her university-learned language skills to translate material for the *Olimpiada Popular*, the People’s Olympics organised by the Catalan Communist Party to counter the forthcoming official games in Nazi-controlled Berlin. As the political tensions in Spain escalated, Aileen would discuss the volatile situation with her new friends in a *fonda* in one of the small streets off the Ramblas over plates of octopus or rice with snails. Strikes were paralysing the city, then in July came news of the assassination in Madrid of a prominent right-wing opponent of the elected Popular Front government. *The days passed, heavy with foreboding*, Aileen would write later. *Every day, travelling in by train to Barcelona, you saw reinforcements of Civil Guards pouring into the city.*

When the rebel army generals with their North African militia stormed the city on a sweltering weekend in July, Aileen was staying at the flat of friends so that she could be on hand to translate for the athletes arriving in Barcelona for the games that were due to start on Monday. She was awoken in the early hours of the morning of the 19th by comrades who had been out on the streets all night: ‘*It’s begun. They’re fighting in the city now. We’ve seen the first dead.*’

The rebel soldiers had marched into the city, taking possession of strategic buildings on one of the main boulevards by entering them shouting, ‘*Viva La Republica!*’ At first no one realised they were enemies, but then the workers who began lining the streets tore up paving stones and built barricades, grabbing whatever arms the government handed out. Despite the bloody fighting that ensued, the resistance prevailed and the coup did not succeed that weekend: *By Monday the fighting was over in Barcelona, except for occasional bursts of sniping in the tortuous streets back of the Ramblas. But Barcelona was a changed city.*

Indeed, Spain was a changed country and this was, in fact, the beginning of almost three years of continuous warfare all over the country. Thousands of men and women from around the world
poured in to take part in the International Brigades in an attempt to stem the tide of fascism that was threatening to engulf Europe.

Aileen was determined to stay in Barcelona and play whatever part she could, but when her father visited the British Consul he was told the anarchists would take control of the city and the Palmers were urged to take advantage of their British citizenship and leave on the battleship that was sailing for Marseilles the next day. Aileen rushed off to see the chief of the local militia and obtained a document from him assuring that the family would be safe, but Vance remained unconvinced, his main anxiety being that the mail would continue to be disrupted and cut off the income from abroad they were dependent upon. She argued that she should stay while her parents left, but Vance’s plea to her to consider how her mother would worry finally persuaded her to give in. This always worked, even though Aileen was aware that her parents operated as a team, one putting pressure on the other.

As the HMS London sailed silently out of Barcelona harbour at dawn on 29 July with the Palmers aboard, Aileen made the decision to part with her parents and get out from under what she later called their august and all-pervasive shadows. While Nettie and Vance stayed a few days in Paris, Aileen travelled ahead of them to London determined to find her own digs and a job. She met Isabel Brown of the Relief for Victims of Fascism who was forming a committee in answer to an appeal by the Spanish Government for medical assistance. Aileen told her she was hopping mad at having to leave Spain and would do anything to help.

For the next three weeks Aileen worked day and night in the two-roomed office at the top of a narrow flight of stairs in the Trade Union Club building in Holborn that was the headquarters of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC). Plans were made to secure supplies and equipment and the various volunteers were chosen. Two days before the unit was due to leave she was invited to go for a beer with some of the SMAC members late one night where she was asked if she would consider leaving with the unit as secretary and interpreter. It was put to her that her experience in Barcelona and her ability to speak Spanish as well as fluent French and German would be invaluable in helping the unit get through red tape and foreign
regulations. For Aileen, who had not considered joining the unit as she had no medical experience, the invitation was irresistible.

Nettie and Vance, who had reached London by then, were consulted and, while both were apprehensive about their daughter heading off for a war zone, they rallied and supported her. They themselves were writing articles and giving radio broadcasts about the situation in Spain before their return to Australia to take up the cause there. Vance had been feeling guilty about insisting that Aileen leave Barcelona with them; Nettie busied herself attending to practical details like shopping for underclothes and other necessities that her daughter had no time to think about. Aileen’s only request was for an adequate supply of Craven A cigarettes.

