THE
SHELF LIFE
OF
ZORA CROSS

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I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree.

Signed: Cathy Perkins
Date: 14 July 2016
Abstract

Zora Cross (1890–1964) is considered a minor literary figure, but 100 years ago she was one of Australia’s best-known authors. Her book of poetry *Songs of Love and Life* (1917) sold thousands of copies during the First World War and met with rapturous reviews. She was one of the few writers of her time to take on subjects like sex and childbirth, and is still recognised for her poem *Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy* (1921), written after her brother was killed in the war. Zora Cross wrote an early history of Australian literature in 1921 and profiled women authors for the *Australian Woman’s Mirror* in the late 1920s and early 1930s. She corresponded with prominent literary figures such as Ethel Turner, Mary Gilmore and Eleanor Dark and drew vitriol from Norman Lindsay. This thesis presents new ways of understanding Zora Cross beyond a purely literary assessment, and argues that she made a significant contribution to Australian juvenilia, publishing history, war history, and literary history.
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Books

Oh, bury me in books when I am dead,
Fair quarto leaves of ivory and gold,
And silk octavos, bound in brown and red,
That tales of love and chivalry unfold.

Heap me in volumes of fine vellum wrought,
Creamed with the close content of silent speech;
Wrap me in silent tapestries of thought
From some old epic out of common reach.

Night holds me with a horror of the grave
That knows not poetry, nor song, nor you;
Nor leaves of love that down the ages wave
Romance and fire in burnished cloths of blue.

Oh, bury me in books, and I’ll not mind
The cold, slow worms that coil around my head;
Since my lone soul may turn the page and find
The lines you wrote to me, when I am dead.

— Zora Cross, from Songs of Love and Life
Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1917
Introduction

I was sitting on the concrete floor of the Mitchell Library basement in 2008 when I first saw the name Zora Cross. Working as an editor at the State Library of NSW, I was researching a display on early Australian book publishing. I had taken the wood-panelled, brass-buttoned lift down to the stack to look at a book of letters to and from George Robertson – known affectionately through his 40 years of publishing as GR.1 In that book, I came across a set of letters surrounding the 1917 publication of Zora’s book of poetry titled *Songs of Love and Life*.2

Robertson had initially turned down the manuscript without reading it. He would blame this oversight on his mood and the fact that Zora’s mother had offered to pay for the printing – which was ‘always a bad sign’.3

When he saw the self-funded paperback in October 1917, he opened the book at Zora’s poem ‘Memory’ and immediately bought the rights. Angus & Robertson rushed out a new edition before Christmas and before the second conscription referendum of the First World War.

Christopher Brennan had commented on the manuscript, calling Zora’s work ‘the real stuff of poetry’, reminiscent of ‘the best sonnet-writers, from Rossetti back to Shakespeare’.4 But Norman Lindsay refused to provide illustrations because he believed women couldn’t write love poetry, telling Robertson: ‘All love poetry comes from the connection of the spinal column and the productive apparatus and it is a notorious fact that God did not connect the two in woman ... The consequence is that all female passionate literature comes from the ice-chest.’5 He did produce a cover design.

*Songs of Love and Life* – holding 60 sonnets, 36 other poems and a portrait of the author – would be reprinted three times and sell around 4000 copies, a decent number in a population

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4 ‘Extract from a Criticism of “Songs of Love and Life” by Assistant-Professor C.J. Brennan M.A., University of Sydney’, Angus & Robertson papers, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
of five million.\textsuperscript{6} I was intrigued by this success in the face of Lindsay’s dismissal, and by a letter Zora wrote to Robertson after receiving his publishing offer. ‘My heart is tired from years of disappointments – disappointments in love, in work, in myself – in all things,’ she told him, ‘I have suffered alone and let no one know.’\textsuperscript{7} She wanted him to think of her as a child, ‘Then you will understand me and be able to forgive those thoughtless things which might otherwise seem unpardonable.’ She seemed to encapsulate the passion that surrounds book publishing, which transcends the etiquette of a normal business transaction.

I went back to my desk and looked up the \textit{Australian Dictionary of Biography} entry on Zora Cross, which credits her with ‘the first sustained expression in Australian poetry of erotic experience from a woman’s point of view’.\textsuperscript{8} In Dorothy Green’s largely sympathetic account, Zora Cross’s place in literary history is unresolved. She had a ‘true lyric gift’ and could write with ‘surprising dramatic strength’, but some of her work was ‘somewhat monotonous’ and of ‘little artistic importance’. On a personal level, Green writes that Zora’s relationship with the \textit{Bulletin}’s literary editor David McKee Wright had ‘scandalized literary and journalistic circles in Sydney, mainly because it was mistakenly believed that Wright had abandoned his responsibility for his four sons’. Literary and moral judgement were intertwined. I began a long-term fascination with this dead writer, which would reach a point where one of my children asked me on a car trip if Sydney’s Cross City Tunnel was named after Zora Cross.

This thesis does not seek to restore Zora Cross to literary prominence, but it argues that she deserves further historical attention. A prolific letter writer, Zora has filled archives with evidence of her daily life and professional ambitions. These letters, dating from childhood, allow us to get closer to her – or to the self she presented to her peers – than to other writers whose work has better withstood the twentieth century’s literary assessment. Her poetry and fiction, unpublished work, manuscript memoirs, letters and journalism offer a distinct and complex picture of Australian life and publishing history.

\textsuperscript{6} Angus & Robertson publishing accounts, Angus & Robertson archive, MLMSS 3269/14, State Library of NSW.
When Zora Cross was born at Eagle Farm, Brisbane, on 18 May 1890, her family already held hopes that this second daughter would become a writer. Her Sydney-born father Ernest William Cross had written poems before going into business as an auctioneer. Her mother, born Mary Louisa Eliza Ann Skyring to a family of early Queensland settlers, was involved in amateur theatre. ‘I made you a poet before you were born,’ Mary told Zora, having spent the pregnancy reading in the garden while ‘plenty of servants’ waited on her.

The family lost its wealth in the 1893 bank crash and moved to the Skyring family’s dairy farm near Gympie, a central Queensland mining town. Zora’s early letters and stories appeared in the *Town & Country Journal*’s ‘Children’s Corner’, edited by Ethel Turner, from 1902. After moving to Sydney as a teenager to live with an aunt, she attended Sydney Girls’ High School and was accepted into Sydney Teachers’ College.

Zora married an actor, Stephen Smith, in 1911 at the age of 20. She taught for three years in Sydney primary schools before giving birth to a daughter who did not survive. She left Smith and continued to write journalism and poetry, while working as an actress and vaudeville performer. She began submitting poetry to literary magazines, and her verse ‘The Casements of the Past’ was published in the *Lone Hand* magazine in 1913. Zora would later assist with editing the *Lone Hand* and serve as its theatre critic.

During the war, Zora returned to Queensland where she ran an elocution studio in Brisbane and toured the state’s north with a theatrical group raising funds for the war effort. She self-published a book of poetry, *Motherlove*, with proceeds going to the Red Cross, and wrote accounts of the tour in Brisbane’s *Daily Mail*. In September 1914 she had a son, Normand Garvin (who changed his name to ‘Teddy’), to a father whose identity she never divulged. She gave birth in Sydney and left the boy with her parents – who had bought a house in Mosman – before returning to Brisbane.

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10 Letter from Mary Cross to Zora Cross, 21 November 1920, Zora Cross papers, Folder 3, Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.
12 Zora Cross, biographical notes, February 1918, Angus & Robertson papers, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
14 In 1917 and 1918. See letters from Zora Cross to Bertram Stevens, Bertram Stevens papers, 1906–1920, A2471, State Library of NSW.
16 NSW Birth Certificate 29321/1914; and information from family.
Back in Sydney from 1916, she began to write full time, her poetry featuring in leading publications such as the Triad and the Bulletin. After her breakthrough with Songs of Love and Life, Zora published another book of poems, The Lilt of Life, and a children’s book, The City of Riddle-Me-REE, also with Angus & Robertson. Around this time she began the relationship with McKee Wright, moving with him to Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, in 1919. Teddy came to live with them and they had two daughters together, April and Davidina.

Zora gave a series of lectures at Sydney Teachers’ College in the early 1920s, the publication of which comprises one of the earliest guides to Australian literature. In 1921, she published a critically acclaimed elegy to her brother Jack, who died in the Great War. She went on to write several novels and continued to publish poetry and journalism. After McKee Wright’s death in 1928 she was granted a small pension from the Commonwealth Literary Fund. She spent the last decades of her life trying to complete a series of novels set in ancient Rome. Only one was published, in serial form, as The Victor in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1934. She died suddenly of a heart attack at Glenbrook on 23 January 1964, aged 73.

In her lifetime, Zora Cross was recognised as ‘an Australian poetess’, and children learned her poem ‘Memory’ at school. Frederick T. Macartney’s 1957 literary history names her among the leading Australian female poets of the early twentieth century, calling her sonnet series ‘profuse’ and her First World War elegy ‘impressive’.

She was treated coolly in literary histories of the 1960s, when the style of poetry she wrote was out of favour. H.M. Green stated in 1961 that Zora Cross’s sonnet series ‘so shocked and allured readers of its day as to obscure her other verse and give her a poetic prominence that was not quite warranted’. Green did not begrudge her ‘a place in the history of Australian

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17 Zora Cross, An Introduction to Australian Literature (Sydney: Teachers’ College Press, 1922).
18 Mrs Zora Smith (Zora Cross), 1928–1960, Commonwealth Literary Fund, A463, National Archives of Australia; in regard to Zora Cross’s later life see April Hersey (daughter of ZC), ‘Zora Cross’, Nepean Review 8 [1982].
19 ‘Australian Poetess Dies At 71’, Sydney Morning Herald, 24 January 1964 (the Age and Sydney Morning Herald mistakenly reported her age as 71; she was 73).
20 Frederick T. Macartney, A Historical Outline of Australian Literature (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1957), p. 25.
literature, but it is not quite what her admirers imagined’. Green’s main problem with the sonnet sequence is that it ‘exalts physical love’ without analysing it, as a modern poet would.

A few years later, in 1964, Max Harris let it be known that ‘Australia has little to show in the way of love poetry apart from the feminist tradition which culminated in the stuffed-owl excesses of Zora Cross.’ He did not explain which feminist tradition Cross fits into, but she was as much a victim of modernism as misogyny. Harris knocked down Cross, with her outmoded symbolism, in order to promote another poet, Judith Wright, who began writing several decades later.

In the 1980s, many Australian women writers were rescued from obscurity, but Zora Cross was not among them. Drusilla Modjeska wrote in 1981 that ‘Zora Cross’ poetry was remarkable for that period’. But she contrasted Zora’s brief fame with the greater achievements of Australian women novelists in the 1930s and 40s. According to Modjeska, Zora began the artistic feat of writing about sex from a woman’s point of view but ‘faltered’ and ‘retreated’ towards safer topics in the face of a male-dominated literary milieu. Because ‘there was nowhere for a woman like her to go in the Australia of the twenties’, she joined ‘the many minor women poets’ whose work is not worth digging up.

Similarly, in Dale Spender’s 1988 survey of 200 Australian women writers, Zora Cross’s work is not discussed in detail. ‘Even a poet like Zora Cross,’ Spender writes, ‘whose work presented an image of the passionate/sexual woman, was mocked by the men who saw their myths of mastery and mateship as paramount.’ Spender seems to suggest that male writers and critics had reason to like Zora Cross – she promoted female sexuality, and surely that can only benefit men – but they denigrated anyway because she was a woman who dared to write. She is mentioned as an extreme example to highlight the plight of all women writers, but not deserving of examination in her own right.

The first articles to discuss Zora Cross’s work in detail, by Julia Saunders and Michael Sharkey, appeared in the same 1990 issue of the feminist literary journal *Hecate*. Saunders, who also wrote an Honours thesis on Zora’s papers, addresses Modjeska’s contention that

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Zora became distanced from literary society and that the quality of her work declined. Saunders quotes Zora’s incoming correspondence to show that despite being isolated in the Blue Mountains, and suffering poverty and ill health, she was vitally engaged with many other writers.24

Addressing Zora’s ‘exclusion from the canon of Australian literature’, Michael Sharkey condemns her ill treatment by her peers and later critics. ‘It is rarely if ever recalled that she was a novelist and supporter of Australian writing’ as well as a poet, he writes.25 ‘Cross’s work [in promoting fellow writers] has been overlooked while literary inquiry has tended to privilege “better-known” authors and academic sources.’ Sharkey brings a great deal of personal information and historical context to explain both Cross’s career and the degrading image of her that had lodged in literary history. These negative ideas of Zora Cross (examples are discussed in Chapter 2) were still fresh when Michael Sharkey was writing about her. To me, thirty years later, she seems more forgotten than maligned.

Sharkey and Saunders assert Zora’s importance without emphasising her status as one of the first Australian women to write about sex. The feminist readers they were hoping to convince were reluctant to champion writers who gave ‘sex and satisfaction too much significance as a solution [to patriarchy]’.26 But only a few years later, in 1994, Kate Chadwick credits Zora Cross with ‘clearly, unambiguously and publicly depicting the perspective of woman as lover rather than beloved’.27

In 2005 Hannah Forsyth wrote about Zora Cross as a woman who challenged Norman Lindsay’s artistic supremacy by successfully writing about sex.28 And in 2007 Ann Vickery devoted a chapter to Cross in her book on Australian women poets of the 20th century, Stressing the Modern.29 Vickery sees the popularity of Zora’s erotic sonnets as overshadowing her later work. ‘Viewing her love poetry as ephemeral and lacking in

historical interest,’ writes Vickery, ‘Australian literary criticism has largely bypassed Cross’s work.’ Vickery addresses this absence with a detailed discussion of Zora’s work, especially her poetry, giving relevant biographical context. Her fundamental interest in Zora Cross is as a poet, whereas I give equal weight to her journalism, letters, novels and memoir fragments. In Chapter 4 of this thesis I look closely at Zora’s interviews with Australian women writers in the *Australian Woman’s Mirror*, and argue for her significance as a literary promoter.

The focus on Zora Cross as a writer of erotic poetry was continued by Lisa Featherstone in 2012. Featherstone lauds Zora for producing ‘one of the few female explorations of eroticism and desire in Australia in this period’, suggesting that her achievement was to move ‘beyond the procreative nexus into a whole new world of sexual options’. Featherstone explains the overwhelming social and cultural dominance at the turn of the twentieth century of ideas that limited female sexuality to ‘conjugal duty’. In this context, she argues for the ‘radicalism’ of Cross’s poetry. However, apart from ‘some evidence’ in her papers that ‘some of her poetry continued its erotic explorations’, Cross’s meaningful career is seen to end with her poetry volumes in 1917 and 1918. After this ‘Cross was quickly absorbed by the more traditional forms of domesticity’, her work becoming secondary to David McKee Wright’s, while she took up ‘less controversial writing forms’. This narrative of Zora Cross’s career is similar to Drusilla Modjeska’s sense of Cross retreating towards more conventional writing. In contrast with this view, I demonstrate that both before and after the First World War, Zora Cross challenged the conventions of literary endeavour.

While her love sonnets have dominated scholarly attention, Cross has also been recognised as a Queensland writer and as a poet of the First World War. In 1959 Cecil Hadgraft claimed that ‘no Queensland poet has devoted so much space to the love of man and woman as Zora Cross’. He was at first inclined to judge her novel *The Lute Girl of Rainyville* (1925), set in North Queensland, as ‘wondrously old-fashioned and artless’, before insisting that ‘It gradually takes hold, and develops a charm that persists.’ A more recent literary history of

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30 Ann Vickery, p. 175.
32 Lisa Featherstone, p. 725 and p. 717.
33 Lisa Featherstone, p. 726.
34 Lisa Featherstone, p. 727.
35 Lisa Featherstone, p. 726.
37 Cecil Hadgraft, p. 75.
Queensland explains that *The Lute Girl* ‘initially follows romantic convention’ before moving towards a more radical understanding of ‘life and love’.\(^{38}\) Along with the work of authors such as Rosa Praed and Mabel Forrest, Cross’s novels set in Queensland (particularly *Daughters of the Seven Mile*) – which draw on her mother’s accounts of frontier life – have attracted interest for providing a woman’s perspective on first European contact with Aboriginal people.\(^{39}\) In Chapter 1, I look at a relatively unexplored source of Zora’s perspective as a Queenslander – the letters and stories she contributed to the *Australian Town and Country Journal* as a child.

Identifying her as a ‘Brisbane poet’, Raymond Evans includes Zora Cross among the Queensland writers whose work first made him realise that the state’s literature had been marginalised and was worth recovering. Her elegy struck him as ‘so arrestingly modern in its sensibility. Rather than being a typically grating Anzac panegyric, it was a powerful anti-war statement, published in 1921.’\(^{40}\) As a result of that elegy, Cross has been counted among Australia’s significant poets of the First World War.\(^{41}\) In Chapter 3, I argue that Zora’s love poetry and its reception provide a way of understanding the impact of the war that rests outside the state-endorsed historical narrative.

Archival research into the lives of authors has gained momentum in the past few decades.\(^{42}\) While this applies to both male and female authors, some scholars have argued ‘for the special place of private papers in the literary appreciation of women writers’, due to the central role of relationships in women’s creativity.\(^{43}\) By looking closely at correspondence between Zora Cross and people who influenced her literary development, I show what Maryanne Dever, Sally Newman and Ann Vickery call ‘the larger dynamics of the literary


scene’ which go beyond ‘an author’s published contributions to literary culture’. 44 These authors argue for acknowledging the fragmentary nature of the archive and making visible the historian’s process of interpretation. Following this approach, I have not sought to ‘fix her story into a coherent narrative’, 45 but have brought to the surface ‘those elements of uncertainty and contingency inherent in the primary documents’. 46 In Chapter 2, for example, where I look at Zora’s largely epistolary relationship with the publisher George Robertson, I highlight the value of these letters to publishing history and also the different ways in which they have been interpreted.

This thesis uses wide-ranging primary sources to argue for Zora Cross’s significance as a poet, journalist and letter writer. It shows how her posthumous reputation, or ‘shelf life’, is open to multiple interpretations depending on how we use the rich archives at our disposal. For beyond her contribution to literature, Zora Cross has left behind the quality and volume of material that allows us to evoke the past with the detail, personality and emotion that hold our attention in the present.

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Chapter 1

Zora’s childhood in black and white

When Ethel Turner received a copy of Songs of Love and Life in 1917, she laughed at the author’s suggestion that she promote the book on the children’s page of a national newspaper. She would rather protect Australian children, and her own daughter, from the book’s fifty love sonnets which exalted sexual passion. ‘I should be burnt by parents,’ she wrote, ‘and rightly enough – for drawing attention to such heady stuff.’ But she praised twenty-seven-year-old Zora Cross for her natural poetic voice. It was a voice she recognised from the Australian Town and Country Journal, where she had published Zora’s childhood letters of rural life in Queensland. Zora’s writing had been so vivid, Turner remembered, that letters from city girls seemed ‘lifeless’.

Writing to Ethel Turner’s ‘Children’s Corner’ in the Town and Country between 1900 and 1907, Zora began her career as an author. She would later recall that the experience ignited her obsession with writing. Her father ‘who used to fill the house with books and papers’, she told Aussie magazine in 1922, had brought home a copy of the paper and she came across the children’s page and its call for contributions. Her father gave her a pencil and her mother some paper, both encouraging her first tilt at publication. ‘We lived in a hardwood house in the bush with a splintery verandah, and I stretched myself flat downwards on the verandah and wrote a letter.’ After receiving a prize of two shillings in postage stamps, she was hooked: ‘from that day until this I have never ceased writing’.

