

Authors and their editors

A delicate relationship

Jane Beattie

As Melbourne is one of only five cities globally recognised as a UNESCO City of Literature, the literary and publishing collections at University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) are culturally significant. These holdings are fascinating in their depth and in their representation of a spread of key figures in Australian literary history. They also reveal the very personal relationships that exist between writers, their editors and publishers.

An examination of the publishing and literary collections held at UMA illustrates the process of writing from the point of inspiration to publication: from writer's block, through the submission of drafts, to receiving and rejecting criticism. Many writers developed career-long relationships with publishers and editors. The expression of this relationship is most evident in the archive of one of Australia's most influential literary journals, *Meanjin*.

At the heart of the *Meanjin* Collection, beyond the stellar line-up of famous poets, novelists, essayists and literary critics, are the relationships that the magazine's founding editor, Clem Christesen (1911–2003), developed and sustained over three decades in the face of many financial, political and cultural challenges. The correspondence

between Christesen and journal contributors provides a rare insight into the literary world of post-war Australia.

Of note is a considerable amount of correspondence and reviews by writer and critic Nettie Palmer (1885–1964), commenting on the changing nature of Australian literature and often challenging Christesen to do 'justice' to himself as an editor and writer. Palmer's material shows her ability to be friend, mentor, student, critic and mother figure all in one. Palmer was a champion of the journal's place in literary history, declaring to Christesen: 'In my opinion, one of the most important functions of *Meanjin* is to close a few gaps in the public mind'.¹

Correspondence between Christesen and over 300 Australian writers, including novelists Katharine Susannah Prichard and Patrick White, playwright Louis Esson and poet Judith Wright, reveals the working lives and relationships of editor, publisher and writer. Christesen wrote to Palmer:

An editor seems to be asking all the time—or suggesting. If he merely suggests, invariably nothing is done. He must then follow it up, ask outright or

demand ... I'm not much good at that, making demands on people's goodwill, on their time and energy.²

Christesen was clearly an effective editor; he published the work of many celebrated figures in Australian literature and introduced much international writing to Australian readers. Although Christesen retired from the editorship in 1974, *Meanjin* has successfully continued as one of Australia's foremost literary voices.

The theme of maintaining a quality publication is also evident in the correspondence in the *Australian Book Review* Collection at UMA. Like Christesen, editor John McLaren engaged with publishers to increase readership and circulation, in competition with the literary sections of the large newspapers of the 1970s and '80s. The struggle to achieve balance between integrity and finances was constant, but so too was the willing support for a journal that fulfilled its 'intellectual role of providing lively, authoritative, and if possible, controversial reviews of all important books'.³

Perhaps one of the most enigmatic writers represented in these UMA collections is the novelist, essayist, historian and biographer Ray Ericksen (1919–1998), whose papers

embody the process of writing from the first spark of an idea to the final published product. His collection is a treasury of note-taking, passionate research and stream-of-consciousness contemplation of plot, character, setting and the meaning of words. Folders containing working notes and correspondence on Ericksen's article on Charles Sturt⁴ have highly charged captions such as: 'Sturt. A sad file of publishing blunders & wasted time! Messy! Still, the text is here!'⁵ Another, inscribed 'Scribbles re: Amos', contains a scrap of paper with the challenge, 'Nonsense! But how else can thinking start?''⁶

The relationship between editor and writer and the inherent need for compromise are palpable in Ericksen's correspondence. His work is lush and intricate, lyrical in describing his natural surroundings, and demands a commitment that is perhaps not easily achieved by all readers. In a reaction to some editorial changes that he felt diminished the substance and meaning of his writing, Ericksen states: 'Language is a subtle instrument capable of expressing meaning in a myriad ways; tone and rhythm are personal to each writer; the balances we strive for are delicate in the extreme and easily upset; the whole can be irreparably spoilt by even small intrusions brashly made'.⁷