They did not manage to find her among the crowd at the station to say a final goodbye, but as the train was gathering steam, Nettie caught sight of her daughter’s strong Palmer profile under the blue storm cap she wore over her Eton crop. It was an image she would not forget. Aileen was leaning out of the train window shaking hands with the comrades she had been working with over the previous three weeks. Nettie had to admit she looked very happy and told her mother in her next letter home that Aileen deserved to be so, being actually permitted to do something she believed in.

Aileen was to call her time in Spain *my first coming of age.*

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**Melbourne, Easter 1948:** Aileen’s head was buzzing. *My mind is so full of the echoes of words that have haunted me…taking out all of the bunkum that some words hold, the poison, the dangerous bunkum that some words hold, that sets me off thinking like this. Thinking too quickly… Remembering things.* Her mind was racing so fast that her fingers on the typewriter could not keep up, even though her trusty portable sometimes seemed like an extension of herself. It had accompanied her in ambulances rattling over the bone-shaking dirt roads of Aragon in 1936. It had sat on tables set up in cupboards or corners of wards or hospital tents that had become her makeshift offices over the two following years, where she wrote letters in Spanish or French or German as the occasion required. It had then travelled in her case from bedsit to bedsit in London during the Blitz where she
drove ambulances and tried to ignore the air-raid sirens as she wrote her novel about her time on the battlefields of Spain. Now it was here, back in Melbourne, battered (a bit like herself really) but still functioning – just.

Promised land: that was what Australia had seemed…Songs – the songs they used to sing – foul or comic, brave or nostalgic – haunted her now… Ta-la-la-la-by-by: you want the moon to play with…Everyone of course wanted the moon to play with – something to rouse the lost community spirit, the romantic spirit of peasants and gypsies and children that wore out so soon in the great amorphous cities that spread like a fungus without a heart. Something seemed to have snapped when the gypsy spirit went out of her, and she felt as though she were perpetually perched on a kind of precipice… Gypsies…

Carmela mia, que guapa eres,
La mas bonita de las mujeres…

She had to get out of this dark room where she spent her nights keeping herself awake with cigarettes and benzedrines. There was no time to sleep, so much to write.

She’d wasted the first two years after she returned in 1945, outwardly cheerful, giving radio talks, going to parties, listening to Nettie talk of her very valuable work among the refugees for Australian Spanish Relief. She herself had spoken calmly, collectedly, like an intellectual to the people who wanted to hear her tell of her experiences in Spain, the war in Europe (comfortable, cushioned people, stuffed men, she called them privately). But she had felt an inner detachment all through that time, as if sealed off in a cage of glass, in a state she called frozen mind, until recently when the unfreeze had started to set in and the thoughts whirling in her head had left her no choice but to try to get them down as quickly as she could. The bennies had helped and now she couldn’t sleep if she wanted to, but at times her hands shook so much they refused to hit the right keys and she had to resort to scribbling on scraps of paper. Nettie had startled her – no, shocked her – one night by coming upstairs and banging on her door in the small hours beseeching her to go to bed, the hysterical edge to her voice driving her daughter crazy. Eventually, Aileen had given in and gone to bed so that she could get some peace. Sent to bed by her mother at thirty-two! Guilty? Why should she feel guilty now? She had
tried all her life to do her best for society, for progress. Then after coming back to the country of her childhood, something inside her had suddenly snapped. ‘No hay luna, no hay sol’.

Vance Palmer sat at his desk on the glassed-in balcony trying to finish the text for the next ‘Current Books Worth Reading’, the fortnightly national book review he broadcast on the ABC. A sun-worshipping Queenslander, he always sought out the warmest corners and had long since claimed this annexe, which caught the fickle southern sun whenever it chose to appear, as his workspace. The autumn sun warming him here never reached the inner rooms of the rambling old house. Vance was probably distracted from his writing this morning though, not by the warmth but by worrying thoughts about his elder daughter. If only her Spanish novel had been picked up by Gollancz, as had seemed possible at one stage, things might be different now. He’d tried to offer assistance in his letters after she sent drafts of it from London, suggesting how she could better organise the rather messy structure by creating one protagonist instead of the five or so she had started with. The ideas were there; form was what she needed to work on and refine.