Children’s sections had been part of Australian magazines and newspapers since the 1870s but expanded significantly in the early twentieth century. The Town and Country was one of the first newspapers with a ‘child-specific space’. Leonie Rutherford argues that children’s print culture has been neglected by media history. It has been difficult to access due to the privileging of other genres by universities and archives. In the 1990s the Australian literature database Austlit indexed literary contributions to the Town and Country but rarely included

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47 Letter from Ethel Turner to Zora Cross, 17 October 1917, Angus & Robertson publishing files, ML314/21, State Library of NSW.
material such as letters. As a result, poems and short stories by Zora Cross and her contemporaries have been more accessible than their childhood letters. Digital archives have made it much easier to uncover children’s writing from the early twentieth century and use it as a source of cultural history.

This chapter examines Zora Cross’s remarkable contributions to the *Town and Country*. It shows how publication in Ethel Turner’s ‘Children’s Corner’ helped Zora to develop skills as a writer, to begin to see herself as part of a geographically dispersed literary community, and to form a relationship with Turner as an editor. It gave her an audience to inform and entertain with scenes of life in a relatively remote part of Australia. She could record her mother’s stories of settler life among Aboriginal communities, material she would later use in novels. These letters show a child’s excitement about Federation celebrations in Brisbane and the return of soldiers from the Boer War. They include observations about education, train travel, local tourism and food. They record the material culture of an early twentieth-century childhood: clothes, toys, books, gifts for parents. They reveal a developing consciousness, from childhood innocence to adolescent scepticism, and the language used to express it.

These 30,000 words by Zora Cross in the *Town and Country* amount to a rare autobiography by an Australian child.51

Ethel Turner’s view of the ideal Australian child is inscribed on a plaque along the ‘Writers Walk’ at Sydney’s Circular Quay. A quotation from her 1894 novel *Seven Little Australians*, it reads, ‘In Australia a model child is – I say it not without thankfulness ... There is a lurking sparkle of joyousness and rebellion and mischief in nature here, and therefore in children.’ This idea of the young Australian as more adventurous and less rule-abiding than their British counterpart was prevalent at the time. It was an extension of the ‘bush-myth’ that saw authentic Australianness as belonging to the rural landscape, even though most Australians lived in urban areas.52

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51 Zora Cross’s childhood autobiographical writing is not referred to in Joy Hooton, *Stories of Herself When Young: Autobiographies of Childhood by Australian Women* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990), which focuses on adult reflections of childhood.

The tomboyish ‘Australian Girl’ has been seen as a local incarnation of the ‘New Woman’.\(^5\) As Tanya Dalziell writes, ‘The Australian Girl was a feature of popular texts, newspapers and journals circulating in settler Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.’\(^5\) She was confident, independent and physically strong. Dalziell argues that she played an important role in the ‘production of settlers’ consent to colonial projects’.\(^5\) Zora Cross’s letters support this view. The presence of European settlers in the newly colonised landscape is made to appear natural through the eyes of a child, and the relationship with the Aboriginal owners of the land is depicted as harmonious, despite an underlying tension.

Sitting at home in Sydney’s Mosman sorting correspondence for the ‘Children’s Corner’, Ethel Turner was struck by the first letter from Zora Cross as the voice of an unmistakably Australian child. She liked the sound of Zora’s address, ‘Gympie, Pie Creek-road’, which evoked the sensory pleasures of the bush. ‘Pie Creek! I suppose the place is a real children’s paradise,’ she commented below the letter when it appeared on Saturday 3 February 1900. ‘I am sure there is a particularly delicious kind of mud in the creek.’\(^5\)

Zora’s letter summed up the first nine years of her life. She was a ‘little schoolgirl’ whose father managed the Gympie Butter Factory and owned a bullock team. She had been born in a house with a beautiful garden at Eagle Farm, Brisbane, where her father had been a successful auctioneer. She had also lived at a place called Mumbeanna, where the family had a lot of cows and ‘darling little calves’. She had one sister and three brothers, the youngest a baby called Jack, also known as Zackie. The family had two horses — ‘a saddle horse and a buggy horse’ — and one of their three cats belonged to Zora.

A peripatetic childhood is glimpsed through the rural idyll. Other sources show tensions and disappointments. Zora’s father Ernest Cross built a substantial house beside the Brisbane River before losing his fortune in the bank crash of 1893. Her mother Mary’s family, the Skyrings, were early settlers in the Gympie area of Queensland and Mary believed she had

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\(^5\) Tanya Dalziell, *Settler Romances and the Australian Girl* (Crawley, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2001), p. 2.

\(^5\) Dalziell, p. 6.

aristocratic blood that connected her to the Duke of Devonshire. Mary resented moving back to live with her family after her husband’s bankruptcy and Ernest had begun drinking heavily. Mary would confide in Zora after Ernest’s death that she had loved her children more than her husband: ‘My children were my God. Dad was good and I loved him dearly but I really think my children came first which perhaps was a sin … His only fault was drink, and a bad temper in the end, but I know now when it is too late it was only his illness that made him so bad tempered.’ The Town and Country enabled Zora to glamorise her childhood and overlook its hardships.

Over the next seven years, Zora Cross grew up on the children’s page of the Town and Country. The newspaper boasted on its masthead — which was illustrated with hay bales, ships and musical instruments — a ‘circulation three times that of any other Weekly Newspaper in Australasia’. While this may have been an exaggeration, R.B. Walker suggested in 1976 that historical interest in the Town and Country had not matched the influence of a paper that ‘reflected and satisfied the tastes, interests, values, aspirations of country folk better than the noisy, impertinent Bulletin’. In 1994 it was acknowledged for having ‘provided a constant publication outlet for Australian writers for half a century’, with contributors including Henry Kendall, Ethel Turner and Henry Lawson. The newspaper’s ‘unprecedented popularity’ among rural settlers at the turn of the twentieth century is cited in the 2014 A Companion to the Australian Media.

Following advertisements for corsets and farm machinery, half-page photographs of society balls and bushmen’s contingents setting off for the Boer war – and soon after the chicken-raising advice column ‘Poultry Gossip’ – the ‘Children’s Corner’ appeared around page 40 of the 60-page tabloid. Its competitions were open to ‘everyone under 18’ and the editor

57 Zora Cross, ‘Autobiographical fragments’, Zora Cross papers, Folder 3, Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.
58 Letter from Mary Cross to Zora Cross, 12 March 1923, Zora Cross papers, Folder 3, Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.
promised: ‘The best will be published, and perhaps win a prize; and even the worst will be 
read with interest.’ Children could write in different genres to ‘members of the court’ 
(Turner’s various characters): animal stories to Prince Hal, other stories to Princess Spinaway, 
jokes to the Court Jester and poetry to the Little Laureate, but all mail must be addressed to 
‘Dame Durden, Town and Country Journal, Market-street Sydney’. Children could write 
under a pen-name if they wished, but if they dared to scrawl on both sides of the paper, ‘the 
waste-paper basket is the only chance of publication they will see’. Experience had taught 
Turner that ‘young people prefer their own and their contemporaries’ efforts in print to the 
best professional matter’ and this also limited the newspaper’s costs to her modest editor’s 
fee. Sorting through hundreds of submissions a week was sometimes a chore, but she could 
turn to the task when literary inspiration failed her, and it kept her in tune with the minds of 
her readers. She had published her own first work as a child in the Bulletin and other 
publications.

The study of writing by children, as opposed to writing for children, was relatively neglected 
before the twenty-first century. Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster argue that ‘there 
should be a place for what children have to tell us about themselves’ and its study must 
involve ‘recovery, publication and critical examination’. Since 2001 the Juvenilia Press, 
founded by McMaster and with Alexander as current General Editor, has published work by 
child writers from eight countries, and the fourth international conference on literary juvenilia 
was held in Barcelona in 2015. Australian juvenilia so far recovered includes Ethel Turner’s 
contributions to the literary magazine Parthenon, which she founded with her sister Lilian in 
1889, and Mary Grant Bruce’s stories of nineteenth-century life in rural Victoria, written for 
the newspaper The Leader. Youthful writing of the twentieth century is represented by the 
novelist Eleanor Dark and the poet Dorothy Hewett. The Juvenilia Press aims to avoid 
‘overly idyllic images of youth’ and publish ‘honest and gripping responses to personal and

67 See <https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/juvenilia/>.
societal struggles through texts alive with acute creative clarity’. Zora Cross’s contributions to the *Town and Country* are aligned with this project because they express the author’s unique voice and experience, which rise above her efforts to appeal to the editor’s conception of rural life.

Realising that she was writing from an interesting, exotic place – and perhaps already aware that it gave her a competitive edge – Zora’s second letter offered some local history: ‘Pie Creek is a lovely place for picnics. It was called Pie Creek because there was a surveyor named Mr Pye, and the blacks speared him, and he was buried on the bank of the creek, and for years his grave could be seen; but now it is not to be seen anywhere as the big floods have washed it away.’ So precious was space in the ‘Children’s Corner’ that paragraphs were run together, squashing picnics, spearing and floods into the same train of thought.

By early 1901, Zora was a seasoned ‘Cornerite’, apologising for an absence from the page. ‘You must think that I have quite forgotten you,’ she announced, ‘but I have not.’ Her mother had a baby, ‘another little sister’, and the two older girls were sent to Brisbane for the Christmas holidays. She enjoyed the Commonwealth celebrations at the Brisbane Gardens – adding that she hoped Dame Durden enjoyed the celebrations in Sydney – and she was part of the crowd that cheered the Imperial troops returning from the Boer War. She described the soldiers with a mixture of childish flippancy and poignant observation: ‘I was laughing when I saw the big hats the men wore. The soldiers that came home from the war had their hats all knocked about, and their coats were all a dirty color from powder and shot.’ This striking image of men returning, not strengthened but battered by war, makes me wonder what she saw on their faces. Zora Cross would go on to write patriotic poetry during the early years of the First World War and an elegy for her brother denouncing the war in 1921.

Perhaps the most historically interesting material in Zora’s *Town and Country* letters relates to her mother’s experience of living among Aboriginal people in the Gympie area. Writing by

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71 See Zora Cross, *Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1921).
early Queensland women writers has been mined for its female perspective on ‘first contact’. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writes Belinda McKay, ‘Queensland women writers were more likely than those from other states to grow up in rural areas and experience frontier conditions, either first hand or through the personal accounts of parents and grandparents’. While McKay does not accept earlier assessments that white women’s perspectives align with those of Indigenous women ‘based on shared gender oppression’, she suggests that women’s fiction offers ‘a very different view of the colonial enterprise to that of male writers’. White women tended to display more sympathy for and knowledge about Indigenous people while ultimately favouring white ‘civilisation’ over Aboriginal ‘savagery’. McKay contrasts the earlier writer Rosa Praed, for whom the white race could only redeem itself by excluding Indigenous people, with the more integrated society in Zora Cross’s 1924 novel *Daughters of the Seven Mile*. ‘The narrator’s expression of the vanishing race theme [in Cross’s novel] is at odds with the omnipresence in the novel of Aboriginal people and their participation in local events …’ Both *Daughters of the Seven Mile* and the depiction of Aboriginal people in Zora’s letters to the *Town and Country* are based on stories from her mother’s childhood. Zora’s letters show an attempt to view Indigenous people as individuals with similar hopes for their lives and families as European settlers.

‘I’m going to try and tell you an interesting story about the early blacks of the Pie Creek district,’ promised a ten-year-old Zora in a letter published on 3 August 1901:

In the early days of Gympie the blacks were savage, but they never hurt any of my mother’s family. My mother lived a long way out in the bush, and there were a lot of blacks camped out there then. When my mother was a little girl she saw a great lot of the blacks. The name they gave to their home was Mumbeanna. They christened my grandpa Mumbea, because he was so good to them, and because they had a king named Mumbea. My mother has often told me a little story about grandpa and the blacks. The blacks took grandpa to a sapling one day and told him in their own language to bend the tree, and, if it broke, he would lose Mumbeanna, and if he bent it without breaking it, he would never lose Mumbeanna. When grandpa bent the tree it broke, and the blacks cried and made a sort of a wail, and said: ‘Poor Mumbea, losee

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73 Belinda McKay, ‘Writing from the Contact Zone’, p. 63.
Mumbeanna.’ But grandpa said it was all right. It turned out that what the blacks had said came true. For, in years to come, when grandpa died, Mumbeanna was sold.⁷⁴

There’s no suggestion that the local Indigenous people knew the sapling would break and were playing a game with Zora’s grandfather. The child had been taught that the traditional owners empathised with the settler family’s looming dispossession. But the story records a sense of intimacy, and shared language, between the Indigenous people and white settlers.

Zora went on to describe for her national audience a ‘true blacks’ corroboree’, witnessed by her mother as a child. The men ‘paint themselves all over with charcoal and grease to make themselves blacker’, then apply ‘stripes all over them with white, red and blue clay’. The women, adorned in grass beads and feathers, beat music onto possum skin ‘while the blacks dance to it, and do many funny tricks’.

She mentioned ‘a black bushranger named Campbell’ who ‘did a great many wicked deeds’ around the time her mother was a child. According to Zora, Campbell ‘was caught by two blackfellows named Griffin and Tommy King’, who were still around and ‘may often be seen throwing boomerangs down the Brisbane line’. The letter ended with a sentiment that would appear in Daughters of the Seven Mile, making the point that Aboriginal people mourn their losses as acutely as the whites: ‘When any of the blacks’ people die whom they love, the blackgins cut their heads with a tomahawk, and when the blackfellows think they have cut it enough, they take the tomahawk away from them and wipe the blood up with grass.’

Zora promised to send some of the words the local Indigenous people used, passed on from her mother, and Dame Durden’s comment below the letter encouraged her to ‘tell us more about the aboriginals’. She won ‘Queen Youngheart’s prize for best letter by a competitor under 12’ for the letter and the Jester added a quip to lighten the mood: ‘Those blacks at the corroboree were, evidently not as black as the colored gentleman who was so very much colored that he used to make a white mark on himself with a piece of charcoal.’ The joke highlighted the casual racism of the era in which Zora’s letter was published.

In the meantime Zora Cross disappeared. ‘Your prize was posted to you,’ a note in the ‘Children’s Corner’ on 24 August 1901 informed her, ‘but came back to us as a dead letter.’ The Gympie correspondent’s absence from the Corner was unremarkable. Children wrote to

the *Town and Country* in bursts of enthusiasm then turned their attention to other pursuits. It was only when another letter appeared in April 1904 that the break gained significance. In a couple of brisk lines of an otherwise chatty letter, Zora explained her disappearance: ‘It is nearly two years since I sat down to write you a letter, but for all this I have not forgotten you. We have had a great misfortune. We lost our beautiful home by a terrible fire.’

Ethel Turner was sorry that fire had claimed the home of one of her favourite Corner children. ‘I can imagine few more heartbreaking things,’ she told her, suggesting Zora describe the event for her readers, and asking ‘Were you present at the time?’ If Zora described the fire in detail, the letter was not published. All we know from the *Town and Country* comes at the end of a long description of the town of Ipswich, where Zora moved to boarding school that year:

> You wanted to know whether our house was built in the same place. It is not in the very same place, but about 100 yards away. I do not think that we could blot out the memory of that awful night if we tried; and now one black and charred stump marks the place where our home once stood. My little brother did indeed feel it very much; but now he is forgetting it.

By that time Zora was less preoccupied with her home than her education. In 1904 she was ‘studying for an Ipswich scholarship, which I hope to win’. She didn’t win, coming seventh of sixteen candidates, but her parents paid for her and her sister to attend Ipswich Girls’ Grammar School, where students aimed at passing the University of Sydney examination. Women had only been admitted to the university twenty years before Zora entered the grammar school, and higher education for girls followed soon afterwards, with the Ipswich girls school opening in 1892, almost thirty years after the boys grammar school. The novelty of her educational opportunity was not lost on Zora.

Boarding in Limestone Street, a ‘very pleasant’ one-mile walk from the school, she was content in her new surroundings. While the railway station ‘seemed so dull and smoky’, she was ‘very much surprised’ by the town, which had good roads, an impressive park, and hills that offered wide views of the countryside. The fourteen-year-old noted the different

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economic foundations of Gympie and Ipswich. Built along the Bremer River, Ipswich was ‘almost as wealthy in its coal as Gympie is in its gold. There were a great many coal fields in Ipswich, and they are mostly owned by one man (Lewis Thomas), who is called the coal king.’

Zora applied herself to ‘geology, French, English, Latin, history, geometry, drawing, arithmetic, and algebra’ but didn’t turn her back on Dame Durden’s Corner. She pledged her loyalty, signing off: ‘I remain, yours sincerely, Zora Cross.’

This is where Zora began to experiment with different genres to maximise her chances of publication and prizes. At the end of 1904 she won ‘Mistress Homely’s Competition’ by addressing the problem of what she would buy her mother and father for Christmas if she had only one shilling to spend on each. Her mother would receive crocheted slippers made from ‘Maroon bee-hive Fingering Wool’ (sixpence for an ounce and a half), with cork soles (fourpence), and trimmed with ribbon (twopence for two yards). ‘I am sure any mother would be proud of such a thing from her daughter’. Tenpence would buy two and a half ounces of Black Beehive Fingering Wool to crochet father’s socks. The loan of needles from her mother would leave twopence to spare: ‘Perhaps I could make father’s socks more inviting by using up the other two-pence; but I think he would like them best if they were plain.’

As well as sharing her craft suggestions, she was able to instruct Corner readers on the best way to prepare ‘a Queensland lunch’ for a school child. This should be carried in a leather bag with separate compartments for lunch and books: ‘Some children carry both a leather bag and a basket; but I think they are so awkward, especially in wet weather, when one has to carry an umbrella and cloak.’ The lunch should be simple: ‘The daintiest lunch (to my idea) comprises four or five sandwiches, a buttered scone, a few biscuits, with an apple and a bottle of milk.’ The best sandwich filling was ‘thin slices of tomato, lettuce, and onions, with a little pepper and salt. I do not like meat sandwiches and would not recommend them.’ Many Queensland children ‘rave over’ pineapple when it’s in season, but ‘I always prefer an apple ... because apples feed the brain’. Zora saw her way into print by appealing to the health trends of the day. She also won prizes for sending jokes to the Jester, but did not yet try her hand at poetry, which she said she loved.

In her later years on the children’s page, Zora contributed several short stories, some of them printed in three parts. A boarding school story ‘Five Merry Girls’ depicted pranks and pillow fights on a hot summer’s night in Ipswich. Turner published several of Zora’s cheerful farm
stories, full of action and dialogue. While the editor praised her ‘excellent descriptive powers’ in these stories, Zora’s fiction is not nearly as compelling as her teenage journalism. A piece on kangaroo hunting described the hunting tradition ‘in this fair State of Queensland’ where ‘most of the pleasure hunters hunt Australia’s famous old animal … the “ever wonderful kangaroo”.’ Attesting to the tastiness of kangaroo-tail soup, Zora took her readers through the delights and dangers of the hunt, when four men set out with ‘from thirteen to twenty kangaroo dogs’, and returned with ‘two or three kangaroo tails hanging from their saddles’. A kangaroo in fear for its life, according to Zora, would pursue a man or dog to a waterhole and ‘hold him under water until drowned’.

Zora was aware that anecdotes of farm life had more appeal in the *Town and Country* than tales of the city: ‘Ipswich is not Gympie’, she regretted. But she did her best to draw inspiration from the industrial setting. A school trip to the railway workshops was such an opportunity: ‘ever since I came to Ipswich,’ she wrote, ‘I have longed to explore those large places, and to me unknown regions, which stretch out before my eyes when I walk to and from school’. Her letter wandered through the railway yards, visiting the boiler shop, noticing the intense heat of the machinery shop, and stopping in the brass works shop, where ‘would you believe it, one of the men made a brass ring for me while I stood and watched him’. An ambulance man tended to ‘some poor fellow’ with an injured foot. A worker dipped metal into a tub of acid where it changed into copper, then brass, then silver. The vast maze of workshops exhausted Zora, who had to be lifted up by the other girls when she ‘could not resist the temptation of sitting down for a while’. For the girl who would spend her twenties in constant motion, the romance of the workshops was their promise of swift transport towards adventure: ‘the shop where the railway carriages are made … put me in mind of a time when I would be sailing along the North Coast line in such a carriage’.

