

Brigid Rooney and Fiona Morrison, editors. *Time, Tide and History: Eleanor Dark's Fiction*. Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2024. 312 pages. AUS\$60.00. ISBN 9781743329665, Paperback.

Blue Mountains novelist Eleanor Dark (1901–1985) is best known for *The Timeless Land* trilogy (1941–1953), which enjoyed such popular success in her lifetime that it overshadowed her modernist interwar fiction, including most notably *Prelude to Christopher* (1934). *Time, Tide and History* collects fifteen essays about Dark, clustered around these two highpoints of her oeuvre, but also frequently reaching out to include other, lesser-known works. The topics “arose organically out of the interests expressed by the contributors,” and yet still manage to show a wide and appropriate coverage. The editors hope to “not only . . . establish a new view of Dark’s fiction as a whole, but also to reflect on the ways in which her fiction speaks to our own present moment, in the context of a globally fraught, post-pandemic, Anthropocene era” (3). The Introduction includes a valuable survey of Dark’s career and reception. In addressing the complexity of Dark’s depiction of Aboriginal people, the editors write: “Our hope is that readers and scholars . . . will be encouraged to reflect on the never-quite-resolved dynamic in Dark’s writing between the melancholy of what her narratives picture as a lost Aboriginal past and [a] utopian dream of settler futurity” (18).

The collection is a microcosm of the field of Australian literary studies and it shows an evolving discipline still open to long-established modes of critical enquiry like genre alongside more recent approaches like ecopoetics. There is an appropriate humility to the engagements with Dark’s work, aware of the contexts of the critic and the provisionality of critical judgements. A number of chapters are built on archival research, connecting unpublished or obscure works by Dark with the rest of her oeuvre. As one example, in “An Outstanding Study in Abnormal Psychology,” Alicia Gaffney reads Dark’s unpublished first novel, “Pilgrimage,” and *Prelude to Christopher* as expressions of “modernist melancholia,” a reading which illuminates the significance of the unpublished manuscript to Dark’s development and gives new insight into the better-known work. This is the kind of scholarly commitment which brings hard-won new insights and shows the need both for universities to fund research trips and institutions to fund digitisation of archives like Dark’s.

There are some chapters which have the kind of elegance and concise judgement which makes scholarly reading a pleasure. One of these is Victoria Kuttainen’s chapter, “Connecting Water and Land”; it is wide-ranging and curious about possibilities as it looks to somewhat neglected works by Dark (*Sun Across the Sky*), and by Vance Palmer (*The Passage*), to find that in them “a balanced way of life expressed through water and land aligns with the way each novel considers the emerging role of art” (155).

The most referenced scholarly work throughout the collection is Barbara Brooks and Judith Clark’s biography, *Eleanor Dark: A Writer’s Life* (1998), generally used as a reference work to glean the “facts” about Dark’s life. There is nothing inappropriate about this, but biography is, of course, contestable and significant as its own mode of enquiry, as shown by the different portraits of Dark offered by Brooks and Clark, and by Marivic Wyndham in “*A World-Proof Life*”: *Eleanor Dark, a Writer in Her Times, 1901–1985* (2007), and Drusilla Modjeska in *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925–1945* (1981). In *Time, Tide and History*, the editors have “intentionally loosened the conventions of literary scholarship” by including Margot Beasley’s biographical chapter on Dark’s husband, Eric Dark (3). Eric Dark was a GP, a pioneering rock climber, and a political convert who moved from a conservative upbringing and young adulthood to become a fellow traveller with the Communist Party. Beasley traces the strands of his life and shows different ways in which he was significant to Dark and her writing. She examines the “refractions” of Eric in Dark’s fiction, allowing her to

trace echoes and possible depictions without being absolute about how autobiographical they are. Eric would seem to deserve the book-length treatment Beasley is working on, although if the chapter is indicative of his archival remains, she will be facing the familiar challenge of limited personal material. Morgan Burgess's chapter, "A Writer by Inheritance," is a well-argued study of the influence of another man in Dark's life—her father, the author and Labor figure, Dowell O'Reilly—using the lens of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*.

The other chapter, "Loosening the Conventions" is a contribution from two eminent Australian historians, Tom Griffiths and Grace Karskens, in the form of a conversation about Griffiths's provocative claim that Dark was "probably Australia's most influential historical writer in the twentieth century" (181). They consider the way Dark depicts time itself, her environmental awareness, and the *Timeless Land* trilogy as a conscious redress to the absence of Aboriginal people and convicts from the 1938 sesquicentenary celebrations. The historians' eloquent enthusiasm for Dark's work is persuasive. Their analysis sits alongside Philip Mead's essay locating the trilogy within the genre of historical fiction and the "contrapuntal" Wild White Man thread complementing the nation building story which was so much more palatable to the original readership. It is a fruitful engagement probably demanding a greater length, given its useful overview of the genre in setting the scene.

Time, Tide and History is the nineteenth title in the invaluable Sydney Studies in Australian Literature series. The series now has monographs and edited collections covering the colonial to the contemporary, with a good range of thematic treatments and individual authors. Dark is the second author, after Gail Jones, to be the subject of two books in the series, giving an indication of her ongoing significance to scholars. *Time, Tide and History* is a major contribution to the scholarship around a writer whose work has much to say to our current age.

Nathan Hobby, University of Western Australia