In the back garden glossy bushes grew like weeds but hid the neighbour’s backyard effectively and provided the illusion of spacious greenery. If he had looked out past the fruit trees towards these bushes, he would have seen Aileen wander across the lawn gesticulating and muttering to herself – or was she singing? – then stretch out on the ground, her head on her arms. Was the grass still damp?

Perhaps he remembered the occasion a few days before when he had mentioned at dinner that their friend Flora Eldershaw had angina, the same condition his sister Mabel had died of in her sixties. It was sad, yes, but Aileen’s reaction had been extraordinary. She had gone suddenly white, stopped eating and rushed from the table to her room. She seemed to be in a highly excitable and shockable state altogether, this usually stoic, shy daughter of his. Nettie was beside herself with anxiety, and no doubt the subject of Wob, his younger brother, lay unspoken and heavy between them. It was just as well they had sent for Helen to come and advise them on what to do.
Aileen stretched out on the lawn, cool breeze blowing away the smoky fug from her tired brain, sun massaging her aching shoulder blades. ‘On days of doubt, on days of heaviest thoughts about the fate of my people, you alone are my stay and support, oh, brave, strong, true and free Russian language’. Poetry: they could speak poetry, Pushkin and Turgenev, doubt as they might that the world about them would listen to the voice of freedom…

Songs of the last depression haunted her mind:

> Once I built a railroad, made it run,
> Made it run against time,
> Once I built a railroad, now it's done,
> Brother, can you spare a dime?

All was quiet in the back gardens of suburban Kew. An exquisite drowsiness washed over her and she closed her eyes. But now it was the Andalusian wail she heard, the bitter-sweet wail of a people debased by hunger and oppression: cante fondo, out of the depths.

> Go down, Moses: way down in Egypt's land,
> Tell, oh, oh, Pharoah! Let my people go!

> My people. These are my people, drinking their beer and enjoying a time of full employment, no more rattled than the cockneys were when we came back from Spain and talked about bomb-proof shelters…

The old-fashioned and disorderly kitchen at Ardmore, the family home that Nettie had inherited when her mother died in 1944, allowed only a restricted view of the back garden. Nettie’s mind, nonetheless, would have been entirely preoccupied with her daughter’s strange behaviour; she didn’t need to be able to see her lying on the lawn. Never known for her culinary skills, Nettie was throwing ingredients into a casserole even more distractedly than usual. But instead of preparing a review of a new book in her head or pondering over a lecture she was to give at the university, it was more likely that she was reliving the events of the small party she had attended at the flat of their friends Brian and Dorothy Fitzpatrick the previous night. Aileen had turned up unexpectedly with Flora – in an exhilarated state, red-faced and talking and laughing in a most uncharacteristic way. Although she had seemed her own sweet self since she had come back from England in 1945, typing up manuscripts for Vance and
making intelligent suggestions on details, she had also been rather cut off. Nettie worried that it was her fault, that she had pressed her too hard to return and live with them at Ardmore, offering her space to write in and money to help her.

Nettie had watched her daughter carefully at the party because she and Vance suspected she was drinking too much, although they hadn’t talked to her about it. While they were unflinching in their literary criticism, neither of them dealt with confrontation well on a personal level. But that night Nettie couldn’t blame Aileen’s behaviour on alcohol; something else was driving her nervous excess. She had harangued that poor poet mercilessly, accusing him of being a nearly-was poet, a might-have-been poet. Aileen had known him at university years before and Nettie too might have been objectively critical of his work in a review, but this was unforgivable. And when Nettie urged her to stop, she just said airily that there was too much Rimbaud in her head, as if that explained her diatribe. Even when Nettie managed to get her daughter to leave the party with her, Aileen had distressed her by talking loudly in the tram all the way home. They had managed to get her to bed with the help of one of Nettie’s mild sedatives, but neither parent had slept. In the morning, Vance wired Helen to come and they started to get in touch with doctors. There had been times over the last few years when Nettie had been almost afraid of her younger daughter’s cool efficiency, especially after she joined the WAAAF (Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force) and looked so formal and untouchable in her uniform, but she knew she could depend on Helen in a crisis. She was due to arrive towards evening, if her aeroplane was on time.