By this time, Zora had taken at least one trip to Sydney. As a twelve year old she and her sister had been invited to stay with relatives in the well-to-do western suburb of Burwood. Her mother had overcome her fear of her two daughters, ‘only small girls’, travelling so far on their own. Zora reported that she enjoyed the ‘wonderful sights of the vast city’ and

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promised to pay Dame Durden a visit when she was next in town. She recalled the sensory delights of Manly, where they gathered shells and walked on the cliff: ‘the spray from the ocean swept over our faces. I think it is a lovely sight to look far over the limitless Pacific.’82

They stayed for eight weeks, visiting the Cyclorama before heading back to Queensland.

In her later teens, Zora’s words tested the boundaries of the strictly defined territory of the children’s page. With growing confidence she ignored personal warnings from Dame Durden such as ‘Albert B., Phila, Zora, etc.: While full of interest, your letters are too long; better, when you have so much to say, make two letters of your news.’83 Turner commented after one of Zora’s long, but sparkling, descriptions of ‘the wild, free life of the Australian bush’: ‘An excellent letter, Zora; but you will see we have left out some pages, for it was much too long — indeed, it is too long now; but all is so brightly told, it seemed a pity to waste-paper basket it.’84

Zora’s letters to Ethel Turner were not her family’s only connection with literary culture. Her paternal grandfather had owned a local newspaper in Sydney, the Paddington Times, and her uncle Oscar Cross had been a journalist with the Sydney Morning Herald and had also written for Turner’s magazine.85 Oscar wrote an ode on Zora’s birth that predicted her future as a writer. Zora believed Ethel Turner’s initial interest in her may have been because she suspected a family connection to Oscar, but ‘My uncle died at twenty-five before any of his talents had developed,’ apparently of a broken heart.86 Her father had been taught by the poet Brunton Stephens and had come fourth in a poetry competition in which the first three prizes went to Stephens, Henry Kendall and George Essex Evans.87 He had given up his literary ambitions to go into business.88 One of Zora’s aunts had been friendly with the writer Mary Hannay Foote, who had been impressed on meeting Zora at the age of two that she knew how

85 Letter from Zora Cross to Connie Robertson, undated, Constance Robertson further papers, MLMSS 8060, State Library of NSW.
86 Letter from Zora Cross to W.H. Ifould, Chief Librarian, 27 March 1927, Ac 104, State Library of NSW.
88 Letter from Zora Cross to W.H. Ifould, Chief Librarian, 27 March 1927.
to rhyme. Zora Cross may have come from ‘literary stock’, but Ethel Turner was her first direct contact among Australia’s literary elite.

In Turner, Zora found an encouraging editor who would break her own rule about word length if the copy was good. Turner’s benevolence gave the child writer a confidence in approaching literary gatekeepers that carried over into her adult dealings with editors and publishers. Throwing her personality into these interactions would win the support of magazine editors Bertram Stevens and David McKee Wright. It would initially endear her to the publisher George Robertson. But when he began to reject her work, this personal investment exposed her to a deeper disappointment than if their relationship had been more conventionally professional. Reading Zora’s letters to Stevens, Wright and Robertson in the light of her childhood letters to Turner makes them seem less like coquetish approaches to powerful men than the continuation of her established method of pitching work. They also form part of a continuum from childhood to adulthood that reveals her irrepressible personality and her enjoyment of writing personal letters. If they are read first, Zora’s childhood letters encourage a more sympathetic reading of her archive.

Another parallel between Zora’s childhood experience and her later career is her use of the postal system to maintain contact with many other writers. The social network of the ‘Children’s Corner’ connected children from every part of the newly federated country. Several other contributors, such as ‘Bluebell’ from Mitchell’s Island, Manning River, New South Wales, prefaced their letters with a nod to Zora — calling her letters ‘so jolly’ — before narrating their own farmyard antics. She was a sought-after participant in the ‘postcard craze’, with Lily Walton of Merewether mentioning that she regularly exchanged postcards with Zora, having recently received a coloured image of the Anglican church in Ipswich and another card from Toowoomba. Pictures of actresses were Zora’s preference when she requested postcards from others. Postcards were such hot items, often awarded as prizes for winning entries, that Turner offered her contributors a chance to opt out of

89 Letter from Zora Cross to John Le Gay Brereton, August 1922, John Le Gay Brereton papers 1889–1933, MLMSS 281/5, State Library of NSW.
90 Aussie, 16 June 1922.
exchanges with their peers if they ‘begin to dread the sight of a postcard when pocket money is low’.  

A postcard exchange was ordered by the Dame at the end of a long-running ‘squabble’ between Zora Cross of Gympie and Ipswich, and Elsie Taylor of Southport, that resulted in one of Zora’s longest and most exuberant letters. The dispute began in July 1905 with Zora’s seemingly benign description of a Saturday trip to the ‘famous seaside resort’ of Southport. Telling her readers that ‘Southport is not at all a large city, but is by no means unimportant’, Zora took them on the three hour train trip with a dozen girls, followed by a boat ride across ‘a deep channel, which is at times just thick with sharks’. The main beach demanded a long walk ‘through sand knee deep’ before reaching the ‘glorious sight’ of trees for a picnic. Zora, tasked with bringing the milk, had left it on the boat: ‘Well, Dame, the consequence was, as you will know, that we had to drink our tea minus milk, which is not at all a pleasant state of affairs. But it was all my fault, and I believe I suffered the most for it, because I cannot enjoy my dinner anywhere without a cup of good tea.’ The inland dwelling schoolgirls were excited about bathing in the ocean, with some girls so eager that ‘They just threw themselves into the breakers, clothes and all.’ They took the boat back to Southport for a walk along the pier before having a great time on the train home, thanks to ‘some rowdy girls in our party’.

The letter is an engaging description of the Australian Girl – laughing at her failure to remember the milk, watching her friends run into the sea with their clothes on, and making noise on the train home – which contrasts with the conception of femininity that prevailed in the early 1900s, a time Zora would later recall as ‘Beautiful days of long hair and ankle-length dresses’.

But the description of her home town was more than Southport local Elsie Taylor could bear. She fired back a defence, which was published the next month. ‘I hope I am not very impolite,’ Elsie wrote, ‘but I feel I must write and tell you about Southport, as it is not as Zora Cross made it appear’. To start with, seeing a shark at Southport was ‘quite an excitement’. Rather than the wasteland of knee-deep sand Zora described, ‘the main beach is

94 As above.
96 Zora Cross (writing as Bernice May), ‘Vera Dwyer’, Australian Woman’s Mirror, 19 June 1928, p. 12.
a charming spot’ and its sand ‘was not – and never is – above our ankles’. The main point of contention rested on Zora’s claim for Southport’s importance. The place Elsie had lived for four months and had known for many years was ‘quite an unimportant little seaside village’.

What should Dame Durden do at this ‘frightful juncture’ of a dispute between two of her Corner girls?98 ‘Ought I to put on my bonnet and set off for Southport by the next train?’ she asked ‘uneasily’ before letting the matter drop for the rest of 1905. That would have been the end of it if Zora had not come across an old copy of the *Town and Country* bearing Elsie’s corrective missive. In February 1906 she exploded:

Since last I wrote to you, Dame, I’ve taken a sudden change (in my nature, I mean). When I had that photograph (which I sent you) taken, I was about the most serious girl ever given a pair of ‘dandy, grey russet’ (that’s the real colour) eyes. But lately I’ve just gone wild. In fact, mother says I’m the wildest piece of humanity whose ears she ever boxed. I suppose you think I’m too old to get a good sound box across the ears; but, dame, I reckon, I’ve just about deserved it for making such a sad blunder about Southport. That is, of course, Dame, if I ‘did’ make a blunder at all.

Running over 1700 words, the letter was long even by Zora’s standards. She reported her strong reaction ‘when I saw my name in black and white for making such mistakes’.99 She had read Elsie’s letter ‘over and over again’ and ‘was just putting on my headgear to go, post haste, for my solicitor’ when ‘I threw down my hat, read that letter over about a dozen times more, and in the end decided to try and defend myself’. Zora addressed each of Elsie’s claims about Southport, from the presence of sharks to the depth of the sand. ‘Maybe there are two main beaches at Southport, but I failed to see the charming one.’ Turner was clearly unable to resist publishing this long, entertaining letter, which ends, ‘Kindly excuse me for writing this letter beyond the limit, as it’s so hard to defend yourself (without the aid of a solicitor) in a case like this. With love to all the Court – I remain, Sincerely yours, Zora Cross (15 years)’.

The Dame promised a Royal Commission into the matter, before suggesting that we all see things differently: ‘Take Rome for instance. One young lady goes there, and is blind to everything but the crumbling columns of the Forum, the remains of the Baths of Caracall, and

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98 As above.
the great Flavian Amphitheatre. Another young lady contrives to find the ancient city “a pleasant place, in spite of all the horrid ruins.”\textsuperscript{100}

Zora’s teenage transformation was set in print as a result of the Southport controversy. She went from a relatively ‘serious girl’ to ‘the wildest piece of humanity’ on the pages of a national newspaper and in idiosyncratic style. These letters are an early example of the journalistic technique she developed, combining her research with personal observations and confessions, which would eventually leave behind a body of valuable interviews with Australian women writers.

The expression of her developing personality and her experimentation with writing style continued in the last two years of her Corner tenure when she was writing from Sydney’s Burwood and later Granville. She didn’t explain the move, but it can be assumed she was living with the relatives she visited a few years earlier.\textsuperscript{101} She continued to win prizes and remained immersed in the romance of the bush. On a trip back to Gympie the farm had been allowed to fall into disrepair, and Zora wallowed in the simple beauty of her former life, lapsing into incoherence, or perhaps poetry:

> What a difference exists between this life and the one I’ve left. Here, fanned by the breath of Nature, live, love, and die her creatures – there whirled ’midst the panting crowd live, love, and die – myriads who know her not. Dear Australia – this and this only is the real Australia. Here, peace, harmony, concord blend in one; here one forgets the dreary, weary cares and worries, and even in the ‘grim old drought’ knows not the cruel, heartless, misery of other realms.

> Poor, weak individual – I! why should I think ‘old Sol’ looks sadly on the throbbing, panting cities, where creatures, thousands of creatures, live – live for living sake and like puppets pulled along by a string as fine as cobweb – act and work at the ‘money god’s’ will, casting at his palsied feet jewels – priceless jewels? One thought, one mind – just one only opinion mine, as I gaze at the heavenly sunset which smiles and frowns, frowns and smiles.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{100} As above.
\textsuperscript{101} Biographical notes in Angus & Robertson publishing files confirm this, MLMSS 314/21, State Library of NSW.
She begged forgiveness for her diversions: ‘There, Dame, let me stop my confused letter before another woman sighs for my lack of logic,’ she concluded. Both the Jester and the Dame expressed their concern. The Jester reminded readers that ‘Our old friend, Zora Cross, used to write letters palpitating with fun and merriment’. Dame Durden agreed, alluding to Robert Louis Stevenson, who ‘very truly says there is no duty we so much under-rate as the duty of being happy’. Zora had ruptured the jolliness of the children’s page and shown her capacity to question the way people live. She had come up against the limits of Turner’s ideal Australian child, who could never be compromised by adult doubts. (It has been suggested that Turner killed off the main character in *Seven Little Australians* rather than address the question of how her exuberance might play out in adulthood.)

When Zora moved to Sydney in her teens she was invited to a gathering in a North Shore dining room of young writers who called themselves ‘Ethel Turner’s girls’. Among them was Vera Dwyer. At the time Zora was attending Sydney Girls’ High School, where Turner had been educated. Zora would interview Dwyer for the *Australian Women’s Mirror* in 1928 when they were both enjoying successful literary careers. She recalled herself as a ‘child writer … rushing to get the *Town and Country Journal* to see if I had won a story prize. No. Always the first prize seemed to go to “Vera Dwyer (North Sydney).” She was absolutely unbeatable as a child, this Vera.’ Dwyer’s 1913 novel *With Beating Wings* was published by Turner’s UK publisher Ward Lock, and publicised as Turner’s discovery. Also supporting Zora’s career, in 1916 Turner provided a foreword for a novel manuscript based on Zora’s mother’s experiences of Queensland. The novel failed to secure a publisher but its theme was the basis of Zora’s future success with her novel *Daughters of the Seven Mile* (Hutchinson, 1924).

Zora Cross always acknowledged the serendipity of her entry into literary culture with Ethel Turner’s support. Her letters to the *Town and Country* have left us with a valuable body of juvenilia that offers biographical insights as well as the voice of an Australian child in the early years of Federation. I could find no other child who contributed as many words to the

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103 See Tanya Dalziell, *Settler Romances and the Australian Girl* (Crawley, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2004), p. 122.
newspaper during this period or who shared as much detail about their life. Written to appeal to Ethel Turner, but without much sign of restraint or polishing, this writing is both public performance and intimate reflection. It records events in the life of a ‘colonial girl’ and reveals the developing talent of an Australian writer who would make a contribution to poetry, fiction, journalism and literary history.
Chapter 2
The great and shadowy goal

Dedication without their permission

To all publishers, circuses, critics, teamsters, students, jockeys, barmaids, newspapers, teachers, novelists, commercial travellers, babies, lawyers, race-horses, milkmen, picture-stars, dentists, play-wrights, poets, soldiers, dancers, doctors, elephants, fairies, crayfish … and also myself without whom I never should have been able to write this book, I solemnly dedicate it.

Rose Brown

— Zora Cross, ‘Rose Brown by Herself’, unpublished manuscript, 1920

George Robertson thinks the photograph is beautiful. Zora Cross in a dark cape, looking over her shoulder towards the camera, head tilted back, hair tucked into a bonnet tied with a ribbon. Her hands and arms are folded into the cape, which fades into the photograph’s white background. Light touches clear skin. If she looked innocent in her first A&R portrait, she now has the gaze of experience and success.

Zora is out of circulation in June 1919, trying not to worry anyone with her ‘mental and physical agonies’, when her mother drops off the photograph at Angus & Robertson’s offices above the bookshop at 89 Castlereagh Street. The picture is framed and mounted near the door to GR’s office. It will catch his eye whenever he passes, and everyone who visits the publisher they called the Chief and the Master will also see it. He writes to assure her that the image is cherished.

107 Angus and Robertson Ltd publishing manuscripts, 1881–1924, C 843, State Library of NSW.
108 Letter from Zora Cross to George Robertson, 22 May 1919, Angus and Robertson Ltd archive, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
It seems simply incredible that that little chit of a girl could have written ‘Songs’ and ‘Lilt’! 109

Robertson encloses a clipping from the Adelaide Register which announces, ‘Zora Cross is founding a school’. The author of a new book of love sonnets, while ‘not quite another Zora Cross’, is said to be following a trend among young, married women to chart their journey in verse ‘from a bride’s timidity, through realized delight, to the glory of motherhood’. 110

‘See what you have to answer for?’ writes Robertson.

Her second book, The Lilt of Life, hasn’t made the same mark as the first, but Robertson believes in Zora’s achievement. And he likes her.

I am glad to hear that you are getting stronger, and hope to see you going about again, as cheeky as ever.

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My first encounter with Zora Cross was through a letter she wrote to George Robertson immediately after their first meeting. ‘I want you to regard me as a child always,’ she writes. ‘Then you will understand me, and be able to forgive those thoughtless things which might otherwise seem unpardonable. Ah! Do not let this seem the outburst of an impulsive woman …’ 111

I liked the way the letter breached the formal convention of how a writer should communicate with her publisher. I thought Zora was performing an exaggerated version of an excited author. But others have drawn different conclusions.

In 1983 novelist and critic Jill Neville read the same letter when reviewing Anthony Barker’s George Robertson: A Publishing Life in Letters for the Times Literary Supplement. 112 Neville concluded that Robertson had ‘let amorousness cloud his judgement, with one Zora Cross, a kind of Antipodean Ella Wheeler Wilcox who wrote palpitating poems and unbusinesslike

109 Duplicate of letter from George Robertson to Zora Cross, 3 June 1919, Angus and Robertson Ltd archive, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
111 Letter from Zora Cross to George Robertson, 17 October 1917, MLMSS 314/20.
letters to the hitherto sensible Scot’.113 Robertson’s belief in Zora as the ‘greatest Australian woman poet’ was a ‘lapse of taste’.

The idea of Zora Cross beguiling George Robertson against his better judgement was realised on the Concert Hall stage of the Sydney Opera House in November 1986. To celebrate the centenary of Angus & Robertson, a dramatic reading from the company’s archive was performed by professional actors. Barker’s book had pointed the way to the juiciest correspondence, writer Barry Oakley made the selection and Nick Enright directed.114 Near the end of the play, George Robertson falls into a reverie, calling Zora’s name over and over again while the narrator reads excerpts from her letters. The play uses Zora Cross for a comic conclusion in which she appears as the femme fatale who cracks the professional demeanour of the otherwise staid George Robertson.

Zora Cross was an easy subject to resurrect from the archives as an almost fictional character. By the mid 1980s she had fallen so far from literary consciousness that poets Judith Wright and Rosemary Dobson felt safe in recommending that the Australian Jockey Club name a horse race after her. The organisation wanted to name a new handicap race in tribute to ‘an Australian Poetess’, and the Society of Authors had offered a choice between Cross, Wright and Dobson. Wright wanted no part in it because ‘the racing game is not in v. good odour at the moment’ so the 1400 metre Zora Cross Handicap joined a list of annual races named after poets such as Henry Lawson and Henry Kendall. ‘It’s lucky Zora Cross can’t object,’ Wright wrote in a private letter, ‘and since nobody remembers the poor woman, the good name of Poetry can’t be involved.’115

In her 1995 essay about the mythology surrounding the Bloomsbury set, Janet Malcolm argues that, apart from Virginia Woolf, this group of writers and artists was no more talented than many of their contemporaries. The reason they feature so prominently in biographies and continue to fascinate readers is that they left such a rich bounty of words describing their

113 Wilcox was an American poet whose book Poems of Passion was rejected by one Chicago publishing house as ‘illicit’ then published by another, in 1883, to commercial success. Among other affirmations, she is remembered for the line ‘Laugh, and the world laughs with you; / Weep and you weep alone’: <http://www.branfordhistory.org/ellawheelerwilcox.html>.
lives. Malcolm goes as far as saying, ‘No life is more interesting than any other’; and she means no one’s inner life. 116

‘The remarkable achievement of the Bloomsbury writers and artists,’ she writes, ‘was that they placed in posterity’s hands the documents necessary to engage posterity’s feeble attention – the letters, memoirs and journals that reveal inner life and compel the sort of helpless empathy that fiction compels.’ Malcolm does not suggest it is genuine inner life that pervades the Bloomsbury archives; it is the ‘hyper-reality’ they share with fiction that makes these personal narratives so compelling. Realism rather than reality.

Where Zora’s letters compel a kind of ‘helpless empathy’ in me, and taken out of context they provide raw copy for a melodrama, they are a means of understanding what it was like to be an Australian writer during and after the First World War. Because she expresses so much of what it meant to be published, and not to be published, her letters have value beyond her personal story.

The world is a muddled and mangled mess at present but your bookshelves are clean and orderly and the great hope is here with us. 117

Zora Cross began writing to George Robertson in a state of excitement. It was the height of the First World War. She had a small son; she was married in name only; and she was starting to gain attention as a poet, with the Triad magazine declaring her, in January 1917, ‘a million leagues apart in spirit from the thousand Australian and New Zealand girls who send the TRIAD its weekly reams of ting-ting’. 118 But no ephemeral journal, however high its circulation and esteem, meant more to her than publishing a book.

