

When Aileen Palmer died in 1988, the last of her immediate family, there were no tributes or obituaries. In the time leading up to her death in a Ballarat (Victoria) psychiatric nursing home, her ramblings about war had been regarded by nursing staff as an incoherent part of her illness, having no basis in reality/fact. However, as Sylvia Martin’s biography establishes, Aileen Palmer was a person who warranted, and who warrants, attention, her bedridden ramblings connected with a significant political and cultural transnational history.

Born in 1915, Aileen was the eldest of two daughters of Nettie and Vance Palmer, a powerhouse left liberal couple in Australia from the 1920s through to the 1950s, creators of a huge body of literary work and exercising considerable power and influence in cultural matters. The lives and works of the couple have been well furrowed by scholars and commentators, their papers in the National Library of Australia there largely due to the endeavours of Aileen.

Younger sister Helen, socialist activist, author, editor, and teacher, has attracted previous attention from historians, and emerges in this study rather harshly from the person I knew when she helped and encouraged me in my young leftist days the 1960s, but this is a quibble. Aileen and her sexuality has drawn some scholarly attention, but as a full person she has been all but invisible, referenced mainly in a footnote sort of way as one of the Australian leftists who volunteered for service in the Spanish Civil War.

Sylvia Martin’s exhaustive and fine study establishes Aileen as being more than a footnote: variously a communist; premature anti-fascist when much of the democratic world was cosying up to fascism; secretary and interpreter in medical units during the Spanish Civil War; ambulance driver during the London Blitz; published poet; internationally acclaimed translator (of the poetry of Vietnamese revolutionaries To Huu and Ho Chi Minh); anti-war activist; and aspirant novelist. Martin’s account is the result of extensive research conducted over years, in Australia, in the UK (the Marx Memorial Library, London), and in Spain.

The problem with Aileen historically, the reason for her ‘invisibility’, is that post-1945 when she returned to Australia from the European war zones that had been her theatre since 1936, her life became shrouded, clouded, obfuscated by the shames and taboos of the time. Martin documents her considerable mental health issues, now more kindly understood as Post Traumatic Stress due to the traumas of war, and mood swings of a bipolar kind. It was a double whammy that was not understood sympathetically by her family - in the case of sister, Helen, not until she too had a breakdown late in life but by then it was too late. Then there was Aileen’s sexuality; she was attracted to women, not men, and this was neither understood nor accepted.

Through all this there was her writing, particularly her poetry, much of it unpublished, in which, as Martin demonstrates, Aileen sought to explore her mental health issues, and what she had seen and felt and thought since 1936. For her literary family however, used to naturalistic writings and bread
and butter realities, it rang alarm bells and was seen as a cause of her problems. Simply, the ink in Aileen’s veins had to be drained.

So it was that Aileen was well-meaningly turned over by her family to the essentially cruel mental health regimes of the time. She chain smoked, had mood swings, breakdowns, suicidal thoughts, and was in and out of mental health care facilities. Further, as the Cold War intensified and the threat of all-out nuclear war haunted humanity, this fed into Aileen’s psyche, compounding her mental health issues which in turn were exacerbated by psychiatric treatments. In a way, as Martin explains, her conditions and her treatments became ‘Aileen’ for all and sundry, and her creativity and achievements sidelined and all but lost in the process.

A feature and strength of the book is the way Martin enables Aileen to speak for herself by using extracts and quotes from the significant literary corpus, published and unpublished, Aileen left behind. Much of this has never been used before by scholars, and through this we can recognise a significant literary talent that was not able to become fully manifested, the poet/diarist/aspirant novelist struggling to write through - and despite - her mental health issues, and occasionally winning. Overall, Martin’s achievement is the sensitive and powerful evocation of a political and literary life and its times, and the moving reclamation of an undeservedly lost Australian literary figure.

University of Wollongong

ROWAN CAHILL