Got to keep telling my mother to leave me alone, telling her not too hard or too casually but saying it somehow enough. Enough for this thing to unravel itself in my mind as I lie on the lawn – the story, perhaps, of my life. The ground was getting hard and the daylight was fading, but Aileen, spread-eagled on the grass, was incapable of moving as her thoughts went on speeding wildly in all directions. Sick in the guts. It made her feel sick in the guts to read the newspapers they printed in Australia now. Words – bloody words! Yarn-spinning – it had been her main entertainment when she was a child. Yarn-spinning.
Tom he was a piper’s son
He learnt to play when he was young
The only tune that he could play
Was over the hills and far away…

Midsummer Night’s Dream. I seen it, I seen the little lamp! Lamps among the ti-trees when they played it among the ti-trees, down at Black Rock. At the Longs’ place. Dick Long – went to jail during the anti-conscription campaign. Face like Jesus Christ. Carpenter. Gave them toys…

When that I was a little tiny boy
With a hey-ho! – the wind and the rain
A foolish thing could give me joy
For the sun it rises every day…

Hills of childhood, blue sea and sky of childhood. Bottom the Weaver compose de feux la mer, la mer toujours recommencée…

There was another voice besides that of Paul Valéry in her head now, telling her urgently to get up.

‘Go away, I’m busy. Can’t you see I’m busy?’

She tried to concentrate on Valéry: O récompense après une pensée… But the voice kept on, like an insistent mosquito. Gradually, Aileen became aware that it was her sister’s voice, her little sister Hell’s voice. She rolled over slowly and looked up to see Helen looming over her, huge against the darkening sky, her face contorted, mouth opening and shutting like a fish gasping for air. Phsyies, fishies – these were among those crazy nicknames her sister had for the family. She felt like laughing.

‘Aileen, get up. Aileen! Come on, Old Face, can’t you hear me? Get up!’

Aileen tried to talk rationally to her sister that day about the phenomenon of delayed shock that she felt she must be suffering from, explaining why her war experiences were only affecting her now, after several years. She might have thought Helen had accepted her very rational explanation; that is, until the young doctor arrived and she was carted off, protesting violently, to hospital.

Nettie was so distressed that she completely forgot she had accepted a dinner invitation for herself and Vance on the Easter Sunday of
1948. On the Monday she sent a note of apology to her friend Jean Campbell, to whom she confided, ‘Aileen has had a breakdown & we had to send for Helen from Sydney on her account. We may know a little more about it tomorrow when doctors and appointments settle down a little after Easter: but it will be long. No more just now. We’re more anxious than I dare say. Forgive my fumbling admissions. Thanks for your hearty hospitality. Yours, Nettie P.’
PART I

A Promising Life
Two Legacies

Aileen was to say that Spain was not her first experience of the bombardment of civilians as she was born in London shortly after the outbreak of World War I. *I grew up feeling ashamed of being a ‘pommie’, and, when admitting to it at the university, when we were sitting round having our sandwich lunch, said hastily: ‘But I was in Brittany before I was born’.* And she was. She was conceived there when Nettie and Vance were on their working ‘honeymoon’, a matter of weeks before their serene life in the little fishing village of Trégastel was disrupted dramatically with the declaration of war on 4 August 1914.

It was not the Palmers’ first visit to Trégastel. Nettie had attended a summer school there three years earlier when she was in the final stages of the International Diploma of Phonetics she had been studying for in Germany and Paris, and Vance had taken time off from his work as a journalist in London to join her for a week. After they finally married, the village that held such happy memories for them was their choice for the kind of working holiday they would seek out many times during their long marriage and productive working partnership. They had simple requirements: sun, sea, quiet, and fresh air.

Janet Gertrude Higgins (Nettie) and Edward Vivian Palmer (Vance) endured a lengthy courtship after they met in the summer of 1909 in the most fitting of locations – the Public Library of Melbourne. Although both were twenty-four years old, their experience of life was very different. Vance, striking with tanned, strong features, blue eyes and sporting a jaunty bow tie, was in Melbourne to follow up some
journalistic contacts and had set up his informal office in the library. He had already made two trips overseas and was in fact on a visit home from his base in London to see his family in Brisbane. Nettie, less immediately striking except for her dark eyes and direct gaze, was studying for her final university examinations. The daughter of strict Baptist parents, she had led a sheltered life but was active in politics and the literature club at university. The fact that her accountant father had supported her desire for a tertiary education was progressive for the time, but his sisters had both attended university and his brother, High Court Judge Henry Bournes Higgins, provided financial as well as intellectual support to his niece.

