

VANCE PALMER IN LONDON, 1906-1907

THE YOUNG EDWARD VIVIAN (VANCE) PALMER left Brisbane for London via Sydney in late 1905 determined to establish himself in the profession of letters; by late 1907 he had departed London for Australia via Finland, Russia and Japan 'no longer infected by the romantic notion that writing was in itself a glamorous pursuit, irrespective of what was written'.¹ Relatively little is known of the first London period in Palmer's professional life. Harry Heseltine (*Vance Palmer*), Vivian Smith (*Vance and Nettie Palmer*) and David Walker (*Dream and Disillusion*) have drawn principally on brief references in some of Palmer's autobiographical pieces and in Vance's and Nettie Palmer's letters to reconstruct this phase in Vance Palmer's career;² in addition David Walker has drawn on Albert Dorrington's and Lionel Lindsay's descriptions of the toughness of literary life in Edwardian London for the 'empire' writer.³ Bibliographical information located during my research into Edwardian periodicals might assist Palmer researchers in the compilation of a comprehensive bibliography of his writings, may direct future biographers of Palmer to further primary sources and appropriate publishers' archives, and point to a pseudonym Palmer could have used while in London. In addition, the recovery of Palmer's earliest non-fictional writing on aboriginals might assist scholars investigating the development of Palmer's attitudes towards and representations of aboriginals, and the correct identifications of the version of George Moore's 'Avowals' read by Palmer may allow a proper evaluation of Palmer's debt to Moore to be made.

When Arthur Hoey Davis (Steele Rudd) published Palmer's 'An Australian National Art' in *Steele Rudd's Magazine* Palmer was working as a clerk in a warehouse and had had a couple of paragraphs published in *The Bulletin*.⁴ The greatest literary excitement of this period for him had been the discovery of French and Russian novelists and diarists guided by early instalments of George Moore's 'Avowals' published in *Pall Mall Magazine* between March and August 1904. Moore revised these early instalments for inclusion in *Avowals* (1919). (Walker's statement that Palmer read *Avowals* in 1904-5 is inaccurate). The influence of the early chapters of 'Avowals' on the ideas Palmer expounded and on the tone and strategy of his critical judgements of individual authors in 'An Australian National Art' is marked.⁵ Several possible intertwined motives for Palmer's departure to London are revealed in three pieces Steele Rudd published in his magazine: to 'learn his art in the school of life'⁶; the seductive enchantment of a dream city of 'rich statues' or 'old world splendour' and a tradition of 'artists', 'dreamers', and 'singers'⁷; and the awe of a 'great city', the 'pleasure to be derived from the fact that you are in touch with the world's celebrities'.⁸ 'An

Australian National Art' had been a reply to Beaumont Smith's bemoaning of the financial lot of the professional artist in Australia in 'The Arts at the Antipodes'.⁹ Beaumont Smith's pessimistic view of the struggling Australian artistic scene would have been reinforced for Palmer by the despondency of Steele Rudd at his failure to find extra capital backing for his magazine, a failure which deprived Palmer of a proffered sub-editorship. Steele Rudd, with some optimism at the prospect of breaking into a wider market, had, in fact, requested Palmer prior to his departure for London to act as his London agent, a position for which Palmer soon recognised he had 'neither the experience nor the assurance'.¹⁰

In 1915 Palmer wrote that his literary encouragement in setting off to London had been 'of the slightest'. A few manuscripts sent to a London literary agent (and forgotten) came to light again in the shape of a couple of glossy magazines and a fat cheque.¹¹ Nettie Palmer advised Frederick Macartney that Vance's first articles and stories had been accepted by *Country Life* and *Nineteenth Century*.¹² Palmer's 'The Australian Corroboree' was published in *The Nineteenth Century and After* in August 1906, 315-320. The article had been written in direct support and extension of an article published in *The Nineteenth Century and After* in January 1905, 89-96, 'The position of the Australian Aborigines in the Scale of Human Intelligence' by J. Mildred Creed, which argues that widespread popular and scientific opinion unfairly denigrated the intelligence of Australian aborigines. Palmer drew on his own early contacts with aboriginals at school, Dr. Walter Roth's *Ethnological studies among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines* (1897), and *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland (Dating from 1837) Recorded by his Daughter* (1904), to illustrate the 'intelligence', 'keenness of perception', 'general alacrity', and humour of aboriginals; the adaptations of aboriginal tribes to harsh physical environments; and the art-forms of corroboree tales. It is this article Nettie Palmer referred to in a notebook entry on 'V. and the blacks' without giving place or journal of publication and which Vivian Smith reported he was unable to trace.¹³ Palmer's early interest in aboriginals certainly predated the Abbieglassie incident on which J.J. Healy bases his discussion of Palmer's attitudes to aboriginals in *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia 1770-1975* (1978); it is also more extensive, sophisticated and sympathetic than Healy suggests.