Dear Mr Robertson, even if I fail to succeed as much as you would wish – even if I fail altogether, the thought that you believe in me shall spur me on and on to the great and shadowy goal ahead. 119

George Robertson’s sudden and passionate interest in her work was a wonderful but unsettling intrusion of fantasy into real life. She had spent two years at the Girls’ High School opposite his old Market Street shop, which she held in ‘awe and respect’ as a schoolgirl

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117 Letter from ZC to GR, 2 November 1917, MLMSS 314/20.
118 ‘Editorial’, The Triad, 10 January 1917, p. 46.
119 ZC to GR, 17 October 1917, MLMSS 314/20.
chasing tennis balls across the road.\footnote{ZC to GR, 8 February 1921, MLMSS 314/20.} She had not sought him out, but he had found her. It was up to her to hold his interest – to entertain but not offend him.

*There is a fairy-tale and a matter-of-fact side to every life. You have been and shall always remain a great piece of the fairy-tale to my life and I would rather do anything than have it otherwise so I shall not again annoy you, believe me with all my heart.*\footnote{ZC to GR, 8 February 1921, MLMSS 314/20.}

Zora’s early letters to George Robertson read like an imaginary extension of their meetings. He has fuelled her ambition, believing her capable of writing an Australian poem that would endure like Longfellow’s 1855 epic ‘Hiawatha’. She expresses her excitement, calling him Great Zeus, Apollo, and Orlando to her Rosalind.

*I’m very very old compared to you – even my body is older than yours – but I am younger than a child in spirit and must remain so. Take no heed of my moods – let me be free and sing on till I make great songs. Those things I have written are nothing – nothing – nothing. I want to see behind the moon and the sun ...*\footnote{ZC to GR, 2 November 1917, MLMSS 314/20.}

Zora seems more reckless than naïve in filling an archive with dramatic monologues. She feels compelled to write after seeing GR, marking her letters ‘personal’. It feels more like speaking than writing – ‘I won’t keep you talking like this’.\footnote{ZC to GR, 4 February 1918, MLMSS 314/20.} It is a relief after her day’s work, breaking the churn of her thoughts by releasing them onto paper and mailing them away. She asks him not to reply – ‘I’ll write again soon if I may – but I know you are too busy to answer so don’t bother.’\footnote{ZC to GR, 6 June 1919, MLMSS 314/20.} She writes down the thoughts she would share with him in person if he wasn’t so pressed for time and she wasn’t limited by propriety.

*It has done me so much good to write to you.*\footnote{ZC to GR, 6 June 1919, MLMSS 314/20.}

These letters are written in stage speak, Zora creating a caricature of herself. She builds the drama of his expectations and her desire to please him. In letter after letter she creates a fantasy in which two characters, Zora and Robertson, face each other in an office above that ‘colossal monument of your labour’, the bookshop on Castlereagh Street.\footnote{ZC to GR, 8 February 1921, MLMSS 314/20.} He is a famous publisher and she is his new discovery, until recently a ‘common little vaudeville singer’.  

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\footnote{ZC to GR, 8 February 1921, MLMSS 314/20.}
They stand next to solid wooden shelves which hold the country’s literature, printed and bound according to the highest standards, with a view to longevity.

*It seems ridiculous doesn’t it – but the joy of pleasing you is my chief reward.*  

Those early letters are loaded with fear that Robertson’s good favour is precarious. That she will disappoint or repel him. She warns him not to show her too much kindness. ‘I fear the foolish bits of me will annoy you.’ His encouragement sustains her.

*O death upon the day I fail you!*  

There is nothing to suggest Zora was this character anywhere except in letters. Robertson’s assistant Rebecca Wiley calls her ‘a very clever woman’, whose invitation to edit the *Lone Hand* was an achievement. GR writes to Christopher Brennan, ‘I like Zora – no swell head on her, but a firm belief in herself for all that.’ He wrote that, having read her letter that declared: ‘My dear man, I am only a woman after all – and sometimes all the future of my sex seems to lie in my hands – at others I am little and weak and feel that I have been revenged because I have no home and no husband.’

In the few notes GR writes to Zora, he is playing along. ‘Don’t believe you’re resting a little bit,’ he tells her to on 7 January 1918, ‘Nothing short of taking care of you personally could effect that – and that would probably kill one!’

Unlike other notes from GR, no copy of this letter was included in the A&R archive, but the letter is among Zora’s papers. ‘Did you really mean what you said about looking after me?’ she responds. ‘Perhaps I ought to report myself once a month. But you don’t know the catty jealous words of these muses – whom I love better than my life.’ Then she corrects herself: she can satisfy her muses and her publisher.

127 ZC to GR, 22 April 1918, MLMSS 314/20.  
128 ZC to GR, 23 October 1917, MLMSS 314/20.  
129 ZC to GR, 23 October 1917, MLMSS 314/20.  
132 ZC to GR, 2 November 1917.  
133 GR to ZC, 7 January 1918, Zora Cross papers, Folder 1 Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.  
134 ZC to GR, 16 February 1918.
For the first year of their acquaintance, Zora Cross and George Robertson were bound together by a two-book contract. In exchange for the generous advance of £50 and a ten per cent royalty on the retail price, the author had agreed ‘to submit to the publisher sufficient verses to make another volume the same size’ as *Songs of Love and Life*.\(^{135}\)

There was no due date for the second manuscript or demand that it should be similar to the first in any way except its length. Unlike the first, it would not draw on poems already published in magazines; it would be ‘largely new – perhaps all new’.\(^{136}\) But it could not be forced. Robertson must take his place among the muses.

*I am your daughter – your literary daughter now and thro’ all time.*

Whatever she managed to produce, he would have the best of it. As much as she liked to be in GR’s presence, she would stay away forever unless she could walk in ‘behind a piece of work better than I ever did before … That sentence might be a death warrant but I hope not.’\(^{137}\)

*You’d expect ‘Songs of Love and Life’ to have been written on green grass somewhere wouldn’t you? I can’t see this place for paper at present. It would be a unique photograph if one could get it. You would see into what a whirl my new work has sent my brain.*\(^{138}\)

Living in her parents’ home, she suffers rheumatism, chicken pox and ‘Egyptian blight’ (an eye infection). Her father is dying and, as much as she loves him and credits him with inspiring her ability to write poetry, it is hard to write when she is ‘surrounded with Decay’.\(^{139}\)

In May 1918 the family receives the news that Zora’s nineteen-year-old brother Jack has died in England of meningitis. He had been recovering from wounds suffered in France. Zora tells Robertson she had gone to Brisbane to tell her mother the news ‘and it was terrible – but god is wonderfully good and kind and we are all bearing up well’. A painful growth on her left eye has been caused by ‘too much crying’.\(^{140}\)

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\(^{135}\) Contract to publish *Songs of Love and Life*, October 1917, Zora Cross papers, Box 10, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.

\(^{136}\) ZC to GR, 15 November 1917.

\(^{137}\) ZC to GR, 4 February 1918.

\(^{138}\) ZC to GR, 10 April 1918.

\(^{139}\) ZC to GR, 27 February 1918.

\(^{140}\) ZC to GR, 4 May[?] 1918.
In August she sends GR the manuscript for *The Lilt of Life*. It is what she has been driven to write and she is unable to judge its quality. Robertson would require ‘a lot of health’ to read it.\(^\text{141}\) It has almost cost her life to write it. ‘I have suffered so much over the book, and believe in it myself, because it is myself.’\(^\text{142}\) She will not fight for every line like she did over the first book, because she has already begun to think of a more ambitious work. She cares that it sells well only for GR’s sake.

Soon after delivering the manuscript, Zora writes one of her most extraordinary letters to Robertson. She warns him on the first page that the letter ‘has to be written and I do not think it is going to be short’.\(^\text{143}\) Then over seven pages – almost two thousand words – she pours out an explanation of herself and her response to him.

The letter was triggered by her feeling that GR had misread her behaviour when they met during the day. She apologises for being presumptuous. ‘I’m not always myself, Dear Mr Robertson. Sometimes I am a poetess, sometimes an actress, sometimes only a charwoman …’ It is the actress that gets her into trouble.

He must understand how bleak her life was before she encountered the ‘colossal column of kindness’ that is George Robertson. She doesn’t think of him as a publisher but as a saviour: ‘it had been a pathway of tears – until you took my hand’.

He should not misunderstand her. ‘I don’t want you to think because I forget sometimes and seem to treat myself, my work and you lightly that I mean it.’ Her ‘casual ways’ keep her from misery, but she fears, ‘If I let myself become too familiar even with you, I shall have to begin my journey again’.

She wants to write a book that can take its place on his shelves and she would like it to be a book of her country – ‘the country for which you have already done so much, by feeding its people’s minds with art and truth as well as universal enjoyment’. She feels love and gratitude towards him, ‘But don’t – don’t ever think an unchaste thought has its being in my mind.’ (This repetition of ‘don’t’ is an example of Zora’s stage-speech.)

‘What I have learned of the world,’ she tells him, ‘to my sorrow and despair and perhaps ultimate joy – wasn’t done for adventure – but because I lost the Light of Beauty early and sought it unsuccessfully for many years.’ They are both above playing at ‘chatter and chaff’.

\(^{141}\) ZC to GR, 2 August 1918.
\(^{142}\) ZC to GR, 7 August 1918.
\(^{143}\) ZC to GR, 26 August 1917.
unless they both understand that’s all it is. ‘I will promise not to be forward again and to remember my place.’

She doesn’t know why she writes as she does. People who found her sonnets erotic must be drawing on their own experience of love. ‘I have not known it – nor do I ever wish to. What is written – is written.’

She must end this letter here. ‘But remember, O remember, my dear dear Mr Robertson. If you found me hanging over a precipice you would drag me back. Drag me back now. Nature is only experimenting with me. She wants to see what woman can do.’ She doesn’t want him to judge her as ‘careless and insincere’ like other people do. ‘Only God knows the hurt I have suffered this year and part of the last over the misunderstanding of the relationship between David and myself.’ He must forgive her, in person, when she sees him on Friday.

GR sends her a book of poetry by Swinburne, whose love sonnets she had been accused of copying even though she was unfamiliar with his work.

In his 1936 polemic The Foundations of Culture in Australia, PR ‘Inky’ Stephensen raises the problem that early Australian publishers were primarily booksellers. These merchants had a ready supply of imported books, and they published local authors ‘occasionally and as a sideline’.144 This was one of the causes of a literary culture that tended to ‘exalt mediocrity and drive genius into silence and exile’.145 He does not blame booksellers for having an eye for what would sell, and being reluctant to take risks that might deter loyal customers. The result, however, has been ‘books of a familiar pattern, safe books, books beyond criticism, conservative books’.146

A publisher is a different beast. He has ‘that in his nature which makes him desire to give the public, not only what it wants, but what it ought to want’. This is a person who will stake his money and reputation on ‘a “new” author, an unorthodox author, an outrageous author, in the hope that ultimately he will discover a Shaw, a Wells, a Galsworthy, as the rebel matures’. He will take literary as well as financial risks.

145 Ibid, p. 106.
George Robertson, in Inky’s opinion, belonged to the first group and not the second: ‘This kindly, shrewd Scotsman was one of the greatest booksellers the world has ever known. Few, if any, bookshops in Britain sold as many books as did his shop in Sydney.’ GR would have said as much himself (with the modest qualification that ‘conditions were favourable’). The Chief attributed his success to hard work and a clever system of organisation.

By 1984, in *Snow on the Saltbush*, Geoffrey Dutton places more value on Robertson’s publishing legacy than Stephensen, acknowledging that ‘Angus & Robertson published the majority of worthwhile Australian books between the 1880s and Robertson’s death in 1933’. But he, too, draws attention to the way publishers had restricted the boundaries of Australian literature. He points to the dire years of the 1920s and 1930s when ‘Serious Australian writers have to publish in London and, preferably, live there’. GR was ‘a literary moralist and censor’ and his firm rejected the novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard, M Barnard Eldershaw and Vance Palmer, as well as short stories by Christina Stead.

In the cautious 1920s GR’s split-second decision to publish *Songs of Love and Life* and sign up a sequel began to seem like a wartime aberration. And it hadn’t been much of a gamble. Even though GR had taken on an unorthodox – and arguably outrageous – author in Zora Cross, her first book had obvious appeal for readers.

Having to take her place among the horde of ‘scribblers’ eager to publish under A&R’s imprint, it took Zora a while to adjust to the new reality.

In February 1920, Zora’s relationship with David McKee Wright has become public and she faces accusations that her de facto had written her poetry. Informing GR that she would not dwell for long on this gossip, she reveals her attitude to the afterlife: ‘I don’t suppose Rupert Brooke would care if the world said his songs were written by someone else and believed it too, if he were only here to sing them.’ The loss of her brother in war had sharpened her attitude to death.

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147 Duplicate of letter from GR to ZC, 6 October 1920.
150 Ibid, p. 15.
152 ZC to GR, 3 February 1920.
When you are dead, Mr Robertson, you are very, very dead, and I know it too well ever to mind any little things again.

In March 1920 Zora sends GR a bunch of flowers with a note introducing a manuscript titled ‘Children of the Soil’. She asks him to ‘please look at them at once, as I shall call this afternoon for your opinion’. This brusque demand is part of a ‘hoax’ in which the bouquet was sent in place of a manuscript. The children of the soil are flowers.

In May she gives two days’ notice of her visit to discuss ‘the most important thing I have yet consulted you about’.

In July she asks to see him ‘for just one minute this afternoon’ to give him the ‘something I mentioned to you last time I was in’. She leaves a manuscript with him on Monday 5 July.

Towards the end of August she finds it amusing that GR has asked her to write nursery rhymes when two months ago she sent him ‘the best Australian story that’s ever been told in verse’ and he hasn’t read it yet.

In September, she has still not heard about the manuscript and tries to pique GR’s interest by telling him that it combines verse and prose to tell the story of ‘a Sydney society woman who has entertained the Prince of Wales during his recent visit here’. It is ‘a satire on society, Australia, the war, the modern novel, especially the Elinor Glyn type of novel [an early twentieth-century English writer whose novels where considered scandalous], and a lot of other things including moving pictures, and the stage’. Could he please read the manuscript? It should be a tonic for him and not a task. If only she could spare his eyes and read it aloud for him as she does for David.

In October comes Zora’s first knock-back from GR. He does not believe her book, titled ‘Rose Brown by Herself’, ‘would return the cost of production to its publisher’. There may have been a time to take risks but now ‘one must walk warily’. He blames the threat posed by the ‘Anti-profiteering Bill’, which ‘effectively scotches speculative publishing’. If it comes into force, the publisher will have to bear the full brunt of any loss made on a ‘dud’ book (the Profiteering Prevention Act came into force in 1920).

153 ZC to GR, 19 March 1920.
154 ZC to GR, 17 May 1920.
155 ZC to GR, 24 August 1920.
156 ZC to GR, 17 September 1920.
157 Duplicate of letter from GR to ZC, 6 October 1920.
Robertson presents the manuscript’s rejection as his own decision (‘I may be wrong’), and makes no mention of two readers’ reports sitting in Zora’s file. The first warns of an ‘unwholesome flavour’ permeating the story, which is not badly written but insufficiently compelling. The second, by the journalist and historian Arthur Wilberforce (AW) Jose – who had been reviewing manuscripts for the firm since the 1890s – suggests the problem is in the style more than the subject matter. To pull off a novel in verse a writer would need CJ Dennis’s ‘tinge of sheer genius’. This material might work as a prose novel or a play.

GR doesn’t pass this on to Zora.

Zora tells GR not to worry or apologise. ‘Please forget all about it now won’t you? It doesn’t matter.’ Her baby is unwell, so ‘literature is off at present’. She understands his reluctance to expose his hard-won business to risk. ‘I know perfectly well your establishment is as fine an achievement in Australian history as any piece of literature yet published here.’ Zora thanks GR for having the manuscript typed and asks him to send it back to her.

In December 1920 she thanks GR for Christmas presents, passing on her son Teddy’s ‘very many thanks’ for May Gibbs’s latest, Little Ragged Blossom, and her own praise: ‘How very quaintly it is written, too! Worth reading quite apart from the drawings isn’t it?’

Zora is more resolved than ever to keep writing. She will write the book that ‘has to be written’. The book drawn from her life. ‘The story is in my bones and my blood and next year the washing and scrubbing are going to play second fiddle to it.’ It is the book that would become Daughters of the Seven Mile, published in London by Hutchinson in 1924.

In February 1921 Zora writes to GR, concerned she has offended him. She doesn’t know what she has done to annoy him and assures him it was not intentional. She will always think of him as ‘one of the best men I have ever known’.

GR writes straight back, alluding to turmoil in his private life that he would never write about. ‘I wasn’t angry with you, but I am now – or as near to it as I could possibly be with Zora

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159 Reader’s report signed ‘AWJ’, undated, MLMSS 314/20.
160 ZC to GR, October 1920.
161 ZC to GR, December 1920.
162 ZC to GR, ‘Xmas Eve’ 1920.
163 ZC to GR, 8 February 1921.
Cross ... I was distraught, perhaps, for the last ten days have been harrowing ones – but, there, why go into details. Just believe one always, Yours affectionately ... ¹⁶⁴

Zora is in the middle of writing another letter of apology (‘You seemed mad with me and I seemed to deserve to lose you ...’) when Teddy brings GR’s letter in from the post. She continues anyway, assuring him that it was only his kindness that kept her going on her ‘road as hard as Hell’. ¹⁶⁵

A few months later GR sends her Keats, which makes her cry.

*I kiss the thought of you in gratitude.* ¹⁶⁶

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When publishing *Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy*, GR asked Zora in August 1921 if she wanted to include a dedication in the front of the book. She declined because an elegy was itself a dedication; an additional dedication would be a ‘mistake in taste’. ¹⁶⁷ George Robertson’s brief reply shows his amusement:

Dear Zora,

I stand rebuked.

Sincerely yrs

G. Robertson ¹⁶⁸

‘I envy your Scotch terseness and compactness,’ Zora replied. ‘My trouble is that I have to say such a lot before I begin to say anything at all.’ ¹⁶⁹ She promised to keep his letter near her at all times, and it was among her papers when she died 40 years later.

She asked if most of the review copies of the *Elegy* could be sent to England because that was where she saw her best chance of publishing *Daughters of the Seven Mile*. GR put Zora in touch with UK literary agent AP Watt.
A&R would have the novel typed (once C.E.W. Bean’s war history was out of the way) and he promised that the bookshop would buy 250 copies of an English edition. Zora sought GR’s advice about serialising the story in an Australian newspaper first, which he thought a good idea. Serialisation would promote the book and most people would ‘only read enough of it serially to make them ask for it in the shops and libraries’.¹⁷⁰

While it was never suggested that A&R would publish this ‘essentially Australian’ novel, Zora held out hope that it might seize the publisher’s interest from the typist’s desk. The Australasian newspaper offered to publish the story over seven months. ‘It seems like an awful age for a serial, doesn’t it?’¹⁷¹ Rebecca showed GR the notice of the upcoming serial, alongside what he considered ‘a flattering portrait’ of Zora.¹⁷²

When she landed an English publisher for the novel, in July 1923, she sent GR a handwritten telegram: ‘Messrs Hutchinson have made offer Daughters of the Seven Mile am accepting many thanks for your kindness and encouragement.’¹⁷³

GR wired back: ‘GLAD HUTCHINSON IS A LIVE PUBLISHER AND HAS AGENT RESIDENT AUSTRALIA.’¹⁷⁴

While Zora publishes poems and stories every week and believes – ‘all my prospects are bright’ – her stock with A&R is falling.¹⁷⁵ In 1922 the company had knocked back a collection of her verse titled ‘Imitations and Variations’. Jose, who had reviewed ‘Rose Brown’ without knowing its author, headed this reader’s report ‘NOTE ON ZORA’. He found ‘a good deal too much of D.M.W. [David McKee Wright]’ in the poetry, which was ‘mainly nice-sounding assortments of luscious words with no particular meaning’.¹⁷⁶ GR turned it down with a promise that ‘If you publish with another house you may rely on our doing all we can to help, as booksellers’.¹⁷⁷

GR kept sending her books – including Louise Mack’s Girls series about Zora’s old high school – and presents for the children. He gave her advice about UK royalties. She sent promising authors his way. In January 1924 she thanked him for a book of Henry Kendall’s

¹⁷⁰ Duplicate of letter from GR to ZC, 23 September 1921.
¹⁷¹ ZC to GR, May 1922.
¹⁷² Duplicate of letter from GR to ZC, 3 May 1922.
¹⁷³ Telegram from ZC to GR, undated.
¹⁷⁴ Duplicate of telegram from GR to ZC, 14 July 1923.
¹⁷⁵ ZC to GR, 2 December 1922.
¹⁷⁶ AW Jose, ‘Note on Zora’, reader’s report, undated.
¹⁷⁷ Duplicate of letter from GR to ZC, 27 October 1922.
poems and advised of her plan to work through the summer, even if she has to leave the haven of Glenbrook for a while. The only way to ‘tackle my dream’, is to keep working, she tells him. After a ‘perfect drunken spree’ of writing whatever she wanted, she has to put her hand to journalism to pay the bills.