*Something had started them talking, and love of writing turned into love at first sight,* wrote Aileen of her parents’ first meeting. Reams of letters crossed the world and trysts both at home and abroad followed. When they were in Trégastel in 1911, Nettie and Vance decided it was time to tell their families of the engagement they had kept secret for nearly a year.

Nettie would have been happy to declare it to the world when they pledged their love in London in 1910, but the more cautious Vance was not ready, estimating that it would be two or three years before his financial situation as an aspiring journalist would be secure enough for marriage. Later, after Nettie had returned to Australia to prepare her parents for the idea of her marriage and to start teaching, he reminded her of their week together on that rocky coast in the north of France: ‘I like to remember the clothes you wore, and the way you walked – the tricky little swing of your body as if your abounding life was making turns all the while with grace. Dear girl, I’ll never see a sea-beach until we meet again but your figure will be moving across it, just as it did when I was waiting in the sand and you were coming over from the house. It’s great to think that my mate is one whom it’s most easy to remember in the wind and the sun: you will understand all that that means to me, dear’.

John and Catherine (Katie) Higgins approved of Vance as a husband for their only daughter once they had established he was a suitable choice. For Nettie, after two years of having the relative freedom
to pursue her own interests and make her own decisions, the return home was not easy. Unlike Vance, whose travels to London were for the purposes of establishing his career, Nettie’s trip at the completion of her university degree was intended to be a journey ‘home’ in which she would acquaint herself with relatives and European culture. Once in London, she quickly asserted her independence by freeing herself from her chaperone and travelling to Germany to undertake the phonetics diploma. Back in Melbourne she was immediately reabsorbed into the family fold and expected to take up the duties of a dependent daughter, even though she was now in her mid-twenties.

During this period in Melbourne Nettie tried to persuade her deeply religious Baptist parents that her own and Vance’s considered position as non-believers was a legitimate one. She had struggled in her early adult years, praying for faith, but in vain. As she told Vance, her love for him had offered her ‘new horizons’, adding, ‘but I am a bad traveller in spirit worlds: I am like a tiny vessel that can’t hold the rivers of joy & faith that flow by’. Their rejection of religion was anathema to her parents who remained intransigent. Nettie’s father took it upon himself to write to Vance and urge him to reconsider his faith and to pledge ‘total abstinence’. Nettie said she and her mother were ‘like two tense strings & I didn’t dare snap, because I knew she was strained too’. Aileen was to write, years later, in one of her many ‘semi-fictional’ attempts to come to terms with her family that Blake [Vance] took religion lightly, but Noni [Nettie] had an anxious, tormented time getting free of her parents’ religion. Her mother’s problem, according to Aileen, was that she was essentially almost cruelly honest and, instead of simply keeping her beliefs to herself, felt she had to argue her case with her parents.

On Christmas Eve 1913 Vance sent a letter to Mrs Higgins thanking her for the money she and Mr Higgins had sent him as a Christmas present: ‘I am using it to get a little carpet for my sitting-room that my eyes have been resting on longingly for some time, as it will be filling up my own little glory-box’. More importantly, he asked if they would consider letting Nettie travel to England to marry him. The couple were now both twenty-nine years old. ‘I feel that we
have waited long enough’, Vance argues. ‘We are so sure of being happy together, wherever we are, and I have the feeling of being on a sure footing now’. He hopes they will be able to live in Australia eventually, at least he promises they will return for a year in two years’ time.

