

***The Outcast and the Rite: Stories of Landscape and Fear, 1925-1938.* By Helen de Guerry Simpson, edited by Melissa Edmundson. Bath: Handheld Press, 2022. 252 pp. ISBN 978-1-912766-60-4.**

The Outcast and the Rite: Stories of Landscape and Fear, 1925-1938 is a republication of a series of supernatural short stories produced during the interwar period by the Australian author, Helen de Guerry Simpson, and edited by Melissa Edmundson. An expert on women's Gothic fiction, Edmundson has collected here the stories Simpson intended to be collected as *The Baseless Fabric* - but which were not well received by her publisher, Heinemann, and thus never published - as well as two further stories published later in her lifetime. Simpson was Australian, but she was French on her mother's side, and lived, worked, and studied in France and in the United Kingdom from prior to the First World War. This fact gives her work a global perspective, and it bears echoes of other Gothic and supernatural writers not only in Australia, but also in Europe and North America. Simpson died young, at only 42 years old, suffering from complications of her cancer during the Second World War. *The Outcast and the Rite* is a powerful exemplar of her success during her lifetime, and a suggestion of what might have been to come.

As a collection of interwar supernatural writing, *The Outcast and the Rite* forms part of a larger cohort of what Diana Wallace has termed "uncanny stories" – women's female Gothic ghost stories. "Uncanny stories" in Wallace's estimation "work on the ambiguous edge between the explained/unexplained supernatural" (58). The collection's title is taken from Prospero's last speech in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, suggesting, Edmundson observes, the stories' "dreamlike quality, where we must question what is real and what is imagined, what is natural and what is supernatural". Indeed, as Edmundson goes on, Simpson "often places readers in the grey areas between the natural and the supernatural, a quality which lends an even greater degree of uncanniness and uneasiness to the narratives". This strategy is one common to colonial Australian Gothic literature, and to women's writing of that genre more particularly. Indeed, as Edmundson has previously observed, "women's Gothic written during the height of empire emphasises the colonial subject's constant struggle between the familiar/unfamiliar, the natural/supernatural worlds, and the tenuous safety of the domestic space that is constantly being invaded" (9). For this reason, I have observed in my essay on "Terror in Colonial Australian Literature", writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is "primarily associated with realism rather than the supernatural, and with authors of social critique rather than those of fantasy or imagination" (203).

However, writing just a few decades later, Simpson's work of the interwar period, like that of other women writers working outside of Australia at that time, more readily embraces the supernatural. Simpson was always interested in witchcraft and the occult, and the uncertainty presented by such mythologies appears throughout these stories. Unlike Elizabeth Bowen, who contained the supernatural to her short fiction, Simpson was more ready to allow its presence in her longer works – the title of her first novel, *Cups, Wands and Swords* (1927), makes explicit its interest in the tarot, at a time when spirituality and the occult were still popular in the years following the terrible losses of the First World War. At the same time, Simpson is not content with a purely supernatural explanation. This is, argues Edmundson, "the psychological ghost story at its best", and indeed many of those collected here are suggestive of Edgar Allan Poe or Henry James in their tantalising ambiguity.

Although Simpson was well-known during her lifetime, and proudly claimed as an Australian writer, her reputation has faded in the decades since her death. Edmundson's introduction thus offers a detailed and interesting introduction to Simpson's life and work, situating these stories within her larger *oeuvre*. *The Outcast and the Rite* is a welcome reminder of the work of a once-celebrated Australian writer, and of the uncanniness of women's interwar writing, and represents a valuable contribution to the revitalisation of undervalued women's writing around the world.

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Works Cited

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