*But work is the only way that I know to ease my restlessness. It makes me forget myself; and forgetting oneself is the secret of everything, isn’t it?*

Also in that month, A&R engaged Zora Cross to produce three poetry anthologies: a new edition of Bertram Stevens’ *Golden Treasury*, a book of Australian verse for children aged twelve to fourteen, and a volume of Australian nursery rhymes. The firm would pay ‘fifty pounds apiece for each book on day of publication’ and asked that there be ‘no public announcement of the *Treasury*’ as that might interfere with sales of another anthology.

Zora Cross agreed to the terms, set out in a letter from GR’s offsider Fred Shenstone, and promised to try to keep news of the anthology away from the press – ‘but you must remember that compiling an anthology is not a thing that can be kept secret’. Suggesting that it didn’t really matter if word got out, she reminded Shenstone of ‘Balzac’s old remark about business – that it cannot and never does agree with friendship’. Her words now read like a premonition of the breakdown in her relations with George Robertson.

Putting together a wide-ranging Australian poetry anthology was not going to be easy. She contacted a range of poets for permission to use their work. Young poets were excited, older poets who thought themselves forgotten were flattered, and well-known writers such as Dorothea Mackellar and Mary Gilmore were gracious. Some poets could not suggest appropriate work; others wanted Zora to choose for them. Some included lengthy biographies and others gave nothing. Some referred copyright permission to their publisher; others, like Kenneth Slessor, had a list of questions about the anthology before they would give permission. Leon Gellert acknowledged what a lot of work it must be to put together an anthology like this.

Zora finished the book of nursery rhymes in July. She told John Le Gay Brereton that ‘G.R. liked it when I read him some of the rhymes. Personally I rather liked them myself and hope

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178 ZC to GR, 16 January 1924.
everyone else will.’ But her own verses in the collection troubled the publisher’s reader. Would parents, ‘who don’t want to agitate very young minds’, buy a book for children when so many of the poems featured dead babies? She planned to submit the children’s anthology in the same month but was still deliberating over the selections. By the end of the year the anthologies had become stressful, causing her illness. She told Brereton she had never wanted to do them. Robert Holden writes that Zora Cross’s nursery rhymes were among the most effective in the anthology she compiled. He laments that Zora ‘failed to bring the project to completion … depriving Australian children’s literature of what promised to be a distinguished collection’.

Over the next two years communication froze between Zora and A&R, with Zora asking Brereton to intervene on her behalf. Zora believed she had fulfilled the brief and that the company was withholding payment. ‘G.R. owes me £40,’ she told Brereton. ‘I have done his work. He ignores all my letters. If I call he’ll merely refuse to see me.’ The anthologies had taken months to complete and she had spent money on stamps, typing and books. ‘I thought I was doing G.R. a kindness, for no one likes anthology work.’

Brereton reported back to her that GR believed she had been paid for the work and that the firm was not satisfied that the anthologies were publishable. He had given Brereton £25 to pass on to her. Zora was certain that GR had expressed satisfaction with the anthologies and that she had not been paid for her own original work. A&R’s records show that Zora was paid £360 between May 1924 and April 1926 including £100 ‘given by GR from his private account’. Zora told Brereton there was an explanation for why she was given this money, but she would tell him when she saw him. She felt sorry for GR, who ‘is sore about his own failure as a publisher’.

Soon afterwards Zora called into the Angus & Robertson bookshop and ‘saw them all in a bunch at the end of the passage’. She went to speak to Rebecca Wiley ‘and they all fled like culprits from me. GR to his room after saying to me with hesitation, “Well, Madam?”’

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185 ZC to JLGB, 8 April 1926.
187 ZC to JLGB, 17 [April] 1926.
In February 1927 Zora sent a novel manuscript to Fred Shenstone, ‘to have a look at if you are still publishing’. GR’s daughter Bessie Ferguson reported on ‘The Jewel of the House of Han’ without the writer’s name on it. ‘This is a perfectly preposterous story of the loss, search for and finding of Chinese treasure. The story is ridiculous and would lead the outsider to believe Australia is overrun with Chinese,’ Bessie wrote. She was concerned about inaccuracies in descriptions of Sydney and Brisbane. ‘The writer has no literary ability’, she reported, and even if the story were worth telling, ‘it would be a tremendous task to edit it’.

Zora’s ‘business proposition’ that A&R publish a follow up to Daughters of the Seven Mile – including the last chapter of the novel which had been left out by the English publisher – was declined in a ‘Dear Madam’ letter of 24 January 1928.

The most decisive blows were about to fall.

GR had been sending Zora, hot from the English press, each new edition of John Murray’s Oxford English Dictionary. When he began in 1918 she called it ‘the most wonderful present ever received’. It was a landmark publication and they were expensive books. She would read them like novels, and refer to them constantly for her work.

In April 1928 Zora wrote to GR introducing her acquaintance Effie Sandery as a ‘thoroughly equipped newspaper woman with a talent for every branch of her work’. Sandery met GR and passed on Zora’s question about whether he was planning to send her the last two volumes of the Oxford dictionary. In August Zora received a letter from A&R, again addressed to ‘Dear Madam’, to alert her that a parcel weighing 11 kilograms had been sent by passenger train to Glenbrook. She was to arrange delivery from the station.

In thanking GR for the final volumes of the dictionary, Zora wrote, ‘I am so glad I thought to mention them to Effie’.

GR was furious. ‘Of course you are glad you sent a third person to me about the Dictionary,’ he wrote, ‘but you need not have troubled – the penultimate volume was only awaiting the arrival of the last one.’

Zora was sorry. She had not sent a third person to see him. She asked Mrs Sandery to mention the dictionary because Professor Brereton had told her that the university had extra volumes, which she could have if she liked. (Here, in one of his few archival annotations, GR underlined the word ‘volumes’ and wrote, ‘This should read parts. The book had not yet been
completed in bound volumes.’) She had not wanted to accept Brereton’s offer until she knew whether GR would be sending them.

Her note had been ‘only a friendly note of thanks’, and Zora’s aunt had suggested that GR’s reply ‘expressed annoyance’. She regretted annoying him.

After David McKee Wright died suddenly in February 1928, Zora faced the possibility of losing her home and was desperate for money. GR offered to buy books from her, many of them books he had given her, but she couldn’t bring herself to part with them. In October she wrote to suggest he might instead publish her sequel to *Daughters of the Seven Mile* (not the follow-up they had already rejected but a work titled ‘Son of the Seven Mile’). He had been gruff with her when she had seen him, and she apologised again for hurting him. ‘I have been in great grief and worry and distress and might be excused for anything I have done in recent months’. The only answer she received was a ‘Dear Madam’ rejection.

In December she thanked him for a copy of Nettie Palmer’s anthology *An Australian Story Book* in which she had a story alongside those of Henry Lawson and Vance Palmer. She had been coveting a six-volume Roman history in his shop and posted him her copy of Charlotte Bronte’s *The Professor* (‘which was priced at £2, by a dealer in Melbourne’) in the hope she could exchange it for the history (‘second had priced at 35/-’).

*Wishing you a happy Christmas, and hoping that you will not mind my writing to you.*

GR sent it back, having priced the edition at 6/-, and told her it was a ‘cheap edition’ from the 1860s. Rebecca Wiley wrote in her memoir that Zora had sent GR ‘nasty letters’, but the only hint of that I have seen is her response to this rudeness. ‘Of course it was not a first edition,’ she wrote. ‘As a second hand bookseller you should surely know that no one in her senses would offer Messrs Angus and Robertson a first edition of any “Currer Bell” book for 35/- when for a few pence she could send it across to Christie’s.’

She didn’t need to remind him that he had compared her to Currer Bell when they first met. Or that she had just lost her partner. She advised A&R of an offer she had received on the dictionary and was informed it was too low but she was not to send the volumes to A&R. ‘Mr Robertson has given us instructions not to take delivery of it.’ She sent it to them anyway, and she would regret its loss.

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Around this time John Le Gay Brereton was in GR’s office and happened to mention how hard it was for Zora, bringing up the children since David had died. The Chief said he never wanted to hear the name Zora Cross again.  

The manuscript A&R rejected in 1920, ‘Rose Brown by Herself’, is in the Mitchell Library. Zora had asked for its return, but A&R must have sent her the typed version and kept the handwritten one. It is professionally bound and the title page bears the annotation, ‘Not A&R’s copyright’. The novel is not as I expected after seeing the readers’ reports.

‘Rose Brown’ is a full length (400 page) prose novel, with a short verse section at the end. Its satire is wide-ranging; its references belong to the time, while its candour seems well ahead. The main character is more cheeky than unwholesome. It takes the style of a popular romance, while mocking the genre and taking a radical position on how women should be able to live their lives.

The prologue introduces Rose Brown, a married woman who has written a novel about a ‘real girl’, also called Rose Brown. She shows the manuscript to her friend Liz, who doesn’t think it will be a success. It is a love story but it ‘isn’t sweet enough’; it doesn’t ‘hit your heart’. Too many of the characters are servants, it’s ‘not Australian enough’, it ends in a hurry, and why did she have to kill off all the male characters in the war?

‘But it’s melodramatic, sensational, humorous, tragic, common-place, serious, sentimental and stupid in parts,’ Rose tells her. ‘It attacks the sex problem, love, marriage, the law, God, man the devil – all of that.’ Servants are an important part of society; paper is scarce so she had to end it somewhere; and ‘what’s a war for if it isn’t to kill off men?’

Liz’s main objection is that the character Rose is ‘a bit swift in her movements for a perfect lady’.

‘Ah! Liz! You horror! She didn’t love so very many men. Pretend you’ve never loved any other man but your Bill.’

‘I’ve kissed lots but I’ve never loved anyone but Bill.’

‘Well, Rose meant her kisses. She was honest. You weren’t.’

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190 Zora Cross, ‘Rose Brown by Herself’, 1920, Angus & Robertson Ltd publishing manuscripts, 1881–1924, C 843, State Library of NSW.
Liz thinks her author friend should have sent a man after her main character at the end of the book, because ‘man and woman are nothing unless they go hand in hand’. Rose defends her character’s independence: she is ‘a new woman. She does not need a man to wander with her.’

Before the main novel begins (the novel Rose has written, which makes up most of the book), the author’s rich husband offers to get it published for her. Surely they could get Bernard Shaw or HG Wells to edit it. Rose informs him that these authors would have no interest in her book and, anyway, Shaw is ‘too old-fashioned’ and the chauvinist Wells would wreck her female characters.

In any case, ‘you can’t buy great men or great publishing firms’.

‘Rose Brown by Herself’ may well have been a difficult book to publish in 1920 despite its appeal to me in 2014. The narrator makes frequent interjections in parentheses to show that she is sending up the popular romance authors of the day such as Elinor Glyn and Marie Corelli, while also imitating their melodramatic style. For example, when Rose is flirting with a German doctor who employs her to look after his children before promoting her as his secretary, their hands brush slightly and the narrator comments: ‘(If I had only been Elinor Glyn, alas! I should have got some spice in there. I should have made the Doctor curl his waxed moustache longingly and Rose flush and swell with emotion and suddenly fall off the chair on which she was standing right into his aching arms. It was a pity to miss the chance. I must remember next time.)’

But many ideas and events in the novel would not be found in a popular romance. Rose, only sixteen years old, arranges her work life as a servant to suit herself rather than her master. ‘What’s the good of being a servant if you don’t exploit these rich employers?’ She goes onto the stage because she believes it is the only field of work that pays men and women equally. There is pre-marital sex, an escape from a notorious abortion clinic, a stillborn baby, illegitimate children, doubts about the purpose of war, and women who value their friendship over their relationships with men.

One extraordinary scene in Brisbane – where Rose has been working as ‘a common vaudeville performer’ – shows what is going through her mind while she is being raped (although it is not called rape in the book) by a young man who asks her out. She is uneasy when he kisses her, but ‘what else had she come out with him for?’ She feels nothing for him, no attraction or repulsion. When she sees that he is ‘wild with desire’, she recognises ‘the long pent-up primitive man’ and knows she is ‘no longer in the twentieth century’.
‘At first the struggle amused her,’ Zora writes. ‘She was young and strong. She was a match in every way for this city boy.’ She bends his wrist back and kicks him down the river bank, but she helps him up before he falls into the river. Rose starts to get away but slips on her flimsy shoes into his ‘cruel arms’. She realises he is enjoying the struggle after so long suppressing his urges through work and church. ‘Then all the lights of the world went out’.

The narrator says she had expected Rose to make her grief public; ‘to arise and shriek for police or at least attempt to drown herself in the river’. But she tidies up her hair and remarks ‘how beautiful Brisbane looked in the twinkle of its myriad lights’. She is sorry that the man has ruined his new suit and brushes it down for him, telling him to ‘Try cleaning it with ammonia’.

She has left the book she was reading on the river bank. It is *Evelyn Innis*, by the controversial Irish writer George Moore. Someone had told her it was literature. The man offers to go back and get it for her and she lets him have it.

‘I like a risky book,’ he tells her.

‘I like a good story,’ she replies.

Literature presents a choice between brutal realism and superficial romance.

Rose jumps on the tram and never sees the man again, although she will have his child. ‘The burning humiliation into which her own folly had thrust her did not occur to her until she was at last alone’. Having felt herself ‘too independent’ for the social convention of marriage, Rose realises she must find a man to marry in order to have his name. She finds a willing candidate, and feels a certain freedom in presenting herself to the world as a married woman. They never live together.

The narrator, as the author Rose Brown, has the rapist killed on the Somme.

Rose has another child with her former lover Bill. At the end of the book, she leaves her baby girl with her friend Liz, who is now in a relationship with Bill, and takes her son ‘out into the world’. The girl will be fine as long as Liz and Bill ‘can bring her up to believe in herself’. But she and her son need to win their freedom. Her boy ‘has been robbed of the social privilege of a father through his mother’s weakness – his mother’s physical weakness, and that is not fair’. (She makes it clear that her weakness is physical rather than moral.)
She doesn’t want to become a man but she wants a man’s freedom, and to be ‘treated as decently as a man is treated’ in a world where ‘common soldiers are treated better than nursing mothers’. What is the point of giving women the vote if they keep ‘putting the same old men in the same old legislative chairs’?

‘I can’t erect monuments,’ she explains, ‘but I can do helpful little things. They count as much as anything.’

‘I’ll not hush. I’ll not be quiet. For thousands and thousands of years I’ve been quiet. Now I’ll be heard.’

Rose’s final speech is a rousing cry, and it doesn’t seem to come from 1920.

*No one ever got the freedom of his soul by submission. You men fight for yours but you expect women to get their souls by being submissive. It isn’t natural. It isn’t human. You men are afraid of us. That’s what it is ... But your real freedom lies in our freedom, you thought we wanted votes and trousers and coats and pipes and rights like you. We didn’t. We wanted and we want our immortal souls. We want happiness for our children – the right to love our husbands in a clean place. We want to be real women not the equals or the superiors of men. We want to be their true mates as we were in the days of Eden and we shall be. You think I’m going to preach in the streets and do wild and mad things because I am beautiful still. I am not. But you shall hear of me again and I shall win. I shall win.*

I have lingered a long time on this unpublished novel, explaining it in more detail than I describe some of Zora’s published prose. It was a lost direction for Zora Cross, who never wrote anything like it again.

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Few people have taken as much care as George Robertson to leave their papers in order before they die. In the remaining years of his life, Robertson spent hours each day preparing the A&R publishing files for sale to the Mitchell Library. He read every letter in what Rebecca Wiley called ‘his last big effort for A&R’s’, to ensure that the story of Australian literature’s beginnings found its way to students and historians in the best possible condition.¹⁹¹ The 340 letters from Zora Cross, it occurred to him, might need an introduction. So he dictated a file note headed ‘G.R. 1 September 1929’. In a few short paragraphs he tells the story of his instant decision to publish *Songs of Love and Life* and his first meeting with

‘the fair Zora’. The note has all the humour and affection missing from the later years of their correspondence. It suggests George Robertson continued to believe in Zora Cross as a poet and a figure in literary history, even if he gave up his personal connection with her.
Chapter 3

A spoonful of blood

Nine of us are sitting around a long, polished table in a windowless boardroom. It’s a September morning in 2013. We are seven women and two men, and we work for a major cultural institution. The walls are decorated with digital copies of paintings and photographs. Someone is taking notes on a laptop.

We are discussing the national campaign to mark the centenary of the First World War, which will have the same duration as the war itself and involve media, books, websites, talks and exhibitions. Towards the end of the meeting we are told about a planned series of short documentaries to be sponsored by a multinational media corporation. Can we suggest any themes? After a pause, I say ‘Zora Cross?’

‘What does she have to do with the war?’ someone asks.

‘She published a popular book of poetry in 1917,’ is the answer I come up with.

I could have added that Zora was an actress and vaudeville singer who organised fundraising concerts for the Red Cross. That she worked as a journalist and magazine editor during the war. That she wrote an elegy for her younger brother Jack, who died of illness after being injured on the Western Front.

Or I could have described her sudden rise to fame at the height of the war. Her poetry collection *Songs of Love and Life* was a publishing event, with thousands of copies sold to a small, wartime population. I am drawn to the idea that Australians were deciding whether to send conscripts into battle and enjoying erotic love sonnets at the same moment in history.

But Zora Cross doesn’t fit the kind of commemorative campaign we’re discussing. I’m told the audience for the documentaries is mostly male. It’s an audience – so the thinking goes – that prefers war history to be about the waging of war, not the side-effects of grief, poetry and changed attitudes to sex. Stories for the documentaries will be found in war diaries – young soldiers, stretcher bearers and cartoonists, a diary with a bullet hole in it. There will be interviews with descendants. Blood and blood.

In 1920 Zora encountered a similar obstacle when she saw an advertisement issued by the Mitchell Library (now part of the State Library of NSW) promising ‘Good prices will be paid
for good material’ in the form of soldiers’ diaries. She wrote to the principal librarian to ask if her brother Victor’s diaries would be worth more if she applied her literary talent. Victor had written ‘just his day to day observations with no attempt to write finely or resort to imagination’. ‘I do not know which you consider the more valuable,’ Zora wrote, ‘the diary well written or the diary containing the closest observation; but I should be pleased to know if it would heighten the value of my brother’s diaries were I to re-write them for you, submitting the original diaries and my manuscript both to you.’ She wanted to help Victor, who had recently married and started a family.

The principal librarian offered £3 for Victor’s diaries, which was in in the lower range of prices paid for war material. The library found Victor’s diary entries ‘brief and of little military importance’. No reference was made to Zora’s proposal of literary enhancement — the library wanted the soldiers’ experience told in their own words, during the action. Zora was a ‘difficult sister’, according to archives historian Anne-Marie Condé, who brokered the deposit of valuable manuscripts.

A hundred years later, we are still negotiating the space to express the full range of experience of men and women during the war. Individual personality, domestic detail and patriotic ambivalence remain at odds with what Fay Anderson recently described as ‘conventional and comforting ideas of Anzac valour and sacrifice’.