With some reluctance, John and Katie Higgins agreed to Vance’s request, but it seems that the burden of her parents’ religious strictures still weighed heavily on Nettie’s conscience. Eager to join her fiancé, she nevertheless wrote to him suggesting that perhaps they should postpone the wedding if they could not afford to have children straight away. Vance replied, stating the reason he understood to underlie her anxiety and apologising for putting it ‘crudely’: ‘you seem to think that the final act of sex is only tolerable as a conscious means to an end: that otherwise it’s a sort of a sin; that it’s different in its nature from every other kind of sexual intimacy because it may lead to the conception of a child, and that should always be a thing consciously planned. Mate, I can’t put it very coherently but that seemed to me what part of your letter meant’. With a restraint that appears almost noble given that they had already waited five years, he tells her, ‘I can say with perfect honesty that your wish alone shall determine all our relations. If you think that owing to circumstances, economical or otherwise, we shouldn’t risk having children yet; and that being so we ought honestly to live a sexless life till the time comes when we could have children: then we’ll do it. It is possible, though it isn’t easy to say so lightly. Our sex-life is only for a few years though and it isn’t the only thing that holds us together’. From the outset, the couple regarded themselves as soul mates, joined by a bond that was deeper than physical intimacy.

Perhaps the fear of the ultimate intimacy of sex that overcame Nettie in the months before the wedding had more complex origins than a family legacy of equating sex with procreation. Her ongoing struggle with her emotions at this important point of her life suggests an ambivalence that must have been felt by many of the university-educated New Women of the early twentieth century. Nettie’s background would have made it impossible for her to seek love outside marriage. There is no doubt that she was eager to fulfil the role of good wife and mother with her chosen partner, with
whom she shared so much intellectually, but she may well have been apprehensive that the independence she sought would remain out of reach when she left one institution where women were expected to be subservient to men and entered another.

At around this time Nettie tells Vance that his letters are never very intimate, a complaint that would become a motif in later years whenever they were separated; Vance, on the other hand, thinks she does not kiss him enough. While this differing understanding of what marks a true expression of love falls along conventional gendered lines, the fact that their relationship was so thoroughly based in all things literary perhaps makes the situation more complicated. Some of Vance’s letters do read more like self-conscious literary love letters than spontaneous expressions of his feelings. Nettie perhaps felt that lack. In later years, a persistent criticism of his novels by reviewers and academics would concern their emotional restraint and lack of passion. Another part of the mix, however, was Nettie’s particular obsession with words: as a linguist, poet and, later, literary critic. Maybe her lover’s efforts at times simply fell short of Nettie’s exacting literary standards.

Born into this family of writers, Aileen was to dwell in her later years on the destructive as well as enriching side of this legacy in her autobiographical writings. We have all been rather too much in love with words, in our own ways, she wrote in 1961. It was, in the beginning, a gift imbibed from Nora [Nettie] and Blake [Vance], the delight in words, and the capacity to play with words in an exciting way. Revealingly, it was for Nettie, not Vance, that Aileen reserved her most trenchant criticism. No basis for tacit understanding had ever grown up between Nora and me. She has always had a passion for verbalising everything. It is almost as though nothing exists for her until it has been put into words.

The long years that Nettie endured waiting to marry Vance were not only the result of her fiancé’s financial insecurities as he established himself as a journalist in London. There was also the matter of his younger brother, William, known as Wob.

In early 1912, just months after she had returned to Australia to start teaching and to prepare her family for her marriage, Nettie
received a letter from Vance that heralded a situation that was to threaten their union. In it, he told her of his worry about Wob, from whom he had only received two letters since an illness the year before. And those, he said, had contained only ‘bare facts’ that seemed to cut him off.

Suddenly, a few months later, Vance left London, just a day after receiving a cable from his family in Brisbane with the news that Wob was ill again. He started a scribbled note to Nettie as he sat on the boat train, finishing it as he waited for his berth on a ship bound for San Francisco, the only route on which he could get a passage at such short notice. ‘I’ve been nearly distracted running round trying to fix things up since I got the cable’, he tells her. ‘I don’t like to think of the journey. Goodbye mate of mine. I’ll probably be seeing you soon, though I’ll go straight to Brisbane as soon as the boat gets to Sydney’.

On board ship, he poured out his anguish in letters to Nettie. He tells her he received ‘such a strange letter’ from Wob the very same day the cable arrived in London. He describes his seesawing emotions, how ‘fitful gusts of assurance’ alternate with ‘hours in the pit’. He even dreams of Wob nearly every night: ‘I never guessed until now how much he has been mixed up with all I have thought or felt. And we have had such cruelly small fragments of time together in the last seven years. I want him so hard, mate, now. You’ll understand’. The man who had been criticised for his lack of emotion in his letters to his fiancée reveals quite a different side of himself in his distress about his brother.