A check of *Country Life* between 1904 and 1907 reveals no stories signed Edward Palmer, E. Vance Palmer or Vance Palmer (all of which had been used in this early period) and no stories with an Australian setting which might be attributed to him. The 24 November 1906 issue of *Country Life*, however, carried a story by an Edward Vivian (Palmer's given names) entitled 'The Cupboard by the Clock'. 'The Cupboard by the Clock' was

published about the time Palmer's work should have appeared in *Country Life*¹⁴ and the Edward Vivian who signed it only appears in standard indexes to periodicals of the Edwardian period during 1905 and 1906, that is, only when Vance Palmer was attempting to establish himself in London. If Palmer did use Edward Vivian as a pseudonym, then 'By the Unfailing Hand', 'The Sentinel at the Gate', and 'A Guardian of the Stork', which all originally appeared in *Chambers's Journal*,¹⁵ and 'Passing of the Animals', which appeared in *Scientific American Supplement*,¹⁶ may be attributed to him. I have not sighted 'Passing of the Animals', but none of the other pieces had Australian characters or settings, being set variously in Russia, England and Egypt. The Edward Vivian stories I examined display an awareness of the machinery and sensational effects of popular fiction.

Palmer mentioned his early writing for *Answers* in the 'The Distant Fiction-market'. It was standard practice for British editors to pay on publication, so the fat cheque which helped entice Palmer to London was most probably for pieces published in *Answers* or other of Northcliffe's Amalgamated Press weeklies. Two letters to Palmer from Gilbert Floyd, editor of *Answers*, are preserved among the National Library's Palmer Papers. It is evident that by June 1906 Palmer was on familiar terms with Floyd as one of his hack writers. Without identifying Floyd by name Palmer described him in 'The Distant Fiction-market':

He was an assiduous person, a conscientious person, one of the few I have known who really read through the stories submitted to them [his magazines]. He read them through carefully, and took out the best ideas. It was his theory that amateurs always have the freshest plots and professionals the freshest style, and for some insufficient reason he classed me with the professionals. After some struggles with an (as yet) untamed conscience, I consented to write stories round the plots he gave me, at a flat rate of a guinea a thousand words.

It was a mere convenience of arrangement, he affirmed. There could be no real larceny of plots, for there were only 27 in the world; and the best for popular usage was the one about the bold, bad man (bushranger, soldier or stockbroker) who was reformed by a little golden-haired child.

Floyd's surviving letters to Palmer included a detailed synopsis for a story of a gentleman bushranger ('a high tone bushranger this time, one who has had a University education'). The proposed story of 2100 words was to

include a dust storm, the bushranger saving the thirst-stricken troopers pursuing him, the jailing of the troopers who allowed him to go free on the evidence of a disgruntled informer among their group, the bushranger bargaining with the government over the release of the troopers, the escape of the bushranger from jail, and the bushranger meting out justice to the informer.¹⁷ The familiarity of Palmer's acquaintance with Floyd by 21 June 1906 may be gauged by Floyd having signed off his second letter 'Yours very truly' and invited Palmer to his office to talk over other plots.¹⁸ Palmer's stories did not appear in Northcliffe's more up-market *London Magazine* between 1905 and 1908.

In an undated letter to his mother written shortly after his arrival in London, Palmer mentioned writing for *Cassell's Saturday Journal*.¹⁹ Like *Answers*, *Cassell's Saturday Journal* was conceived and conducted as a rival to Sir George Newnes' *Tit-bits* — all three magazines published bitty news and paragraphs and "stories of the wild west and thrilling localities", 'detective stories', 'tales of the sea' and 'sensational' serials.²⁰ Cassell's was the "wealthy publishing firm with branches all over the map"²¹ which expected its editors, especially those conducting its cheaper and less prestigious magazines, to commission authors to write stories around old picture-blocks dating from 1870 and stored in an appropriately nicknamed cliché department.²² Palmer was evidently one of *Cassell's Saturday Journal's* commissioned authors. Two stories by Palmer did appear in Cassell's more up-market illustrated monthly magazines — 'The angel and Black Jan' in the 1907 volume of *The Quiver* (337-340) and 'The Little Typewriter Girl' in *Cassell's Magazine*, November 1907 (657- 660). Both stories were signed E. Vance Palmer. 'The Angel and Black Jan', set in an Australian mining camp, shows a cynically calculated sentimentality in aspects of its style, characterisation, plot detail and dialogue and conflates two popular moralistic plot conventions — the bad man (Black Jan) redeemed by a desire to earn the friendship of a golden-haired young girl (one of Floyd's 27 plots) and the punishment of a child playing a precocious trick in a dangerous adult situation. Palmer's 'The Little Typewriter Girl', again set in an Australian mining camp, a world of men, told the tale of a confidence trick. The patronising and sentimental "little" of the title sufficiently indicates how the confidence trickster posing as a woman was able to dupe the men of the camp. He/she arrived in the camp with one of the fortnightly camel trains, ostensibly to set up a secretarial business, but actually to engineer an engagement to the richest of the miners. Once engaged the young man/woman tricked his/her fiancé into allowing him/her to leave the camp entrusted with a valuable quantity of gold-dust. The young man's dodge was revealed to the camp by a passing trooper.