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193 Letter from Zora Cross to the Principal Librarian, 22 January 1920, corporate record, ML1920/60, State Library of NSW.
194 Letter from the Mitchell Librarian to Zora Cross, 24 February 1920, corporate record, ML1920/481, State Library of NSW.
195 Anne-Marie Condé, ‘Capturing the Records of War: Collecting at the Mitchell Library and the Australian War Memorial’, *Australian Historical Studies* 36, no. 125 (2005), pp. 134–152, at p. 147. Zora did not want to see her brother’s diaries ‘buried in the archives’ and agreed to have them copied by the Australian War Memorial only in 1930, following interest from Charles Bean. Condé quotes a letter from Zora Cross to the Australian War Memorial, 15 July 1930, AWM93, 12/11/3615 and from Charles Bean to Zora Cross, 27 October 1930, AWM93, 12/11/30.
Since Bean wrote his official history of the First World War by ‘finding out and questioning the men who were actually there’, \(^{197}\) firsthand accounts from the trenches have tended to squeeze out other perspectives on the war. Influenced by Bean’s use of soldiers’ letters as source material, Bill Gammage decided to focus ‘not on the war … but on the men who fought it’. Having gathered letters from 272 Great War veterans to create a more nuanced account of the war than Bean’s, Gammage nonetheless deferred to the ‘tragic nobility’ of his source material. If his book had little to say about sex, religion and politics, it was because soldiers were largely quiet on those subjects. Venereal disease statistics indicated that the men ‘took advantage of whatever “horizontal refreshment” chanced to offer’, but their letters suggested ‘sex did not loom large among them’. They rarely had time for it, and when they did, ‘probably, most honoured the honourable, and availed themselves of the available’. \(^{198}\)

While efforts have been made to feature women beyond the categories of *honourable* and *available*, \(^{199}\) certain perspectives and sources have been privileged in the ‘wave of remembrance’ surrounding the centenary of the First World War. \(^{200}\) Joan Beaumont argues that ‘the events of the past have been invoked by state and conservative media to underscore the national and civic importance of remembering – even celebrating – service in the armed forces of the state today’. \(^{201}\) Letters and diaries written by soldiers (‘and in a few instances, nurses’) serving in the war, have been exalted for their ‘authenticity, the immediacy of being in the moment’. \(^{202}\) Letting the artefacts speak for themselves has sometimes come at the expense of historical interpretation which might challenge the legitimacy of war. \(^{203}\)

Perspectives that do not arouse national pride have been excluded. \(^{204}\)

Zora Cross’s letters, poetry and journalism show a tension between the dominant narrative of war remembrance – boosting heroism, accepting the inevitability of war, and putting military deeds at the centre and suffering on the home front on the margin – and her response, which


\(^{199}\) See, for example, Stephanie Woodbridge, ‘Emotional Stories of War’, *History Australia* 12, no. 3 (2015), p. 208.


\(^{201}\) Joan Beaumont, p. 33.


\(^{204}\) See Mark McKenna, ‘Lest We Infl a te’, *The Monthly*, December 2012 – January 2013, pp. 30–35.
personalised her brother’s experience and foregrounded her own perspective. This chapter argues for Zora’s place in the Australian history of the First World War.

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A few months before that meeting I received a copy of an Australian soldier’s war record, ordered from the National Archives of Australia for $25. (I could look at it online for free but I wanted the physical object.) It arrived in my letterbox in a white envelope that held a stiff, grey folder. Printed on the folder – in a large, friendly font – were the words ‘Your story, our history’. Inside were old, brown documents copied onto new, white office paper.

The soldier whose ‘service dossier’ I ordered was not my great-grandfather nor my great-great-uncle (although I felt like a vicarious family historian when it came into my possession).205 He was John Skyring Cross, the younger brother Zora knew as Jack.206

This soldier was born in Gympie, Queensland, and lived in the Sydney suburb of Mosman. When he enlisted on 12 December 1916 he gave his age as twenty-one years and eight months. He had lied about his age, probably to avoid the need for his parents’ permission. He was eighteen, and would not see twenty.

This soldier’s ‘trade or calling’ had been ‘student’. His hair was fair, his eyes blue and his height was five foot eight and three quarter inches. He weighed 136 pounds and his chest measured thirty-two inches, expanding to thirty-six when he took a deep breath. (The minimum chest measurement was thirty-four inches, so the breath counted.)207

In this history of our soldier’s body, he had good teeth, with no fillings, artificial sets or extractions. On the bright, red dental diagram, an unexplained circle is drawn around one molar, but the rest of Jack’s teeth are untouched by the inspector’s pencil.

Another form shows a generic outline of the front and back of a man’s body. It reveals this soldier’s only distinctive mark: a small scar above the centre of his buttocks.

The Report of Death appears in the folder straight after the enlistment form:

205 For a discussion of the impact of family history on Great War commemoration since the 1980s, see Carolyn Holbrook, Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2014), pp. 144–165.
PRIVATE. CROSS JOHN SKYRING. DIED OF DISEASE (CEREBRO SPINAL MENINGITIS). 20TH MARCH 1918. ROYAL VICTORIA HOSPITAL NETLEY. ENGLAND.

‘Died of Disease’ is cited as the soldier’s ‘Cause of Becoming Non Effective’ on a form issued by the Chief Paymaster. It shows that J.S. Cross had twice been absent without leave during his service, once overnight on 26 May 1917 and for a fortnight between Boxing Day 1917 and 8 January 1918. He forfeited a total of 59 days’ pay.

The soldier was given a military funeral in a coffin of ‘good polished Elm with brass fittings’, draped with the Union Jack, and buried at Netley’s military cemetery. The consecrated grave in the Church of England section, number 1942, would be turfed and marked with an oak cross.

Details of the burial were forwarded to the next of kin along with a parcel of Jack’s possessions:

- shaving brush
- razor
- handkerchief
- tie
- balaclava
- scissors
- socks
- letters
- autograph album
- two unmounted photographs
- two devotional books.

After the war, the family was sent a photograph of the soldier’s grave in duplicate, a pamphlet titled ‘Where the Australians Rest’, a Memorial Plaque, a Memorial Scroll, a British War Medal and a Victory Medal. It was as though the Crown would keep sending things until they equalled the weight of a young man’s body: 136 pounds. The dispatch of each object was marked on a form with its own blue or purple inky stamp. These objects were mailed in 1921, 1922 and 1923 to Jack’s father, Ernest William Cross, who had died in 1919. Jack’s mother, Mary, signed a receipt for the plaque.
On receiving the news of her brother’s death, Zora Cross travelled to Brisbane to tell her mother. About a month passed before she wrote to her publisher, George Robertson, to tell him. ‘We have lost our young brother Jack … It just takes all the life out of me.’

The way she writes of her loss seems generic: she seeks understanding in God and the afterlife. Her words are passionless, or not passionate enough, but her body betrays her efforts to be sanguine and a small growth on her left eye is extremely painful. ‘I won’t let the Dr touch it,’ she tells Robertson, ‘because I feel certain it is only the nerves and has been caused through too much crying.’ She notices that her ordinary cares are still there – whether her poetry collection will be published in England, the progress of illustrations for her children’s book.

‘Life goes on and on.’

She decides to dedicate her children’s book *The City of Riddle-Me-Ree* to her brother, if the publisher has no objections. It could read, ‘Dedicated to Jack Cross, who died in the war and all the young dead’. It might not be a selling point for a children’s book to invoke young Australian corpses, but it is appropriate, she tells Robertson, because her brother was ‘only a boy after all’. The poem has ‘a war interest’ because ‘all the lame and maimed soldiers are made happy again by being converted into children’. The publisher amends the dedication, removing the reference to the *young* and *dead*, so that it reads, ‘To Jack Cross who died in the Great War aged nineteen’.

This attempt at a slightly out-of-place dedication is part of Zora’s struggle to bridge the gulf between the experience of her brother’s death and representing that loss. As a writer, she is compelled to move beyond her own bereavement to articulate everyone’s grief. She is obliged to process ‘your story’ into ‘our history’. It is her job, her calling, her campaign.

Zora’s next opportunity to honour Jack in print came when her friend John Le Gay Brereton – university librarian and later Professor of English at the University of Sydney – asked her to write a tribute for the university’s literary journal *Hermes*. Jack had enrolled in medicine at

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208 Letter from Zora Cross to George Robertson, 4 May 1918, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
209 Letter from Zora Cross to George Robertson, 14 May 1918, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
210 Zora Cross, *The City of Riddle-Me-Ree*, illustrated by Olive Crane (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1918).
the university before enlisting. Zora wrote a short piece that set out the basic facts of Jack’s education and war service.

When Brereton told Zora he had expected something more personal, she replied that she had misunderstood: ‘I thought you wished me to make his little history appear no differently to any other man’s there. That is what he would have wished himself – so perhaps the plain paragraph I have written is, after all, best.’211 But she had begun to question the distinction between public and private grief, and she continued to write down her memories of Jack, the letter becoming the basis for a longer and more intimate tribute published in Hermes in November 1918.212

This memoir explains the loss of an exceptional son, who gave his mother ‘all the love that we others failed to express’. Zora could still see him as a schoolboy, ‘helping mother and listening for the school bell’. He had been a brilliant student, a rugby player, a prefect. He wanted to go to war as soon as it broke out, standing ‘as tall as an ordinary man’ at sixteen, but agreed to stay at home and finish school while his brother Victor enlisted. His mother begged him not to go, but he longed ‘to do something’ for his family and his country.

The night before he left, his family, his friends, and his ‘girl-sweetheart’ gathered to say goodbye. If she would not let him go, he told his mother, he would ‘stay and put up with whatever the fellows say’. ‘That pulled her up, and she never bemoaned his departure again.’ Zora put her arms around Jack and, ‘with some premonition of what was to come’, let her tears show. ‘What,’ he cried in amazement, ‘you’re not going to break down, too, Zor.’

Jack was wounded in France in October 1917. He recovered at Rouen Hospital before returning to the front to dig mines. He was wounded again and sent to England. Jack had been about to return to France when ‘he was taken back unconscious’ to Netley Hospital in England where he died of cerebro-meningitis on 20 March 1918. The nurses who looked after him wrote to the family, ‘testifying to his great patience all through his illness’. Not long before he died he had told the doctor he was ‘just fine’. This had been his mantra. In one of his last, short letters, he told his family, ‘I breathe London like the air of heaven.’

Jack’s younger brothers and nephews still waited at the gate for him to come home, ‘because the tragedy of war has not yet come home to their young souls’. The older children saw him as ‘a beacon-light to all those Australians of the future whom he has left behind’.

In her obituary for Jack, Zora Cross is writing for her audience, paring back her family tragedy to a myth. The innocent hero is destroyed because of his goodness and his need to prove his manhood by risking his life. The Australian poet Leon Gellert said he went to war to see if he was a coward and found out that he was. \(^{213}\) Jack was simply brave. But the obituary has another layer, connecting war and literature to explain Jack’s decision to go to war. A school prize he received at seven, which ‘happened to be a book which displayed the more attractive side of military life’, inspired an interest in his mother’s stories about her uncle ‘who did good service for Queen Victoria in India’.

When Jack left his mother to go to war, he gave her his school copy of Shakespeare’s tragedy Coriolanus, about a noble war hero. His school had chosen to teach this play in the early years of war. Coriolanus’s mother, Volumnia, encourages her son to go to battle, aware of the shame he would face if he avoided it. Zora recalled her mother reading the play after news of Jack’s death.

When Zora looked at the books her brother had left behind she found he had highlighted the last verse of Dorothea Mackellar’s ‘My Country’. He might have loved this brown country with its opal heart, but the idea of England had him in thrall. He was a boy who climbed into Wordsworth’s ‘Sonnet on Westminster Bridge’ to agree, ‘Earth has not anything to show more fair’, and die.

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Having published patriotic poetry in newspapers and magazines during the war, \(^{214}\) Zora wanted to write a memorial poem for Jack that would stand with Shelley’s ‘Adonais’ and Tennyson’s ‘In Memoriam’. She kept picking up her draft and putting it down, unable to decide if it was worthwhile. ‘It is not an easy matter to deal with,’ she told the literary critic Bertram Stevens. She wondered if she was ‘ripe enough’ to write about it. \(^{215}\) She hoped the long poem would speak for all sisters who had lost their brothers in the war. It must not be


\(^{214}\) See Michael Sharkey, “‘But who considers woman day by day?’ Australian Women Poets and World War I’, *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1 (May 2007), pp. 63–78.

\(^{215}\) Letter from Zora Cross to Bertram Stevens, c. 1920, Bertram Stevens papers 1906–1920, A2471, State Library of NSW.
seen as a vehicle for her own career, and she was taken aback when her publisher suggested they include her portrait in the limited print run of 140 copies, which Angus & Robertson was to publish in 1921. ‘An Elegy should stand alone,’ she advised George Robertson. ‘It is first and foremost a tribute to the dead; and there would be something shameless about using it as an advertisement for the living.’

_Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy_ addresses Jack directly: ‘I would not curse your England, wise as slow, / Just as unjust in deed.’ She resents her loss, whether or not England honours him as a hero, ‘You shall remain still dead.’

She refuses to accept that war is justified, and the God she referred to in her early letters has nothing to do with it:

I live too much to feel that death must be,  
Though men make death to-day;  
I will not set the blame on Deity  
Of murder tunes they play.

She knows these are ‘harsh thoughts’. And they are her thoughts, and not Jack’s: ‘’Tis I, not you, who grieve.’ If poetry can send a boy to war, can it keep others at home? Will anyone hear her message? In homage to Tennyson, who writes, ‘but what am I? / An infant crying in the night’, Zora includes a statement on the futility of her message:

How should I move that vast eternity,  
Enough loud my cries and wild?  
No more am I regarded than the sea  
Regards a brawling child.

Zora Cross appreciated the ‘quiet touch’ of the _Bulletin_’s review of _Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy_ in December 1921, which she attributed to journalist and playwright Louis Esson. The elegy is the most difficult literary form, Esson believed, because it demands a fine balance between art and emotion. Zora Cross had struck a perfect tone. Her elegy was ‘emotional, but the emotion is never outside the legitimate boundary of art’.

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216 Letter from Zora Cross to George Robertson, August 1921, Angus & Robertson archives, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.

217 Zora Cross, _Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy_ (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1921).

The poet Roderic Quinn found Zora’s *Elegy* ‘a beautiful thing’. Its charm will surprise you, he told readers of the *Worker*, and make you want to read it over and over again.\(^{219}\) The key was not to think about it too much, ‘since poetry is a beautiful mystery, satisfying us as nothing else in the world can satisfy us’. We should not expect it to be ‘tagged and ticketed’. Zora Cross had succeeded in expressing ‘the common mood of many voices of thousands and thousands of sisters’. Quinn praised the poem’s appeal to the heart over the intellect: ‘The sorrow, which cries out from every line of it, at times subdued and sweet, at times fierce and passionate, might have been written not in ink but in tears.’ He hoped in the future there would be ‘no new need for a poem such as this Elegy’. But that would be a miracle.

In *Hermes*, readers were told that the name of J.S. Cross was engraved on the university’s Great War honour roll, ‘which stands at the head of the Fisher Library staircase to fill our hearts with pride and sadness and loving memory’. This was the Australian schoolboy ‘whose sister has now erected in his honour a monument worthy of his sacrifice, a poem of rare beauty, which will always hold a place of distinction in our literature.’\(^{220}\)

Many other reviewers of the *Elegy*, by ‘one of Australia’s foremost poets’, were in awe of this poetic tribute.\(^{221}\) Most could forgive its ‘feminine grudge against England’ – even if they believed the war was justified – because ‘it is perfectly natural in this expression of grief’.\(^{222}\) The poem was so personal it almost made the reader feel ‘a sense of intrusion’.\(^{223}\) One reviewer saw this as a strength, while another believed the poem’s personal nature put it beyond criticism: ‘But for the fact the poem has been sent out for review, we should have supposed that it was intended solely for private circulation.’\(^{224}\)

Four years later, the Launceston *Examiner* marked Anzac Day 1925 with a quote from Zora’s *Elegy* that ends: ‘You never lived to know how sword or pen/ Make but a few men’s

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name’. These lines are typical,’ readers were told, ‘of the bitterness which underlies the whole of a remarkable poetic lament for a brother cut off in schoolboy youth by the Great War’. Zora Cross had succeeded in expressing ‘immediate bereavement’ – and the paper counted her words among the ‘jewels in Australian literature’ – but the days of ‘deep distress’ had gone. According to the article, Australian women had passed from bitterness to pride (a sentiment that doesn’t rule out the possibility of a future war).

Over the century that followed, while it never lodged in the national psyche, An Elegy on and Australian Schoolboy was praised and included in anthologies of war poetry. Literary critics have referred to it as ‘an impressive elegy of the First World War’, ‘Her best verse’, and a poem that shows ‘restraint and dignity that are not seen in Zora Cross’s other verse’. Jacqueline Manuel observes that the Elegy contrasts the imagery of ‘Mother England’ – a place encountered by Australian children only through literature and fantasy – with the Australian landscape of their sensory experience. Through writing, Zora brings her brother back to this ‘homeland’ and rejects the ‘foreign, destructive’ landscape where he lost his life. For Manuel, Zora’s poem demonstrates that writing itself can be an act of empowerment – ‘a riposte or an antidote to the terribly dehumanising impact of war’. Zora’s poem is not only a response to the war and to her brother’s loss, but an argument for the value of a woman’s voice on the subject of war.

While An Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy deserves the attention it has received, Zora Cross’s contribution to the literature of the First World War is broader than literary critics

227 Frederick T. Macartney, A Historical Outline of Australian Literature (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1957), p. 25
228 Cecil Hadgraft, Queensland and its Writers (100 years – 100 authors) (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1959), p. 51.
230 Jacqueline Manuel, “‘We Are the Women Who Mourn Our Dead’: Australian Civilian Women’s Poetic Responses to the First World War’, Journal of the Australian War Memorial, no. 29 (November 1996), para [30].
have acknowledged. Historians and literary critics who argue that women’s voices have been excluded from commentary about the war tend to refer only to Zora’s *Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy* (1921), and not to *Songs of Love and Life* or her 1918 poetry collection *The Lilt of Life*. Jacqueline Manuel argues that civilian women have been particularly neglected in scholarship, publications and exhibitions which include only those who served directly in wartime. Manuel’s focus, however, is on women’s poetry that expresses loss and grief, such as Zora’s *Elegy*. As Manuel writes, ‘unlike any other event in the spectrum of human experience, war concentrates death and bereavement in an unparalleled way’. In Zora’s early poems, war also concentrates desire.

Through a survey of anthologies of Australian First World War poetry, Michael Sharkey concludes that the contributions of women have been under-valued. Like Manuel, he puts this partly down to ‘some commentators’ unquestioning acceptance of the premise that combat determines authentic war experience’. Sharkey suggests that an ‘emphasis on life’s other vagaries’ in the poetry of Australian women who lived and wrote through the war was ‘an alternative if not an antidote to the experience of war’. Thus he acknowledges that the impact of war may underpin women’s poetry even where it does not appear to be the central theme. However, in discussing the work of Zora Cross – one of few women poets to be included in the anthologies surveyed – his focus is on her poetry that is ostensibly about war.

Conversely, Lisa Featherstone lauds Zora Cross for breaking with convention and writing about sex from a woman’s perspective, but does not place Zora’s 1917 and 1918 publications in the context of the war. Featherstone cites Zora’s poetry ‘as one of the few female explorations of eroticism and desire in Australia in this period’. But she does not suggest, as I do, that the war provided both a catalyst and a cover for such unprecedented expression. While it is true that the demands of Zora’s life later ‘subsumed her more sensual work’, it

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231 Jacqueline Manuel, “‘We are the women who mourn our dead’: Australian civilian women’s poetic responses to the First World War”, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, issue 29, November 1996.

232 Jean Devanny, a contemporary of Zora’s, argued that the First World War had thrown moral codes into such a ‘state of flux’ that Victorian attitudes towards sex had to be re-examined. See Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), p. 44.


