



The Difficult Business of Writing: The Story of Return to Coolami's Publication

Author(s): Helen Gildfind

Source: *Antipodes*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (December 2013), pp. 157-160

Published by: Wayne State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/antipodes.27.2.0157>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Wayne State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Antipodes*

JSTOR

The Difficult Business of Writing: The Story of *Return to Coolami's* Publication

HELEN GILDFIND
Melbourne

IN ELEANOR DARK'S ARCHIVE, THERE SEEMS TO BE AN INFINITE number of royalty statements, contracts, and letters between her, Curtis Brown (her literary agent), and American and British publishers.¹ In her article discussing the ill-fated publishing history of *Prelude to Christopher*,² Drusilla Modjeska does an excellent job of untangling a story from such documents, piecing together Dark's persistent and frustrated attempts to get *Prelude* reprinted in Australia, Britain, and America. Modjeska's article provides me the essential bones and background for unraveling *Coolami's* publication story from this confusing papery mess, for *Prelude* seems to have competed against *Coolami* throughout time: the author's favorite text vs. the public's and the publishers' favorite; the literary novel vs. the popular novel; the macabre theme vs. the predictable gratifications of the romantic plot. Modjeska says that she turned to Dark's archive to work out what caused the author's formal retreat from modernism, as represented by her *Timeless Land* trilogy (76). Her essay thus traces how Dark's modernist experiments were hampered by publishers' expectations as to what a female colonial writer can or should be writing (79). I am turning to Dark's papers primarily to get a sense of *Coolami's* publishing "success" over time, as background for my research on how the novel might have been understood by its original readers. Whilst the data in these papers does not tell me what the novel "meant" to these readers, it does show how many people thought the book worth buying, whilst offering insight into what publishers identified as the novel's "qualities." The following paper is intended to supplement Modjeska's essay on *Prelude's* publication history with detailed information on *Coolami's* fate.

The correspondence regarding the publication of *Return to Coolami* seems to begin in October 1935, with a letter from Collins Publishers regarding the proofs of the novel.³ By March 1936, Collins was writing to Dark to congratulate her on the "particularly good" sales of *Coolami*: 1,840 had been sold at "home," and she had achieved 1,110 Colonial sales.⁴ (Could anything make Dark's "Antipodean" status clearer than how these figures were divided and named?) Collins stated that hers were "very good figures for a first novel," adding that *Coolami* had been accepted by Macmillan in America. Collins also commended *Prelude*, but noted that it would not be "so easy to handle" as *Coolami*, though everyone was "very interested" in it. Collins

added that Dark's new unpublished novel, *Gnome in Sunlight*,⁵ was thought by its in-house readers to be "more disconnected" and "not quite so good" as *Coolami*. At the end of March, Dark replied to Collins with thanks, telling him that her own readers of *Gnome* all agreed "it was considerably better" than *Coolami*.⁶ She also declined an invitation to visit England due to everything seeming "so unsettled": she and Eric did not want to "risk" leaving work and their sons "when it might become difficult if not impossible to get back to them." This shows how shifts in European politics were, even before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, perceived from Australia as being both significant and dangerous. Dark also pleaded for understanding in regards to her rate of production: "I am working hard at my new novel, but I write slowly and with truly awful difficulty!"

In a letter to Collins in April, Dark described *Coolami* as "cheerful,"⁷ and hoped that *Prelude's* winning of the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal would make way for its Australian re-release. (*Coolami* was printed before *Prelude* in Britain; in Australia, P. R. Stephensen's original 1934 edition of *Prelude* sold only 500 out of 1000 copies.⁸) In July, Collins wrote to Dark expressing the hope that *Prelude* would have even better reception from the press than *Coolami*.⁹ Modjeska seems to see *Coolami's* success as overshadowing *Prelude's* potential and perhaps, in America, it did. However, it was equally likely that *Coolami* "softened" Dark's British readers up, making them more open to *Prelude's* blacker and more complex subject matter. Whilst *Coolami* was not modernist in its romantic "theme," it was modernist in its crafting and in its focus on inner psychological states: the combination of its conventional content and experimental form thus made it an ideal "bridging" text to *Prelude*.