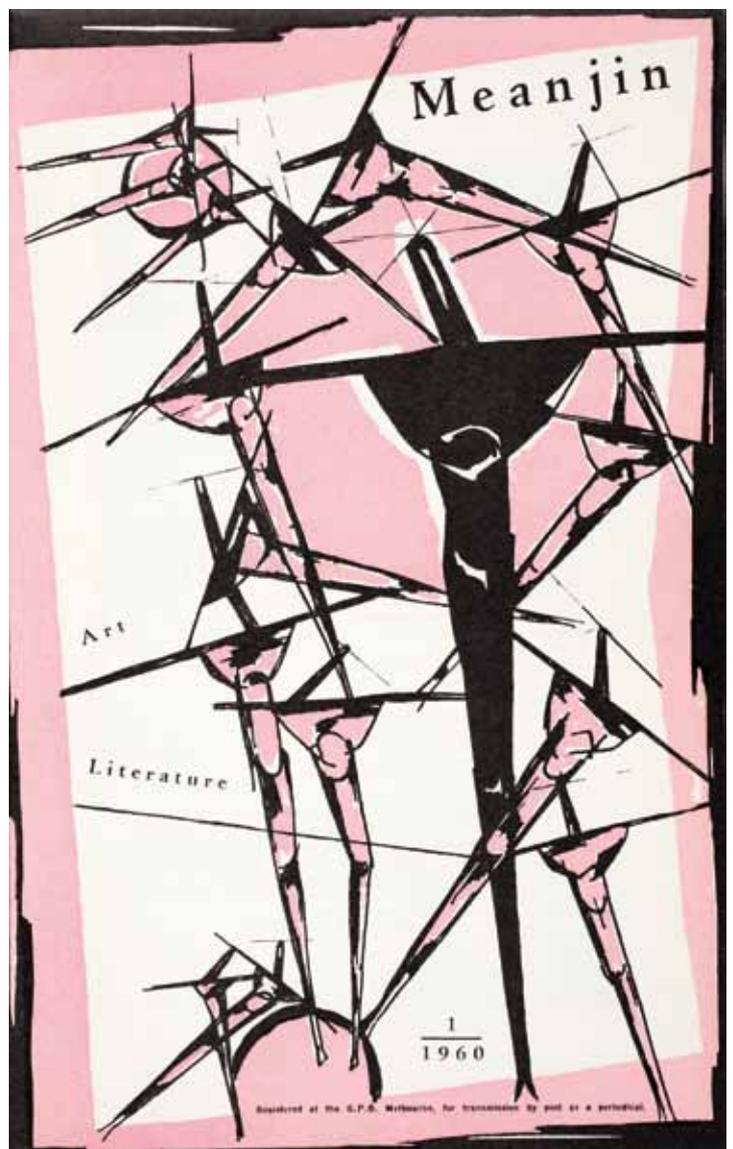
Ericksen's relationships with publishers were not always positive. In a letter to his publisher Angus & Robertson about his Sturt article, he alludes to an experience that traumatised him earlier in his career, causing him to be cautious of editors thereafter. For some writers, the compromises involved in the publisher-writer relationship became a reason to self-publish. William Gosse Hay (1875-1945), a self-funded author, was only critically recognised in London after one of his works, *The escape of the notorious Sir William Heans (and the mystery of Mr Daunt): A romance of Tasmania* was republished by Melbourne University Press in 1955, a decade after Hay's death. Despite choosing not to use a publishing house to champion his work, Hay praised the role of publishers, describing them as 'benevolent people ... they take on with such a number of youthful men all their life—they give us all an example of benevolence'.⁸ Perhaps Hay's avoidance of publishers is evident in his belief that 'it is so easy for an author to be abandoned, and he must save so many situations that hang by a hair—by his temper & epistolary ability—that you quite miss this side of these people when you look at their calm, unruffled faces in the papers'.⁹

In the late 20th century, female writers were supported by publishers and editors of feminist journals, whose aim was to nurture the development of writing by women, for women. Sisters Publishing, founded in 1979 by a close team of five women, including Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble of McPhee Gribble fame, was a feminist company with working relationships with significant female writers such as novelist Beverley Farmer, historian Patricia Crawford and poet Rosemary Dobson. Joyce Nicholson, one of the founders of Sisters Publishing, outlined the company's purpose: 'to ensure that anything worthwhile written by women would not be overlooked'.¹⁰ This was a goal with both positive and negative consequences: 'we felt that every woman who had ever written anything got it out of her bottom drawer and sent it to us'.¹¹ The workload was too great to sustain and in 1984 Sisters Publishing ceased operation.

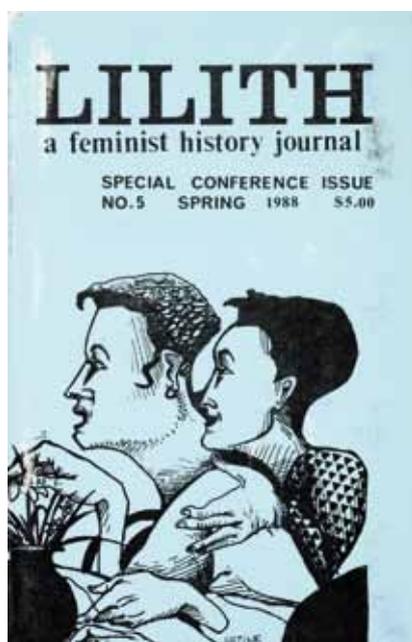
Lilith: A Feminist History Journal was born from an undergraduate seminar conducted by the History Department of the University of Melbourne in 1983. By 1985 the Lilith Collective was publishing 'historical articles and reviews informed with a feminist