235 Featherstone, p. 727.
can also be argued that readers and publishers were less receptive to women expressing their sexuality after the war, when the focus was on restoring the status quo.\textsuperscript{236}

The sexual politics of Australian society in the First World War are illustrated in the proceedings of a three-day conference on ‘Teaching of Sex Hygiene’ held at the University of Sydney in November 1916. Large audiences gathered at the Union Hall to hear lectures on a theme they believed was secondary in importance only to the war.\textsuperscript{237} Organised by the Workers’ Educational Association, the conference was an urgent response to the ‘massacre of the innocents’ wreaked by high rates of venereal disease among soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force. As well as the suffering and death brought to individual victims, sexually transmitted diseases threatened a population already diminished by war; there were concerns that the transmission of syphilis to unborn children would leave a shortfall in ‘the numbers of efficient workers’.\textsuperscript{238}

The delegates were moved by ‘a fine spirit of earnestness’ to address ‘the great task that lay before the nation’.\textsuperscript{239} To promote self-restraint in the next generation, they faced the challenge of dismantling ignorance while preserving innocence. One speaker believed it was an opportunity to apply a ‘sane and wholesome’ approach to sex as opposed to the ‘mock-modesty’ of the Victorian era that made no sense when the world was up in flames.\textsuperscript{240}

Intended to assist parents, teachers and social workers with the ‘high purpose’ of teaching children about sex, the proceedings were issued verbatim by the government printer in a small book, bound in dark red cloth with a gothic title font.\textsuperscript{241} A list of delegates at the back includes unionists, church ministers, educators, doctors and prominent citizens such as mining engineer Frederick Danvers Power and feminist Jessie Street.

\textsuperscript{241} Meredith Atkinson, ‘Introduction’, \textit{Teaching of Sex Hygiene}, p. x.
Among the twelve addresses, a paper by Dr W.A.T. Lind of the Victorian Lunacy Department exposes a fault line among the attendees. Lind’s paper ‘Sex Irregularities of Childhood and Youth’ was delivered in his absence. While the sex instinct is second only to self-preservation, Dr Lind argues, its expression differs in ‘the normal youth and the normal girl’. Whereas ‘the youth is always conscious of his sexual desires’, the girl’s libido ‘lies dormant, and remains so unless accidentally excited, or … activated by the normal caresses of a lover or a husband’. 242

He offers the example of a woman whose accidental ‘first sexual sensation’ was caused by ‘a book falling and striking her on the genital region’. Such precocious arousal, he warns, could lead to ‘all kinds of sexual irregularities, ranging from masturbation to illicit intercourse’.

At least two women in the audience took issue with Dr Lind’s thesis. Mrs James Booth, who had given a lecture on prostitution, called his assumption ‘a common error’ and suggested men were unqualified to speak for women on this subject. Girls and boys experience ‘the same pleasure’, she claimed, but girls are conditioned to inhibit its display. Dr Grace Boelcke argued that such ‘false ideas’ as Lind’s had ‘created for women a world of misery’:

The sexual impulse of the girl is a very strong part of her character, and when it is repressed all the fine achievements which should have been possible for the girl are repressed also, and she is crammed down, down, down, with a sense of shame. 243

When I read the scene above I thought of Zora Cross’s Songs of Love and Life as a book that might have fallen into the lap of a ‘normal girl’ and accidently caused her sexual awakening. A year after those passionate discussions about repression and shame, Zora published a book of poetry in which Paradise is reached through sexual abandon. In one sonnet God asks the narrator, ‘Wilt thou have Heaven or him?’ and she answers, ‘Give me him’. But this is not a choice between sex and eternal life, she reasons, because Heaven feeds ‘upon the flame of our desire’. 244 Zora’s sonnets argue for the inevitability of pleasure and justify its pursuit.


243 ‘Questions and Discussion following the reading of Dr. Lind’s paper on “Sex Irregularities in Childhood”’, Teaching of Sex Hygiene, p. 87.

244 Sonnet III.
Zora’s sonnets can be read as part of the tradition of love sonnets that runs from Shakespeare to Rosetti and Swinburne, in which love obliterates ordinary life. And her depiction of female sexuality can be viewed in the light of feminism’s long project – predating the war – to dismantle the sexual double standard. But the persistent coupling of sex and death in the poems, at a time when mourning was as likely an outcome of romantic infatuation as marriage, presents another way of reading them. These poems argue that there is no value in self-control when death is not only inevitable but probable:

... Hot memory would blacken out my sight
And dull my senses till they seemed to die.
How could I live remembering that sigh ...
That breath ... that sob ... that all sublime delight?
Eternal joy is death, I think, and might
Not such sweet madness kill me, coming nigh? ... 245

A few contemporary reviews of Songs and Love and Life placed the book in the context of war. The author didn’t seek to write about the war, they believed, but she couldn’t avoid it: ‘Miss Cross writes of many things. War not unnaturally claims her for some moments.’ 246

The book caught one reviewer’s attention because it was ‘not about war or bloodshed’. It stood out from the numerous volumes of poetry that sprang from the ‘martial muse’. 247

Another suggested that readers might be more ready to accept passionate revelations from ‘a woman who has lived and drunk of the cup of life with pure and eager lips’ because they offer a distraction from ‘the horrors of the day’.

In November 1917 Zora received a letter from Lieutenant George F. Whybrow, seeking a copy of Songs of Love and Life. He had seen the reviews of the first edition, which had sold out in a few days, but was returning to the front before the Angus & Robertson edition would be available. Zora sent Whybrow her ‘only copy of the old edition’ and commended his bravery for going back to the war. 248 Whybrow was overwhelmed at her generosity (‘Wonderful, wonderful singer …’) and enclosed an antique ring holding ‘Sappho’s stone’ along with his reply. ‘You can have little idea of the pleasure you will give me,’ he told her,

245 Zora Cross, Excerpt from Sonnet XVII, Songs of Love and Life (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1917), p. 17.
248 Letter from Zora Cross to George Robertson, 19 November 1917, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
‘in the long days and nights ahead at the front.’ He denied that there was any bravery in his decision to return and wondered if he could thank her personally before he left.

Further evidence that ‘Men took copies of Songs of Love and Life away with them to war’ is found in war historian Peter Stanley’s Digger Smith and Australia’s Great War. Stanley writes that Zora’s poetry ‘spoke to feelings common to wartime Australia’ and had ‘a powerful effect on her readers’. He cites the National Library’s copy of Songs, which ‘includes heartfelt verses from an admiring young man in Creswick, Victoria, beginning “O passionate woman … you stir the heart of me with words of fire”.’ Digger Smith tells the stories of dozens of Australians who experienced the Great War and happened to share the common surname Smith. Zora is there because she briefly married an actor, Stuart Smith, and sometimes used his surname. Without this unhappy marriage, she would not have qualified for the book and the connection between soldiers and her poetry would not so far rate a mention in the history of the war.

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In late 1917 Zora Cross was well-known in Sydney’s literary circles. Songs of Love and Life was in the bookshops, with her portrait on the frontispiece, and her name was in the press. The only person who might have escaped knowledge of her was Henry Lawson, whose lack of interest in contemporary literature was part of the legend. George Robertson told Zora he had seen Lawson ‘pass through his bookshop a hundred times but he never once stopped to pick up a book and look at it’.

When Zora first saw him at the office of the Worker, Lawson looked like a businessman waiting for a meeting. His white shirt was clean and pressed. His hair had just been cut. His dark suit seemed professional rather than sombre. His ‘noble head’ was held straight. And Zora noted that his hands were long and elegant.

As he came closer, the illusion faded. He was ‘more weather-beaten and buffeted by fate’. He sat down, one leg crossed over the other, lost in his thoughts without a book or a newspaper – ‘he could only have been a poet’.

249 Letter from George F. Whybrow to Zora Cross, Angus & Robertson archives, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
250 Peter Stanley, Digger Smith and Australia’s Great War: Ordinary Name – Extraordinary Stories (Millers Point, NSW: Pier 9, 2011).
251 This section is drawn from ‘Some recollections of Chris Brennan and others’, Zora Cross papers, Folder 2, Box 11, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.
Zora was visiting the *Worker* with David McKee Wright to pick up cheques for freelance writing. It was during the second conscription debate when the paper was campaigning for the ‘No’ cause. The editor, Henry Boote (‘a rare soul’), had given Zora her first chance to write prose. She hadn’t known that Lawson wrote for the *Worker*, but assumed he was there for the same reason.

‘Oh, there’s Lawson,’ said David.

‘You must meet him. Come and I’ll introduce you. You’ll have to speak up. He’s deaf.’

David guided Zora forward and shouted to tell Lawson who she was.

Lawson stared at her with his ‘wonderful sincere eyes’. He grasped her hand. The grasp was both strong and gentle. He seemed to take little notice of the ‘rush of words’ coming from her mouth.

Still holding her hand, Lawson drew Zora back to sit next to him on the seat. (She remembered sitting to his right.) He closed his hand over hers and she stopped talking because he seemed to be about to speak. But no words came, and she wondered if she had overwhelmed him.

Yet he seemed to somehow convey the feeling to me that I had been accepted among the poets of my country and he was accepting me even while he was struggling to speak.

Fourteen years later, on Sunday 6 September 1931, Zora Cross spoke before a crowd of several hundred people at the first annual pilgrimage to the new Henry Lawson statue in Sydney’s Domain. The previous eight memorial expeditions since Lawson’s death had been to his grave at Waverley cemetery, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported ‘considerable additional interest’ in this visit to the statue.

Standing in front of the high sandstone plinth, which was covered in flowers, she honoured the strength, gentleness and genius of ‘undoubtedly the truest Australian poet’. She reminded the crowd of their good fortune that Lawson ‘was born here to us instead of in some far distant country as he might have been’. Even though he was best known for earlier work, she thought of him as a poet of the war.

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‘During the Great War all nations sought in vain for a poet,’ she told the gathering. ‘Henry Lawson’s contribution now, on looking back, we find to have been amongst the very finest. He felt for the men, for the mothers who were losing them, and for the children. And he had the event in true focus more than can be said for many war-poets.’

What does Zora Cross have to do with the war?

I have in mind a concluding scene where I stand in the State Library’s galleries gazing at a wall full of soldiers’ diaries, mounted as a mural for an exhibition titled ‘Life Interrupted’. Or I could walk across Hyde Park to the Anzac War Memorial, where the centrepiece is a bronze statue of a dead, naked soldier. Draped over a shield, he crushes beneath him the mother, the wife and baby, and the sister.

Then I look again at the letters Zora Cross wrote to George Robertson and I find a few lines I like more than anything I could come up with myself.

‘Really you never know a nation until you find out what its pens have been doing,’ she writes in 1921. ‘The swords don’t matter a spoonful of blood. Ink outlasts all the gore that was unnecessarily spilt.’

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253 Zora Cross, ‘An address given by me at the first pilgrimage to the statue of Henry Lawson in the Domain’, Zora Cross papers, Folder 2, Box 11, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.

254 Letter from Zora Cross to George Robertson, 14 November 1921, Angus & Robertson archives, MLMSS 314/20, State Library of NSW.
Chapter 4

Even if the doing fall to dust

Longing

I long to be grey-haired and old to-day,
Alone with no one by,
To hear no sound of children at their play
Nor Life’s persistent cry
That speeds me on a quick, adventurous way,
When I would gladly stay.

For were I old, as old as I could be,
No one would want me then.
I should be free to dream perpetually,
With none near but my pen.
To think like this so wise and wearily
How young I still must be!

— Zora Cross, under pseudonym B. May, *Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 5 May 1925, p. 13

When I tell a colleague I’ve been looking at the Mary Gilmore papers he rolls his eyes. ‘She's a pain, that woman,’ he says. (I’m almost certain he used the present tense.) We were standing in an original Mitchell Library office, with stained glass doors, heavy wooden furniture and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

About thirty years after her death, my colleague oversaw some cataloguing of Gilmore’s correspondence and read the letters she wrote to the chief librarian and others about the collection she might leave to the Mitchell Library.

‘She was always contacting the Library to say she was going to leave us her reading glasses or something like that,’ he says. She was ‘self-aggrandising’, and overstated her influence on Henry Lawson, whose death mask the Library purchased in 1993.
I talk to another colleague who is more charmed by Gilmore. He calls her ‘Teflon-coated’, admiring her for writing a regular column for the Communist Tribune in the conservative 1950s. ‘And she was a Dame of the British Empire!’

I suggest that Gilmore’s state funeral in 1962 was the first given to an Australian writer since Henry Lawson’s forty years earlier. ‘They’re the only two Australian writers ever given a state funeral,’ he confirms. ‘Patrick White didn’t get one.’

Gilmore wrote to the Library often, making demands about how her collection should be organised. If the Mitchell didn’t comply, she would give her valuable material to the National Library. She believed she was the first woman in the British Empire to be given a title for service to literature, ‘which should give me a shelf or a niche in history’.255 She was appealing to Mitchell Librarian Ida Leeson, a woman who knew something about fighting for her position.256

Gilmore began writing to the Library in 1940, at the age of seventy-five and in poor health, when she felt she could suffer a ‘sudden snap’ at any moment. She knew that posthumous survival wasn’t certain and she wanted to be ‘catalogued with the worthwhile’.257 To her tired eyes, looking out from her Kings Cross flat onto Darlinghurst Road, people seemed to have four feet rather than two.258 But she persisted in sorting and annotating her letters. Ten years later – in a feature on ‘Australia’s most famous woman writer’ – she told People magazine that she got up at five o’clock every morning, ate breakfast, read the newspapers and was at her desk by six. She would then work through the day, often forgetting lunch, in a ‘frantic effort’ to complete her memoirs and prepare her collection for the Mitchell Library.259

Gilmore donated the majority of her collection in the mid-to-late 1950s. Her niece, Barbara Powell, who worked at the Library, would be summoned to pick up material from her flat. Powell remembered her aunt’s ‘urgent desire’ that all her books and papers should go to the Mitchell Library before she died. The urgency meant there was often no time to discriminate between important material and ‘trivia’. When the last medium-sized tin trunk of manuscripts

255 Letter from Mary Gilmore to Ida Leeson, 23 October 1940, Mitchell Library corporate files, ML1940/761–ML/51556, State Library of NSW.
257 Ibid.
258 Mary Gilmore to Ida Leeson, 13 February 1941, Mitchell Library corporate records, ML1942/73–ML/51557, State Library of NSW.
had been sent to the Library in October 1962, ‘the flat no longer looked like Dame Mary’s’. 260

‘Has everything gone to the Mitchell?’ Gilmore asked her niece, who assured her that it had.

‘She lay back on the sofa,’ Powell recalled twenty-five years later, ‘put her hand on her chest in a characteristic gesture and closed her eyes. “Thank God! Now I can die in peace”. That was the last time I saw her.’

Among the objects in the Library’s collection that once belonged to Mary Gilmore are her honorary membership badge for the Australian Journalist’s Association, snake skin and puma claws she collected in Paraguay, an engraved gourd, a lock of her hair, her crochet hook, two pairs of her spectacles with spare lenses, her handkerchief, her 1961 May Queen sash, her mother’s reading glasses, her husband’s wallet and fob watch, and a five leaf clover that belonged to her son, Billy, who predeceased her. The Library also has the diaries she kept, and the letters she received from correspondents who included the Duke of Windsor and many Australian writers, artists, politicians and activists. There is also her collection of books, several bearing inscriptions from their authors and pencil notes by Dame Mary.

One of these is a copy of Songs of Love and Life bearing a note from Zora Cross: ‘To Dear Mary Gilmore with all my heart’s love – for no other way can I express my appreciation of the noblest of women. If for no other reason than to be worthy of the praise you have bestowed upon me as a woman …’ 261 Gilmore had called Zora ‘not only a new star … but almost a new creation’ in a review of the book’s first edition. 262

Mary Gilmore’s papers are listed at the Mitchell Library in a burgundy leather-bound booklet of typewritten notes with gold lettering on the cover. While the collection runs to forty-one volumes, it holds only a small portion of the letters Gilmore received as women’s page editor of the Worker and an influential member of dozens of literary, feminist and ‘miscellaneous’ organisations. For a letter to be listed under the writer’s name, rather than grouped with ‘other letters’, correspondents had to be people who were ‘closely connected with Dame Mary, whose names are well-known, and whose correspondence has continued over a more

or less lengthy period’. Zora Cross met all three criteria.

As a female poet and journalist, Mary Gilmore was unusual in securing such a prominent place in the archives, in literary history and on thousands of $10 notes. This is largely due to her political and literary activism, her profile as an Australian nationalist (her poem quoted on the $10 note claims Australia for descendants of the British, Irish, Scottish and Welsh), and her efforts to polish her reputation and get her papers in order before she died. Zora Cross, and many of the women writers she interviewed in the late 1920s and early 30s for the Australian Woman’s Mirror, did not have Gilmore’s ‘preoccupation with posterity’. (Anna Heyward makes the point that Gilmore’s obsession with archival preservation ‘wasn’t about her own work so much as that of others and the larger landscape and history of Australian writing’.) But Zora, like Gilmore, was an ‘activist for Australian letters’, and this chapter demonstrates how her work to promote women writers, notably in her articles in the Australian Woman’s Mirror, amounts to a valuable literary history. Her profiles record the contributions of authors whose brief fame would otherwise have left little trace.

Feminist literary historians over the past four decades have highlighted, and sought to correct, the underrepresentation of women writers in the Australian literary canon. As Dale Spender wrote in 1988, ‘it was (and is), mainly men who have controlled the entry of contributions to the cultural heritage. And they have ordinarily elected to praise, preserve and transmit to the next generation, the achievements of men’. The downplaying of women’s contribution to literary history, however, has not been simply the result of policing by male gatekeepers. As Julieanne Lamond writes, ‘women, too, have internalised … assumptions about literary value’.

As this chapter shows, many women writers of the early twentieth century considered their work to be ephemeral. But while they may have seen themselves as destined for obscurity, they did not necessarily feel oppressed or deprived of opportunity. Whereas Drusilla

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263 Dame Mary Gilmore papers, 1911–1954, A 3293/8, State Library of NSW.
264 Anna Heyward, “‘It was one of the vivid moments of existence’: The Letters of Mary Gilmore’, Meanjin 72, no. 2 (December 2013), pp. 58–66, at p. 60.
Modjeska writes that ‘To be a woman and a writer in Australia during the 1920s was an isolated and often desolate existence’, 267 Zora’s interviews in the Mirror show the pleasures of correspondence, the frequency of formal and casual meetings between women writers, and the sometimes joyful possibility of combining literary ambition with domestic and money-making tasks. While they missed out on lasting fame, they succeeded in having their work published, and entertaining thousands of readers.

Mary Gilmore had not seen Zora Cross for about seven years when she read, in February 1928, that Zora’s partner David McKee Wright had died. 268 She remembered a nervous young woman who had joined a gathering of presswomen in 1916. The group was organising a fundraising concert for the Red Cross to furnish a cottage built by the pressmen for returned soldiers. Among the women were the Bulletin’s Mab Fotheringham, who Zora would recall as a ‘grand old woman journalist’, and younger writers Nina Murdoch and Ella McFayden. Standing in the doorway, Zora said quietly, ‘I don’t know anyone here’. Gilmore jumped to her feet and held out her hand. 269 ‘Oh, yes you do. You know me. I am Mary Gilmore.’

Having shed her shyness, Zora went on to write, with Murdoch, a ‘Pageant of the Muses’. 270 When it was performed along with other acts at Sydney’s Repertory Theatre on a warm evening in March the following year, Zora recited the chorus. The Sydney Morning Herald declared the pageant a highlight of the evening, which was altogether ‘an unqualified artistic and financial success’. 271

Gilmore had published Zora’s poetry in the Worker, and reviewed Songs of Love and Life in November 1917 under the title ‘A Girl Writer’. 272 She believed Zora’s work – with its ‘youth, force, heat, thought, feeling’ and technical skill – was a first for a woman writer. It was not faultless (for example, she might have used the word ‘young’ or ‘fresh’ in place of ‘moist’).