In August, Curtis Brown wrote to Dark from New York, quoting Macmillan's reasoning for not publishing *Prelude*:

[W]e do not think it advisable to bring out this book over here. Judging from our own reaction to it, it is neither as subtle nor as well executed as *Return to Coolami* and I think it would be a mistake from Miss Dark's point of view to have this appear as her second book. We have not, to be sure, had tremendous success with her first but it is a book which has a great deal of distinction and one which I hope will serve to lay the right foundation for later success on her part. I hope

therefore that you will be able to dissuade Miss Dark from endeavouring to publish the book over here at this time as I feel sure it would be a definite mistake from her point of view.¹⁰

Curtis Brown reinforced Macmillan's statement with the request: "I hope, therefore, you will agree to putting this at one side," reminding Dark that her work was contractually under option. Dark was being treated in a most paternalistic manner by both her agent and Macmillan, neither of whom seemed to have much respect for her authorial judgment or for her right to determine the path of her own writing career. In this letter, the power of the publisher to determine authorial image—that is, in this case, to demand *genre*—is evident. As Modjeska notes, Curtis Brown (paid at 10% of Dark's earnings) was meant to argue Dark's case for her, not to side with a publisher's refusal to consider her work (88). What is of most interest to me, however, is how Macmillan's belief that *Coolami* was written before *Prelude* deeply influenced both how the latter was read and their perception of "what kind of a writer" Dark was. Also of interest are the qualities that Macmillan associated with *Coolami*'s "distinction," namely its "subtlety" and its effective "execution." It was thus, ostensibly, in its "technique" that *Coolami*'s superiority lay. However, as *Prelude*'s difference to *Coolami* lies primarily in its *content*, it seems more likely that *Coolami*'s benign subject matter made it more attractive to the American publisher.

One week after their patronizing letter, Curtis Brown again wrote to Dark from New York:

I have just had a chance to read again *Return to Coolami*, and I am taking this opportunity of telling you how good I think it is. It may not attain the best seller lists here but it augers well for your future [. . .]

Macmillan tells me that they have been selling about one hundred copies a week, but total sales to date are not very much, being about fifteen hundred.

If I may say so, I think your best asset is your keen awareness.¹¹

Is Curtis Brown manipulating Dark here through careful praise? This letter certainly reads as a "follow up" to his earlier pushy request that she give up on an American publication of *Prelude*, and it is equally paternalistic, as if Dark needed advising on her "future."

In November, Dark wrote to a Mr. Collins of *Prelude*'s winning of the Evening Standard's Book of the Month:

[Macmillan's] statement that they considered it less good than *Coolami* is one that I simply can't take seriously or finally. Was this the opinion of one reader or several? All the really competent criticism I have had supports my own view that it is an infinitely better book than *Coolami* [. . .] It does not, of course, come under the heading of a subsequent book to *Coolami* as it was published in Australia before *Coolami* was written, and thus there would be nothing in my contract with Macmillan to prevent this.¹²

In this letter, Dark implicitly accuses her agent and Macmillan of "incompetence," of being unable to value literary work correctly. Her own valuation of *Coolami* was clear: it was "infinite-

ly" worse than *Prelude*. Dark also—and again, at the politically astute level of implication—threatened to try another publisher for *Prelude* if Macmillan continued to ignore her arguments for American publication. In December, Curtis Brown replied to Dark's threat and continued their polite sparring match. Again, Brown quoted Macmillan:

I grant that *Return to Coolami* was not as successful as we hoped it might be, but it did establish her as a writer of serious and skillful fiction, and it seems to us a very sound foundation on which to build. Had we had a chance to consider *Prelude to Christopher* prior to *Return to Coolami* we should undoubtedly have brought it out recognizing in it the promise of a good writer. As a book to follow *Return to Coolami*, however, it has definite disadvantages. It is melodramatic in conception and is not as mature a work as *Return to Coolami* [. . .] You know as well as I how important a second book is and, to be frank, we do not want to take a chance with this novel as a second book.¹³

The random contingencies involved in a text and author's reception is clear. These letters show how the intertextual process of relating one book to another, and of relating those readings to a specific author (or, more particularly, to a "new, woman writer") profoundly affected the publication of Dark's work. Were *Prelude* written by a man, would anyone have been so concerned for the "image" it gave its author? Were *Prelude* as "Australian" as *Coolami*, would it have been more appealing and "identifiable" to international readers? Was *Coolami*'s romantic content "mature" or "feminine"? Reading *Prelude* before *Coolami*, as I myself have done, makes Dark seem a very challenging writer: *Coolami* is horribly lightweight in comparison, irrespective of its technical polish. Having read *Coolami* first, however, readers like Macmillan clearly recoiled from *Prelude*'s macabre difference. This letter truly emphasizes how the context of a text's reception powerfully influences understandings not only of that text, but its author. Curtis Brown again ordered Dark to put *Prelude* aside:

[A]ll publishers want to see a future for themselves when they take on an author [. . .] if Macmillan has convinced you that it would be poor strategy to have *Prelude to Christopher* your second book here, then it also follows that it would be even worse strategy to have it come out under another publisher's imprint. Naturally, it would annoy Macmillan considerably.¹⁴

Polite demands, polite refusals, polite threats! How "little" Dark seems in these letters, ricocheting between the "powers that be," as irritating—and consequential—as a fly.

Modjeska also notes how the difficult reality of "commercial exchange" is "never far below the surface" of these letters (90). She believes that such pressure "left its mark" on the form and theme of Dark's later novels, where she made a "sideways move" to the popular genre of the "semi-historical novel," a move that was duly rewarded: she made \$27,000 in a single royalty period in 1942 (90, 91). Modjeska suggests that Dark "knew that money has a good deal to do with how books happen" (76), and *Prelude*'s fate shows how publishers can impact not only what gets written, but also "what gets imagined" (90). Perhaps Dark's generic shifts

simply signaled her acceptance that popular literary packaging was the most reliable way to communicate her ideas to the widest range of people: perhaps her “sideways” move in technique thus had less to do with money, or publishing pressure, than her desire to be *read*. Perhaps she was bored of the predictability of her technique, which saw her use multiple points of view, internal monologue, and flashback in all of her early novels. Perhaps she wanted to do exactly what the literary circles were pressuring writers to do then: write the “great Australian” novel.

In January, 1937, Collins wrote to Dark of *Prelude*'s success in Britain: “This book has had some excellent reviews [. . .] The sales too have been good and show a considerable increase in the Home Sales of *Return to Coolami*, being to date 760 more than that book.”¹⁵ The sales of *Prelude* then stood at 2,730 copies “at Home” and 780 “Colonial” copies (making a total of 3,510).¹⁶ These figures did *not* include the previous 500 copies that were published and sold by P. R. Stephensen in 1934, and Collins blames *Prelude*'s lower colonial sales on this previous publication. By this time, *Coolami* had sold 1,964 copies “at Home” and 1,318 “Colonial” copies (making a total of 3,282).¹⁷ From these figures, and totally at odds with Macmillan's fears and predictions, *Prelude* was clearly the more successful text. So again, and now armed with hard evidence, Dark wrote to Curtis Brown in New York:

The “case” for *Christopher* seems to be a pretty sound one, quite apart from my own conviction that it is a far better, if less pleasant, book than *Coolami*. Without exception the best critics in England and Australia have supported this view [. . .] And its sales in England for the first two months have exceeded the total sales there of *Coolami* by 700 odd.¹⁸

The book, nevertheless, remained unpublished in America.

In October, 1937, Dark received a letter from The Australian Literature Society announcing that *Return to Coolami* had been awarded the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal.¹⁹ It was considered “the best novel published in 1936,” just as *Prelude* had been considered the best novel of 1934. The letter curiously ended with the statement “There is much controversy on the pronouncement of *Coolami*. Would you mind telling me?” *Coolami*'s, or its award's “controversy,” was not explained. Did commentators share Dark's conviction that *Coolami* was a “punk” book,²⁰ and that not even its sophisticated technique could forgive its formulaic romantic themes? Did the controversy lie in Dark winning the medal twice? Or was the novel's content—allusions to sex and divorce and unwanted pregnancy—where the controversy lay?