Born in 1887, William Cecil Palmer was two years younger than Vance and the youngest in a large family except for a sister who died in infancy. The boys had a distant relationship with their only other brother, Harry, who was the eldest child. The overwhelming presence of five older sisters probably drew them close together during their peripatetic childhood in Queensland country towns, moving house as their teacher father was transferred from school to school. A mild and bookish man unsuited to teaching, Henry Burnet Palmer was never a success in the education system, but his immense love of literature instilled in his younger sons a passion for reading. Wob’s artistic bent led him in the direction of drawing rather than writing and by 1912
he was becoming known as a black-and-white caricaturist. Unlike the rest of their conservative Baptist family, the brothers also shared an interest in left-wing politics.

In his anxiety about Wob, Vance neglected to contact Nettie for more than a week after reaching home in early October, replying apologetically to a worried letter from her that he had meant to wire her from Sydney, but had forgotten. This might sound extraordinary, but the circumstances of his homecoming would have driven everything else out of his mind, even his beloved Nettie. He arrived in Brisbane to find his family distraught and his brother incarcerated, having been admitted to the Wacol Insane Asylum at Goodna on 9 September suffering severe depression after making several attempts to commit suicide.

With an ineffectual father and an absent elder brother, Vance assumed charge of the situation, as his family had hoped he would. He took the train every day ‘up the line’ to Goodna, located between Brisbane and Ipswich. The brothers spent hours walking in the gardens of the huge red-brick asylum as Vance tried to draw Wob out. Vance found his brother quite coherent, but changed. ‘He remembers everything – without interest or emotion’, he reports to Nettie despondently. ‘And sometimes he tries to “make conversation”! There’s not a phrase he has uttered since I’ve been to see him that isn’t quite sane, and yet I know that all the time he’s living in another world that he won’t let me enter, and that the world we talk about seems quite trivial and unreal to him. He makes me feel so weak and incapable. I’ve never come into contact with anything like this except in the most superficial way, and it seems that the only thing I can do is to try to make the normal world seems real to him again and to rouse a joy in mere life. I believe if I had him away from there I could do this much more quickly but the doctors won’t let him away till all the suicidal ideas are out of his mind’.

This was the beginning of a rather utopian and desperate plan Vance was hatching to take Wob camping in the bush to restore his mind and body and then to take him back to England. Nettie, perhaps fearing that Vance’s plan would delay their marriage even further, suggested they might marry when he travelled through Melbourne on his journey back, but he replied that the trip had dissipated his
money. He also regretfully rejected her suggestion that they marry and then have her join him in London at the end of 1913.

What they did manage to organise was a week together in Sydney at the beginning of that year, with Nettie bringing her fifteen-year-old brother Esmonde along as her chaperone.

Nettie was both excited and shocked at Vance’s appearance when he met her boat from Melbourne. Tanned and lean, he had lost two stone in the three months since he had arrived back in Australia. Although staying, of course, in separate lodgings, the couple spent the week revelling in the summer weather and the pleasures of Sydney Harbour. They took the crowded steamer to Manly for the surf carnival; they wandered through the Botanical Gardens; they watched the sun set at Watsons Bay. The whirlwind tryst and respite from the serious situation with Wob helped them renew their love and their determination to work towards their marriage. When he left, Vance vowed to visit his brother only twice a week and to work on his writing as if he was in England. Nettie wrote to him lovingly, signing one letter with a frivolous ‘Your hussy’.

Back in Brisbane, Vance set to work and by the end of March had a long serial of 55,000 words ready to type up and send to his agent in London: ‘I feel as if I’d crashed through a long dark tunnel’, he writes. ‘The whole universe seems to be crawling with words’.