consciousness',¹² providing a platform for students and writers of feminist history to share their work. The influence of *Lilith* is evident not only in the fact that it is still published, but also in the personal impressions of readers. Correspondence from a subscriber working in the library of a high school describes the journal's great value to her, asking for more articles as she is 'trying to give a gender balance to the material which usually exists in schools'. She reports that the *Lilith* articles she has included so far have been 'very well used by the senior girl students'. The letter is signed 'In sisterhood'.¹³ Although we do not know whether this letter inspired the editors to introduce the journal to new audiences or not, the minutes of a meeting held on 23 November 1988 record discussion of an idea to publicise *Lilith* to history teachers, to assist this mission of encouraging a gender-inclusive curriculum in schools.¹⁴

The relationships between reader, writer, publisher and editor are inherently complicated, yet dynamic and rewarding. When the right balance is struck, the communication between these parties can create a thriving literary culture. The narrative of Melbourne's rich literary history is illustrated in the archives of writers, editors and publishers at



Justine Wallace, cover of *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, no. 5, special conference issue, Spring 1988. Box 4, ref. no. 1997.0056, *Lilith* Collective Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



UMA. Deeper context is found in the complementary records of the publishing industry trade unions such as the Printing and Kindred Industries Union, as well as those of a variety of printing companies like D.W. Thorpe and Austral Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd.

In recent years, scholarly use of publishing and literary collections has been varied. Research topics range from trends in subscriptions to publishers in the early 20th century, 'cultural cringe' in Australian literature, the expression of the

political and cultural life of Melbourne through poetry, and a study of the Eltham artist colony Montsalvat. In 2013 UMA staff have been working with the School of Culture and Communications to encourage second- and third-year creative writing students to engage with some of UMA's literary material.

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In April 2013 UMA launched a new blog, *A collection of words*, to support the use of collections by students and teaching staff. The blog aims to unearth hidden gems in UMA's publishing and literary collections, bring to light material that deserves its place in Australian literary history and provoke discussion about the nature of writing and publishing. *A collection of words* can be found from UMA's homepage www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/archives/ 'Blogs' or at www.umaliteraryarchives.wordpress.com. Further access points into the collections are two new subject research guides, which can be found on UMA's online catalogue homepage, under the headings of 'Literary' and 'Publishing' <http://go.unimelb.edu.au/fz6n>.

- 1 Nettie Palmer, letter to C.B. Christesen, 19 June 1944. Box 257, ref. no. 2005.0004, *Meanjin* Editorial Records of C.B. Christesen, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 2 C.B. Christesen, letter to Nettie Palmer, c. November 1945. Box 257, ref. no. 2005.0004, *Meanjin* Editorial Records of

C.B. Christesen, University of Melbourne Archives.

- 3 J.D. McLaren, letter to Barry Reid (chairman of the National Book Council), 10 August 1979. Box 2, ref. no. 1982.0096, *Australian Book Review* Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 4 Ray Ericksen, 'Charles Sturt', in Leonie Kramer (ed.), *The greats: The 50 men and women who most helped to shape modern Australia*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson in association with the Nine Network and the Bulletin, 1986.
- 5 Folder: 'Sturt. A sad file of publishing blunders & wasted time! Messy! Still, the text is here!'. Box 4, ref. no. 1998.0016, Ray Francis Stanley Ericksen Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 6 Folder: 'Final writings', 1998. Box 8, ref. no. 1998.0016, Ray Francis Stanley Ericksen Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 7 Folder: 'Scribbles re: Amos'. Box 8, ref. no. 1998.0016, Ray Francis Stanley Ericksen Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 8 'Guide to Wm. Hay's philosophy', group 7/7, biographical material. Box 20, ref. no. 2005.0025, William Gosse Hay Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 9 'Guide to Wm. Hay's philosophy'.
- 10 Joyce Nicholson, 'Problems of a feminist publishing house', c. 1982. Box 10, series 54/1, ref. no. 1999.0016, Sisters Publishing Ltd Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 11 Nicholson, 'Problems of a feminist publishing house'.
- 12 *Lilith*, no. 5, Spring 1988. Box 4, ref. no. 1997.0056, *Lilith* Collective Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 13 Unsigned author, 'Letter to Meg', 17 October 1988. Box 1, ref. no. 1997.0056, *Lilith* Collective Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 14 Minutes of *Lilith* Collective, 23 November 1988. Box 1, ref. no. 1997.0056, *Lilith* Collective Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.