The final relevant letter from this period was written in November 1937, when Dark replied to Collins, who had clearly been fishing for information about her next novel:

the time seems to have come when I must confess that I can't help what I *write*, and even if I could understand the criticisms of reviewers and believe that they were right, it would make not the smallest difference. When I begin a book I have *nothing* but a handful of characters—perhaps only one or two—and the vaguest and broadest idea of a setting [. . .] With *Coolami* I had the general triangular situation and the idea of a car journey [. . .] it is not possible for me to *decide* what kind of book I am going to write, or

even (except in the most tentative way) what it is going to be about, because if I tried the characters would change it utterly before I had done three chapters.²¹

Dark's description of the writing process renders the writer as passive, merely the vehicle through which characters dictate a story. Such a description seems, however, to be at odds with *Coolami* itself, which feels so structured, so choreographed, and so calculated that it is difficult to imagine any spontaneity or confusion in its creation. The lack of drafts in Dark's archive suggests this also. Writing much later, in 1976, A. Grove Day also felt that Dark's psychological novels were “carefully scheduled”: “it is a surprise to be told that Mrs Dark is dominated by her creation [. . .] This testimony seems disingenuous [. . .] Dark's psychological novels [. . .] are not the work of a writer who is in danger at any time of painting herself into a corner.”²² It is certainly arrogant to suggest that Dark is “lying” about her own method of writing. Perhaps what is more fair to say is that, irrespective of Dark's intentions or method of production, her psychological novels, and certainly *Coolami*, emit an effect of being highly structured and controlled by their author.

Initial Macmillan sales of *Coolami* in America were as follows: 1653, 60, 24, 9, and 2 copies were sold annually in the years 1937 to 1941.²³ Collins' first edition sold 1962 copies in Britain, and 1284 Colonial copies, in the six months up to the 30 June 1936. In the six months to 31 December 1936, this edition sold 51 copies in Britain and 92 Colonial copies. In the six months to 30 June 1937, 852 discounted copies sold in Britain, with 288 Colonial copies. In the twelve months to 31 December 1939, 259 further discounted copies sold in Britain and 92 Colonial copies. Over 1940 and 1941, a total of 34 copies were sold in Britain, with 60 more Colonial sales. By 1942, no Colonial copies of the Collins edition were sold, with only 14 sold in Britain. In the 1940s, Collins published *Coolami* in their White Circle Pocket Novel series. For the six months ending the 31 December 1944, 9,600 copies of this edition sold, and by the 30 of June 1945, 14,800 copies had been sold.²⁴ These royalty statements are not particularly easy to understand; nevertheless, it is clear that *Coolami*'s initial sales were not negligible, especially in the White Circle edition, and the very fact of the novel's reissue proves *Coolami*'s positive and widespread initial reception.

The trials and travails of *Prelude*'s doomed attempts to get republished are well documented in Modjeska's article. *Coolami*'s republication was never, however, taken for granted by Dark, who pushed for its republication just as she pushed for *Prelude*'s. In March 1960, Dark received a letter from Rigby, in Adelaide, which asked her if they could reprint 20,000 copies of *Coolami*.²⁵ These would be “pocketbook” editions that would keep the text permanently in print. Collins was already considering a reprint of the novel and therefore expected her to await their decision before responding to Ribgy's offer. In April 1960, Dark wrote to Curtis Brown, stating that she thought it “quite unreasonable” for anyone to expect her to “wait indefinitely” for Collins to re-issue the novel when she had had such a generous offer.²⁶ Plus, she noted, Collins would only issue “a few thousand” copies and then allow it to fall out of print again: “I am a slow writer and I simply cannot afford to have books lying idle when

there is a chance of their producing some royalties." Abruptly, and completely ignoring her contractual obligation of three months, Collins demanded Dark give them six months notice of her move to another publisher.²⁷ By June 1960, Collins *did* finally commit to republishing *Return to Coolami* and *Sun Across the Sky* as part of their Fontana series. Rigby was able to publish *Prelude*, and by the December 1962, they had sold 639 copies.²⁸ The rest were destroyed by fire, and Rigby never sold enough copies to cover Dark's royalty advance. Rigby's entire series was suspended: *Prelude's* unlucky fate seemed sealed. This disaster might suggest that Dark was "lucky" to have rejected Rigby's original and generous offer for reprinting *Coolami*, but Dark's luck with Fontana was not much better than her troubles with Rigby. The royalty statements relating to the Fontana edition, like all of the others, are not easy to understand. I presume that when they refer to copies sold, they refer to orders placed by booksellers. The figures read as follows. In the twelve months to 31 December 1961, 4254 copies of the Fontana edition were sold in Britain, whilst 7026 were sold for "Export." In the twelve months up to the 31 December 1962, 354 copies were sold in Britain, 1092 were sold for Export, and 549 were Returned. In the twelve months leading up to 31 December 1963, 663 copies were "sold" at Home, 363 copies were sold for Export, and 467 Export editions were returned.²⁹ Referring to her query about *negative* royalty statements for *Sun Across the Sky* and *Coolami*, Curtis Brown explained: "What happened on these two books in 1963 was that the number of copies returned exceeded the number of copies sold. Consequently there is a debt of royalties from you to Collins, instead of a credit of royalties payable to you!"³⁰ It is unclear why Curtis Brown states this sorry news with such glee ("!") and once again, the difficult business of being a writer, the sheer *powerlessness* of a writer's position within the industry that depends on them, is horribly evident.

