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Abstract

When *Yarn Spinners* was initially published in 2001 by University of Queensland Press, it was lengthily titled *Yarn Spinners. A Story in Letters: Dymphna Cusack, Florence James, Miles Franklin*. Marilla North was credited as 'Editor'. The title partially explained the contents of the book, but did not do justice to the nature of the book. Nor did the status 'editor' do justice to North's achievement in creating the book. More than an edited collection of letters, it was a biographical study, via letters, of the personal, emotional, intellectual, and political relationships between three Australian women writers during the twentieth century. This was recognised when the book was awarded the Fellowship of Australian Writers Award for Biography in 2001.

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NORTH ON CUSACK

By Rowan Cahill

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When *Yarn Spinners* was initially published in 2001 by University of Queensland Press, it was lengthily titled *Yarn Spinners. A Story in Letters: Dymphna Cusack, Florence James, Miles Franklin*. Marilla North was credited as 'Editor'. The title partially explained the contents of the book, but did not do justice to the nature of the book. Nor did the status 'editor' do justice to North's achievement in creating the book. More than an edited collection of letters, it was a biographical study, via letters, of the personal, emotional, intellectual, and political relationships between three Australian women writers during the twentieth century. This was recognised when the book was awarded the Fellowship of Australian Writers Award for Biography in 2001.

This new edition of *Yarn Spinners*, from independent publisher Brandl & Schlesinger operating out of Blackheath (NSW), has been fully revised and extended, part of what will be a trilogy centred on the life and times of Dymphna Cusack (1902-1981). Narratives and explanations linking and contextualising the letters have been revised and extended; new research has been taken into account; footnotes in the earlier edition have been greatly expanded and become endnotes; the biographical list of characters and personalities that enriched the text of the first edition, has been significantly expanded, as has the first edition's chronology of the lives of the three writers. Illustrations placed in the middle of the first edition have been added to and integrated into the text of the revised edition, which has also been redesigned and is a very attractive publication.

North has spent nearly three decades researching and creating/writing this book and the two that will follow. At times she has worked in academia, but mostly outside of it, which has given her the freedom to research, write and publish independent of production modes and schedules shaped by grants and neoliberal university production demands which would have discouraged this singular project. North's commitment to the life and work of Cusack is due to her being born and raised in Newcastle, where Cusack was once a school teacher, and the impact Cusack's novel about the city during WWII, *Southern Steel* (1953), had upon her. North also empathises with Cusack's leftism and social justice concerns.

Cusack was a secondary school teacher until medical issues later diagnosed as multiple sclerosis forced early retirement, bringing with it a small pension. Her lifetime of literary production, initially as a dramatist, includes twelve novels. Various published in thirty-four countries, her oeuvre has generated sales numbered in millions. Cusack regarded the pen as her sword, and her literary activity as the way she could combine rage and politics, addressing social reform and justice issues in the quest for a better world. Today she is probably best known as the co-author with Florence James of *Come in Spinner* (1951), a novel about wartime Sydney, published in the UK when Australian publishers got cold feet regarding its realities and the possibility of libel actions. Still in print, *Come in Spinner* has sold over a million copies and is regarded as an Australian classic.

The focus of *Yarn Spinners* is Cusack, and her literary and personal relationships with two other Australian literary women: Miles Franklin (1879-1954) inspirational mentor, friend, and literary collaborator; Florence James (1902-1993), Cusack's close friend since university days, and also

literary collaborator. The period covered in the book is 1928-1954, from the beginnings of Cusack's literary career, through to the death of Franklin, which coincides with the ramping up of the Cold War, locally and internationally, by which time both Cusack and James were working abroad in various literary capacities: Cusack writing her novels and battling illness; James a literary agent successfully gaining publication in the UK for Australian authors. And all the while, *Come in Spinner* raced away as an international best-seller.

The three women shared common ground, foremost as advocates for, champions and creators of, Australian narratives, literature, culture. They were feminists working in a gendered world where women were not meant to be self-determining people with agency they decided upon and created independent of paternalism, and within that macro-world, the similarly structured micro-world of literature and publishing where the deck was stacked against women. They also operated in an imperial world, similarly weighted, where British publishers and their 'readers' had significant say and control over what was published in the 'colonies', and where successful publication came with the inequitable distribution of royalties. It is this complexity of forces the three women battle in *Yarn Spinners*, and they were instrumental in eventually gaining royalty justice for Australian writers.

North's curation of the letters of the three women is poignant, moving, inspiring, frank, at times painful, at times humorous. The women were marvellous letter-writers. But there is more to the book than this, for it provides a gateway to the vibrant and rich liberal/radical democratic leftist culture that existed in Australia in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, one which the long ideological rule of Prime Minister Menzies and his cohorts strenuously sought to silence, close down, eliminate.

Yarn Spinners abounds with people, all biographically described by North, many relatively 'unknown'. My favourite is Norman Freehill (1892-1984), Cusack's eventual partner, later husband. Yachtsman, financial journalist for the capitalist press, stockbroking familiar, a foundation member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), and of the Australian Journalists' Association, founding editor of *Common Cause*, the Miners' Federation newspaper, chief-of-staff of the CPA's significant publishing interests in the 1940s, later head of Foreign Languages Press in Beijing. Freehill is a reminder of the hugely talented and diverse pool of expertise and backgrounds the CPA drew upon in its heyday, and the richness of the Australian cultural left in the 1940s and in the early years of the Cold War, a world Cusack was part of. I await the remainder of North's trilogy with anticipation and pleasure.

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9 February 2017