He discussed his plan to take Wob camping with the medical superintendent at the asylum, ‘a very clever specialist, though very English and abrupt!’ He was fortunate that the superintendent, Dr Ellerton, who took over the hospital in 1908, was a progressive thinker who had initiated vigorous reform and building improvements that supported ‘moral therapy’, the notion that the mentally ill could be improved if they were living in an uplifting environment. Though a little sceptical about Vance’s plan, the superintendent agreed to let him take responsibility for his brother. Admitting to Nettie that it would not be easy, Vance was nevertheless optimistic: ‘We’re going straight to a place I know in the Blackall Ranges to pitch our tent in the scrub on top of a mountain, where the air’s pure and heady as wind…There’ll be heaps of exercise from morning till
night, working and walking, and there’ll be no time to think’. If all went to plan, he intended to leave for England with his brother by the end of June.

A short time later, however, Vance’s hopes were dashed when Wob suffered a relapse. Worse, after becoming violent with an attendant, he was moved to a refractory ward among the most seriously delusional patients. Vance was distraught at the conditions his brother was now living under. ‘The place’, he said, ‘was like my notion of an asylum before I’d ever seen one and the associations were harrowing’. He described Wob’s state as ‘more insanity than melancholia now’ and his talk as ‘a swift rush of delusions’ as he raved about how he had been persecuted and incarcerated because ‘he’d written about the Siberian exiles in the Worker “till the loneliness broke their hearts and burst their brains asunder”’.

When Vance complained to the superintendent about the horrific conditions, he was told that Wob’s incarceration in the refractory ward would do him good rather than harm. At a time when restraint or isolation were the principal forms of ‘treatment’ available, he was told that seeing patients who were worse than his brother would ‘brace up his will, and the main thing in mental cures is to stir up a patient’s will’. To make matters worse, Vance was told to visit Wob as little as possible for the next month so as not to stir up old memories in him. No wonder he felt powerless to help. The conditions were so appalling that he even tried to keep the information about the exact ward Wob was now locked up in from his mother and sisters, who had only seen him when he had a room to himself and freedom to walk in the gardens.

If Nettie thought the situation must have reached its nadir, she was mistaken. Vance was so despairing of his brother’s condition that, in his next letter, he tentatively broached the subject of breaking off their engagement. He stressed that he did not envisage it as a probability, but that he felt it would be dishonourable of him not to suggest it to her parents. The shame of having a close family member in a lunatic asylum would have weighed heavily on all the Palmers and now that Wob’s condition was so grave that Vance could no
longer delude himself that he could simply be cured with fresh air and exercise, his thoughts had clearly turned to his responsibility to his future wife’s family. While disturbed that Nettie’s parents might consider his brother’s mental illness to be hereditary, he was also desperate to preserve his own family’s good name: ‘There is no taint in our blood’, he told Nettie. ‘I have satisfied myself completely about that, at least as far as is humanly possible. Our people came from such widely different stocks that there was hardly a chance ever of consanguinity. I am not saying this of course to you, mate, but for the satisfaction of a third party if that be necessary’.

How must Nettie have felt when she read those words in Melbourne? And she might as well have been on the other side of the world, unable to sit and discuss the matter with her fiancé, unable in those days even to pick up a telephone. Her reply does not survive, but her outrage and hurt at Vance’s suggestion is clear from his subsequent fumbling attempts to explain himself. Her angry words are repeated by him:

‘Wob is more important than I am…’

‘If I’m only a luxury…’

‘I’m not going to read any irony into your phrases, mate’, he writes, inflaming the situation further. ‘We’re too close together to be hurt by misunderstanding of the moment’.

It seems that Nettie was able to convince Vance to take that matter no further. But, on another front, she was puzzled as to why her fiancé would not consider settling down in Australia to work as a freelancer. ‘We couldn’t live here half as cheaply as in Europe’, he told her firmly. ‘I’ve thought it out from pretty well every angle and it seems to me that we’ll have to live in Europe for five years or so, and that means I must get back as soon as possible to prevent the few threads I’ve twisted from unwinding’. Nettie might have been an independent young woman for her time, but where her marriage was concerned, it was Vance who made the big decisions.

Reluctantly relinquishing his plan to save Wob but promising himself to bring him to London when he recovered, Vance organised to return to England in the middle of 1913. He told his brother he was going to Melbourne, which he did, but only for a brief stopover en route to the Northern Hemisphere.