I have not been able to examine files of *Answers or Cassell's Saturday Journal*, his connection with which during 1906 and 1907 Palmer himself acknowledged. One could assume the gentleman bushranger story to be typical of his work published in these magazines. The tone of Newman Flower's correspondence with Palmer in 1914 would suggest that in his first London period Palmer did not write for Cassell's other cheap journal *The Penny Magazine*.²³ The romance of literary life in London was soon diminished for Palmer by the necessity of writing stories to order around plots supplied by Floyd or picture-blocks supplied by the editor of *Cassell's Saturday Journal*. The cynicism with which he approached the writing of popular stories may be gauged by reading 'The Angel and Black Jan'. Its moralism and sentimentality suited the semi-religious tenor of *The Quiver*. But if the bushranger story and 'The Angel and Black Jan' represented for Palmer the harshest practicalities of making a living by writing in London, the acceptance of 'The Little Typewriter Girl', with its neat exposure of the false basis of sentimentality in characters and readers, might well have given him some encouragement. Any encouragement received, however, must have been too little and too late to keep Palmer in London.

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NOTES

¹ Vance Palmer, 'London Days', *Meanjin* 18(1959), 218.

² Harry Heseltine, *Vance Palmer*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1970, p.7-9; Vivian Smith, *Vance and Nettie Palmer*, N.Y., Twayne, 1975, p.2; David Walker, *Dream and Disillusion: A Search for Australian Cultural Identity*, Canberra, A.N.U. Press, (1976), p.87-8. Some of Palmer's autobiographical pieces they have drawn on are 'London Days': 'Fragment of Autobiography', *Meanjin* 17(1958), 5-12; 'Steele Rudd', *Overland*, No. 15 (Winter 1959), 21-2; 'The Distant Fiction-market that Looks Blue', *Bulletin*, 11 Dec. 1915, Red Page; and 'Dr Wallace', Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia, 1174/7/13.

³ Albert Dorrington, 'The Literary Career', *Bulletin*, 12 Dec. 1914; Lionel Lindsay, *Comedy of Life: An Autobiography*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1967.

⁴ 'Steele Rudd', p.21.

⁵ The tone and strategy of Moore's critical judgement in 'Avowals' — opinionated and damning or praising with reference to general aesthetic principles — were echoed in Palmer's judgements of Australian writers. Moore made extended reference to the use of local colour in 'Avowals V: Kipling and Loti'; Palmer similarly used local colour as a critical yardstick. Perhaps more interesting in terms of influence, though, was Moore's discussion of the distinction between culture and folk in 'Avowals III.' Moore and Palmer equated culture in a narrow sense with unsound aesthetic and moral values and loss of vitality. Moore argued that art began to slip into decadence when classical formal values took precedence over vital and spontaneous folk substance. (Moore was at this time in his Irish Literary Revival phase.) Palmer, perhaps following Moore's lead, rejected 'cultured writers' in favour of writers like Bjornson, a leader of the national Romantic movement in Norway, who were 'at one with the purposes and aspirations of the people.' Acceptance of the values of the cultured writers of the English world was, for Palmer, tantamount to a swamping of individuality by degeneracy.

⁶ Vance Palmer, 'Literary and Art Notes and Persons: Maksim Gorky', *Steele Rudd's Magazine* (June 1905)599. Signed Edward Palmer.

- 7 Vance Palmer, 'The Dream City' [poem], *Steele Rudd's Magazine* (January 1906)1127.
Signed Edward Palmer.
- 8 Vance Palmer, 'Some Impressions of London', *Steele Rudd's Magazine* (August 1906)632-633. Signed E. Vance Palmer.
- 9 *Steele Rudd's Magazine* (December 1904)63-65.
- 10 'Steele Rudd', p.22.
- 11 'The Distant Fiction-market.'
- 12 Quoted by Walker, p.223.
- 13 *Vance and Nettie Palmer*, p.139.
- 14 Palmer corrected the proofs of 'The Australian Corroboree' which appeared in August 1906 immediately after his arrival in London. He nominated *Answers* and *The Nineteenth Century* as the first London journals in which his work appeared ('The Distant Fiction-market').
- 15 30 September 1905, 697-700; 21 April 1906, 334-6; and 21 July 1906, 542-4 respectively. 'A Guardian of the Stork' was also reprinted in *Littell's Living Age*, 1 September 1906, 541-5.
- 16 27 July 1907, 59.
- 17 Gilbert Floyd, Letter to Vance Palmer, undated, Palmer Papers, Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia, 1174/1/74.
- 18 Gilbert Floyd, Letter to Vance Palmer, 21 June 1906, Palmer Papers, Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia, 1174/1/65.
- 19 Vance Palmer, Letter to mother, undated [c.1906], Palmer material collected by Frederick Macartney, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, MSS F469.
- 20 Simon Nowell-Smith, *The House of Cassell 1848-1958*, London, Cassell, 1958, p.131.
- 21 'The Distant Fiction-market.'
- 22 Newman Flower, *Just As It Happened*, London, Cassel, 1950, p.27-8.
- 23 Newman Flower, Letters to Vance Palmer, 13 January 1914 and 7 February 1914, Palmer Papers, Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia, 1174/1/1032 and 1174/1/1034.

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