In November 1976, Curtis Brown wrote to Dark to revert the rights of *Coolami* back to her.³¹ They mentioned its potential for T.V., and she wrote back thanking them for the reversion, agreeing that "marvellous things can sometimes be wrought by the magic of television"³² (*The Timeless Land* had been made into an A.B.C. mini-series, screened in 1980). It was a very different world to that which *Coolami* had been launched into forty years earlier. Surprisingly, *Coolami's* story does not end here. In 1981, *Coolami* was reprinted as part of the Sirius imprint of Angus and Robertson. It was reprinted by them, again, as part of its Imprint Classics series in 1991. When I contacted Angus and Robertson Publishers (who are now a division of Harper Collins Publishers Australia), they refused to give the sales figures for these editions, considering them as confidential information between author and publisher.

Return to Coolami was never a "blockbuster." However, published in the 1930s, 1940s, 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s—and still studied and read today—*Coolami* certainly seems to have "stood the test of time." □

NOTES

¹ See Dark's archives at the Mitchell Library, State Library of N.S.W., MLMSS 4545/25/26/27.

- ² Drusilla Modjeska, "A Hoodoo on the book': The Publishing Misfortunes of an Eleanor Dark Novel," *Southerly* 57.2 (1997): 73–96.
- ³ Collins Publishers (London) to Dark, 5 October 1935, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ⁴ Collins Publishers (London) to Dark, 12 March 1936, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ⁵ This would be published as *Sun Across the Sky*.
- ⁶ Dark to Collins Publishers (London), 27 March 1936, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ⁷ Dark to Collins Publishers (London), 7 April 1936, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ⁸ Dark to Collins Publishers (London), 27 March 1936, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ⁹ Collins Publishers, (London) to Dark, 29 July 1936, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ¹⁰ Curtis Brown (New York) to Dark, 11 August 1936 MLMSS, 4545/25.
- ¹¹ Curtis Brown (New York) to Dark, 18 August 1936, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ¹² It seems a "Mr. A. C. Collins" may have been working at the New York office of Curtis Brown; hence, it is unclear if this letter is to Mr. Collins at the publishing house in London, or the former. I think it is the former. Dark to Collins, 3 November 1936, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ¹³ Curtis Brown (New York) to Dark, 7 December 1936, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Collins Publishers (London) to Dark, 8 January 1937, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Dark to Curtis Brown (New York), 25 January 1937, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ¹⁹ Elvie Williams (Australian Literature Society) to Dark, 23 October 1937, MLMSS 4545/30.
- ²⁰ Dark to Miles Franklin, 19 September 1936, in Carole Ferrier (ed.), *As Good As A Yam With You*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p.34.
- ²¹ Dark to Collins Publishers (London), 26 November 1937, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ²² A. Grove Day, *Eleanor Dark*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976, pp.41–2.
- ²³ Royalty Statements, The Macmillan Company, MLMSS 4545/26.
- ²⁴ See Royalty Statements, Collins, MLMSS 4545/26 and MLMSS 4545/26.
- ²⁵ Rigby Ltd. (Adelaide) to Dark, 3 March 1960, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ²⁶ Dark to Graham Watson of Curtis Brown Ltd., 4 April 1960, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ²⁷ Cable 136699 TA01316 EK718 London 22 1530, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ²⁸ Rigby, 31 December 1962, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ²⁹ MLMSS 4545/27.
- ³⁰ Curtis Brown to Dark, 14 August 1964, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ³¹ Curtis Brown to Dark, 19 November 1976, MLMSS 4545/25.
- ³² Dark to Curtis Brown, 23 November 1976, MLMSS 4545/25.

HELEN GILDFIND lives in Melbourne and has published short stories, poems, essays, and book reviews in Australia and overseas.