270 ‘Presswomen’s Concert’, Sunday Times (Sydney), 18 March 1917, p. 27.
and Gilmore cautioned others who thought they could copy this incarnation of Sappho just by tearing off their clothes and putting it into poetry. But Gilmore recognised her own youth, and all youth, in Zora’s passion.

Readers had a chance to compare the two writers in 1919, when Angus & Robertson dispatched Gilmore’s *The Passionate Heart* and Zora’s *The Lilt of Life* to bookshops in the same week. Zora was worried they might be mixed up, but George Robertson reassured her that the timing would work. ‘I was tremendously proud in one way to appear with you,’ she wrote to Gilmore after receiving the older writer’s letter of congratulations, ‘for, after all, I am almost a beginner as yet, and you, for so very many years, have been one of the people that as an unknown and stirring singer, I worshipped.’ Gilmore’s work was so distinctive – ‘strong and wild and passionate’ – it could not be confused with her own. And she reminded Gilmore that poetry defied criticism: ‘There is no “best” in poetry. It is just poetry.’

While some reviewers set the two poets against each another, others placed them side by side. The *Worker* praised Zora’s book while preferring Gilmore’s, adding that ‘Zora Cross and Mary Gilmore are two exceptional women’. Gilmore was pleased with Zora’s review of her book in the *Lone Hand*, and ‘doubly pleased to see that it was a woman’s name at the bottom of the notice’. She was disappointed when women published their reviews anonymously or hid behind a pseudonym. And men wrote more about themselves and their current preoccupations than the book they were supposed to be reviewing. But Zora stuck to her subject, ‘to the credit of woman even as a working machine!’

Before giving a lecture on women writers at Sydney Teachers College in October 1921, Zora sent Gilmore a list of questions about her life and work. The reply came too late for the lecture, but sits in Box 7 of Zora’s papers in the University of Sydney’s special collections library. Gilmore described her life as ‘so full of incident and other people’s business’ that she didn’t know where to start. She had been offered a King’s Birthday honour ‘equal to anything given to any man’ but she had refused. (She would accept a later offer when she felt she had earned it.) And she gave a simple explanation for the 2500 km distance that separated her family: ‘My husband and son have land in the gulf country where I can’t live owing to heart

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272 Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, January 1919, Dame Mary Gilmore papers, Mitchell Library, A3262.
275 ‘What the Poets Think of the Poets’, *Lone Hand*, 1 March 1919.
276 Mary Gilmore to Zora Cross, 17 March 1919, Zora Cross papers, Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.
trouble and malaria.'\(^{277}\) With these words, Gilmore fielded speculation that the arrangement gave her all the respectability of marriage with none of the bother.

Zora had the rapt attention of the teaching students throughout her lecture on Australia’s women writers. A female student questioned her afterwards, and at first Zora thought she was interested in Queensland-born writer Mabel Forrest, asking if she ‘has been disappointed in love and if she has had a hard life’. Zora spoke at some length about Forrest until she realised the student had meant Mary Gilmore, whose private life was a mystery to her. ‘Aren’t these young things fond of the love-interest?’ she wrote to Gilmore. ‘She said she felt sure that you had been disappointed in love on account of some of the verses in “The Passionate Heart”.’\(^{278}\)

Whatever secret sorrows Gilmore held on to, she couldn’t empathise with Zora’s complex personal life. She kept her distance when she became aware of the younger poet’s de facto relationship with David McKee Wright. It wasn’t so much that David had left his partner Beatrice Osborn and their four sons to be with Zora. What troubled her was that the two families – Beatrice having begun a relationship with writer Hilary Lofting (brother of *Doctor Doolittle* creator Hugh) – remained in close contact: ‘the mixed way the families lived was repellent to me’, she explained to their mutual friend John Le Gay Brereton.\(^{279}\)

But she would put that aside when she read of David’s death. Gilmore drafted a letter to Zora then tore it up for fear of intruding on her grief. Then she began again: ‘You will be a very sad woman ...’\(^{280}\) She sent £1 and promised another £4. Zora used it to pay the nurse looking after April, who was suffering from gastritis and missing her father.\(^{281}\)

Gilmore wrote to Brereton, recording her thoughts about where else Zora might find help. Fearing that the ‘Women’s Club would drop dead at the thought of an unmarried mother, at all events one not of the servant-class’, she contacted the Australian Journalists Association on Zora’s behalf.\(^{282}\) Gilmore knew that the *Worker* had sent funeral expenses, which Zora

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\(^{277}\) Mary Gilmore to Zora Cross, 17 October 1921, Zora Cross papers, Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.

\(^{278}\) Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, [received 24 October 1921], Dame Mary Gilmore papers, Mitchell Library, A3262.

\(^{279}\) Mary Gilmore to John Le Gay Brereton, 24 February 1928, Australian Defence Force Academy Library, ADFA MS 62.

\(^{280}\) Mary Gilmore to Zora Cross, 10 February 1928, Zora Cross papers, Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.

\(^{281}\) Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, 13 February 1928, Dame Mary Gilmore papers, A3262, State Library of NSW.

\(^{282}\) Mary Gilmore to John Le Gay Brereton, 28 February 1928, ADFA MS 62, Australian Defence Force Academy Library.
would earn out by writing.\textsuperscript{283} She was more sympathetic than Mary Fullerton, another writer who grew up during the Victorian era in an Australian country town. Fullerton wrote to Miles Franklin in May 1930 of her belief that Zora’s prose suffered because ‘She has been over-virile in life and in her art and is tired.’ After accusing Zora of fleshy, falsely masculine writing, she pitied her for being left with no legal standing after David’s death: ‘A wedding ring is breakable, but it is something.’\textsuperscript{284}

Zora’s letters to Gilmore in the Mitchell Library amount to a small fraction of the words she sent to Robertson and Brereton, but they offer a few unique glimpses of her life. They show the two writers’ efforts to put their rivalry aside and express admiration for each other’s work. ‘It is really so Australian,’ Zora writes of Gilmore’s \textit{The Tilted Cart}, which the author had sent her. ‘I could sniff the blue-gums and the roads all the time and you certainly have a sense of real Australian humour which is dry and not uproarious.’\textsuperscript{285} In September 1928, she tells Gilmore she has had ‘a bit of a break-down’, but the rest of the short letter offers reassurance about Gilmore’s work and her future as a writer. ‘There are lots and lots of years for you to write in yet,’ Zora tells her.\textsuperscript{286} ‘You must collect the stuff you are writing now. Believe me, it is extra good.’ In 1930 Zora intends to review Gilmore’s new book which she believes is ‘your best without exceptions’.\textsuperscript{287}

In 1934 Gilmore passed on a compliment from a friend of hers who was an expert in the Roman period. The friend had read a serialised Roman novel in the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} and found it faultless in its detail of the period. ‘That story was by Zora Cross,’ Gilmore told her friend. ‘I thought it astonishing work.’\textsuperscript{288} She repeated the compliment to Zora.

Six months later a desperate Zora asked a favour of Gilmore in relation to her son Ted. Earlier that year Gilmore had heard through Zora’s mother, Mary Cross, of Zora’s poverty and had sent more money. Zora was annoyed at her mother – ‘My mother does many things I do not like, Mrs Gilmore, but only, I am sure, out of thoughtlessness’ – but she told Gilmore

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\textsuperscript{283} See Harry F. Chaplin, Album of papers concerning Zora Cross, 1894, 1918–52, MLMSS 7138, State Library of NSW.
\textsuperscript{284} Mary Fullerton to Miles Franklin, 6 May 1930, quoted (in part) in Kate Chadwick, “Sweet Relief”: The Politics of Erotic Experience in the Poetry of Lesbia Harford, Mary Fullerton and Zora Cross’, Association for the Study of Australian Literature proceedings, 1994.
\textsuperscript{285} Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, 20 January 1926, Dame Mary Gilmore papers, A3262, State Library of NSW.
\textsuperscript{286} Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, 23 September 1928, Dame Mary Gilmore papers, A3262, State Library of NSW.
\textsuperscript{287} Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, 5 October 1930, Dame Mary Gilmore papers, A3262, State Library of NSW.
\textsuperscript{288} Mary Gilmore to Zora Cross, 28 February 1934, Zora Cross papers, Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.
that Davidina had bought shoes and ‘April, being practical, noted that you sent the gift for sweets and already spent 2/- on sweets’. 289 Ted had been away for four years working on a farm in the country and had returned at the age of twenty. He was living in Mosman with his grandmother.

Zora wanted Gilmore to persuade her mother to help Ted. ‘I feel sure a word from you and Ted would be all right’. 290 Zora mentioned Ted’s promise as a writer and enclosed a poem he had written in praise of David McKee Wright. A month later she wrote to thank Gilmore for helping Ted, who was back at Glenbrook and writing constantly after her encouragement: ‘I am sure whatever you said to him gave him great courage and the right inspiration’. 291 Gilmore added a pencil note to one of these letters in 1942 before depositing them in the Mitchell Library: ‘I did not share Zora’s opinion of Ted as a writer’.

One of the best things that happened to Mary Gilmore in 1935 – according to her biographer WH Wilde – was being included in a series of articles by Zora Cross for the Melbourne Herald on ‘Women Who Have Helped to Build Australia’. 292 Zora put Gilmore in the company of four other capable (even ‘superhuman’) 293 women, and the series was syndicated by other newspapers such as the Hobart Mercury. A striking black and white drawing of a muscular woman working a plough appears alongside the first two articles. First in the series is Elizabeth Macarthur, wife of farming pioneer John Macarthur, who ran the family’s wool enterprise alone for eight years in the early 1800s while her husband was in exile in London. 294 She is followed by Caroline Chisholm, who found shelter and work for emigrant women in the mid 1800s. 295 Then comes Pattie Deakin, wife of Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, 296 Mary Gilmore, 297 and finally Edith Annesley Badham, educator of girls. 298

289 Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, 27 June 1934, Dame Mary Gilmore papers, A3262, State Library of NSW.
290 Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, 23 August 1934, Dame Mary Gilmore papers, A3262, State Library of NSW.
291 Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, 25 September 1934, Dame Mary Gilmore papers, A3262, State Library of NSW.
294 Zorah Cross, ‘Elizabeth Macarthur’, see above.
Zora praises these women for their stoicism and support for others. They are physically distinctive: Deakin unusually tall, Chisholm stately if stout, and Badham small and neat. They are noble, courageous, hard-working, knowledgeable and generous. Those belonging to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stand out in a world in which marriage – a life of ‘indolence and inactivity’ – is the ‘sole recognised female career’. These women marry, but Macarthur, Chisholm and Gilmore spend significant time away from their husbands. They embody action rather than feeling, with Macarthur suppressing emotion until the return of her husband and Deakin continuing her labours after the death of hers. They are part of the ‘choir invisible’ of women passed over by history: ‘the ultimate place for exemplary women’.299

Mary Gilmore is the only living subject among the five women. Zora exalts her as ‘one of the most outstanding literary personalities’ and praises her support for younger writers and her courage in tackling important issues for women during her long years at the Worker. She writes of Gilmore’s education-minded parents, her precocious childhood and her early teaching career. Gilmore had joined the socialist William Lane’s New Australian Movement in Paraguay, where Lane had intended to found a utopian society ‘wherein men and women were equal’. While the colony had been dissolved, this was not a failure on Mary Gilmore’s part: ‘to fail at anything was not in her nature’. For Gilmore, the attempt had been worthwhile, and the experience valuable. To be doing something even if the doing fall to dust behind one was the dominant note of her life …

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Before Zora profiled Gilmore and other heroic women, she interviewed dozens of women writers whose lives and ambitions were more like her own. These interviews in the Australian Woman’s Mirror (known as the Mirror) form a remarkable alternative Australian literary history of the late 1920s and early 30s.

I get a sense of Zora Cross as a ‘working machine’ by flipping through the Mitchell Library’s bound volumes of the Mirror. The publication began in November 1924 as an offshoot of the popular Bulletin, which had not properly served the needs of women. According to the Mirror’s first editorial, it had been knocking back a ‘large amount of purely feminine

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299 Zorah Cross, ‘Pattie Deakin’, see above.
writing’, which would now have a home. The Mirror would feature serials, stories, advice and entertainment, but it would also supply women in the city and the bush with conversation material: about theatre, film, music, sport, ‘and a little about books and the people who write them’.

The weekly magazine lived up to its promise and was rewarded with impressive circulation figures, rising to 165,000 at its peak in 1930 (the equivalent of over 600,000 in 2015). With many readers sharing their copy among family and friends, a significant portion of Australia’s population was reading the Mirror, and it was considered a ‘howling success’. Its rapid rise in sales had ‘never before [been] achieved in the same time in Australia by any other magazine’ and, until the advent of the Australian Women’s Weekly in 1933, it was ‘the most popular paper with Australian women’. It was still profitable when Australian Consolidated Press purchased the Bulletin and Mirror in 1960, yet the following year its new owner replaced the Mirror with Everybody’s magazine in order to reduce competition with its Weekly. Despite its popularity, longevity, and the calibre of its writers, the Australian Woman’s Mirror does not take up much space in the history of Australian media.

The 64-page Mirror of the 1920s and 30s is full of flapper fashions, articles on ‘Women in the World’, short stories with titles like ‘The Indispensable Husband’ and ‘Aren’t Women Cats’, cures for constipation and carbuncles, ads for still-famous brands like Palmolive and Rexona and defunct ones like Koko hair preparation, Hypol liver tonic and Symington’s coffee essence. It has dress patterns, recipes and household hints such as using powdered ginger to deter cockroaches. It would pride itself on providing common ground for all kinds

\footnote{According to ‘A Women’s Magazine’, Observer, 12 November 1960, pp. 17–18, there was an economic reason for starting a sister magazine to the Bulletin in 1924: ‘The company had just installed a new rotary press with a capacity to print The Bulletin itself in one and a half days … [the managing director] Mr. Prior had the idea of turning it to good use by bringing out a small women’s paper the printing of which would occupy the press and reduce overheads.’}

\footnote{‘A Talk About Ourselves’, Australian Woman’s Mirror, 1925.}

\footnote{Bert F. Hoy, Editor of the Australian Woman’s Mirror, ‘The Woman Freelance and the Editor’, in Gerald Dillon, Why Editors Regret (First Aid for the Freelance) (Sydney: G. Dillon, 1929).}

\footnote{‘A Women’s Magazine’, Observer, 12 November 1960, pp. 17–18.}

\footnote{Donald Horne, ‘On How I Came to Write the Lucky Country’, p. 75. According to Horne, Frank Packer bought the Bulletin and Mirror in 1960 because he believed Rupert Murdoch was going to make an offer for the Mirror and mount competition to the Australian Women’s Weekly. ‘Packer asked me to bury the Australian Woman’s Mirror,’ writes Horne, ‘by putting the Weekend and Mirror together into a new publication and to do it in three weeks.’}

\footnote{For example, the Australian Woman’s Mirror does not have its own entry in Bridget Griffen-Foley (ed.), A Companion to the Australian Media (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014), although among other mentions the magazine is credited for starting ‘The Phantom’ comic in 1936; I couldn’t find an article that had the Mirror as its subject.}
of women, its contributors ranging from aristocrats to ‘women who earn their living by washing’.

When the New Woman appears on the pages of the Mirror – smoking a pipe, shooting a rifle, wearing a cat mask, wearing trousers, flying an aeroplane – she is there to entertain, and perhaps inspire, shop girls and housewives. Along with striking line drawings and glamorous photographs, poetry is everywhere, filling the gaps between articles. Almost every issue from 1924 to 1929 has a poem by Zora Cross or one of her pseudonyms: Bernice May, Rose Carmen, Daisy M.306 Other women writers who also wrote paycheque poetry for the Mirror include Dorothea Mackellar, Mary Gilmore, Nettie Palmer and Katharine Susannah Prichard. Zora’s poems range from banal to exemplary. Two that resonate for me are at the beginning and end of this chapter – the first because it encapsulates her dedication to writing amid life’s distractions, and the second because it can be read as giving licence to her biographer. Her short stories appear on the feature pages, and increasingly her journalism can be found there too.

One of her first articles, appearing in January 1925, is titled ‘Some Distinguished Women’.307 She writes of picking up an American encyclopedia published in 1883 for half a crown in a second-hand bookshop. She notices that women have been allotted two and a half pages while men get fifty-four – ‘a striking difference!’ Many notable women are missing from a list that includes ‘the notorious dancer Lola Montez, who came to Australia and caused a sensation less by her dancing than by her daring personality; and Sappho, the Lesbian love-poetess who flourished in 600 B.C.’ There is mention of ‘Nuns, poetesses, martyrs, vocalists, actresses, reformers, one or two lawyers …’ But little is written about any of them: Every woman happening to glance at the list of names will feel a regret that about so many of them we know nothing at all ...

In 1927, Zora Cross started interviewing her fellow women poets, novelists and short story writers. One or two of these feature articles, published under the pseudonym Bernice May (her middle names), appeared every month. The title of each article was simply the writer’s name – or the name she wrote under for the Mirror, which was often not her real name. Over five years, Zora interviewed thirty-eight ‘writing women’. Her interviews are sometimes the only information about these writers still available, and have been quoted in biographies and

306 Zora Cross’s pseudonyms are listed in her papers in the Rare Books and Special Collection Library, University of Sydney, see Boxes 4 and 6.
literary histories. They show the experience, as well as the achievements, of female authors in Australia at this time.

Having read the poetry of Llywelyn Lucas, Zora imagines a ‘quiet English girl’, but meeting her she realises ‘that only an Australian could be so full of verve, light and beauty’.\footnote{Bernice May, ‘Llywelyn Lucas’, Australian Woman’s Mirror, 4 October 1927, p. 11.} Lucas’s approach to life – centred on a love of nature – was influenced by the early death of her father and by the war, which Zora refers to as ‘that great crime’. Lucas had intended to study medicine, but the war changed her mind and she went to horticultural college, which would lead to war-work as chief gardener on a large property in Melbourne. (Zora tells Lucas she has always wanted to grow red violets, and the writer sends her the closest thing she can find: cherry-coloured aster seeds.) After the war, Lucas travelled to England with other ‘impecunious’ writers and sent back verse about the birds of Surrey, which was published in the \textit{Bulletin}. She gave up gardening and moved to Brisbane to work as an assistant in her brother’s veterinary practice. ‘Being an assistant to a vet and writing verse don’t seem to go together,’ she told Zora, ‘but I make them fit somehow.’ Lucas has a strong literary ambition alongside a belief that women’s primary work is to care for young children; this makes her, in Zora’s view, ‘a true Mirrorite’. The way Llywelyn Lucas describes herself is a compelling performance of the woman writer in the late 1920s: \textit{I’m not a bit conventional, but neither am I even a little bit Bohemian. I hate beer and onions and adore soap and water; I hate sham sophistry and the lipstick and the shingle [a fashionable hairstyle] – but I like cigarettes and Charlie Chaplin and Bernard Shaw. I believe in Light, like Victor Hugo, especially for women, and naturally I think the future of mankind is in women’s hands.}

Vividly reflecting their time, there is also something modern and compulsively readable about these articles. Zora puts herself into almost all of them; not overshadowing her subject, but leading the reader into their lives. We meet writers who live into adulthood with their parents, and those who marry and fit their writing between childbirth and laundry. Some have breaks from writing and come back to it when their children are grown up. Others are journalists, several of them editing the women’s pages in newspapers across the country. One has worked on the State Hansard staff; another on a farm; another in business, where she ‘wrote her first novel in the office, keeping one eye on the clock and the other on the boss’.\footnote{Bernice May, ‘Georgia Rivers’, Australian Woman’s Mirror, 2 October 1928, p. 8.} A few have extravagant leisure time, like a Victorian writer who spends the summer months
at the beach – swimming, smoking and ‘baking brown’.\footnote{Bernice May, ‘Myra Morris’, \textit{Australian Woman's Mirror}, 19 July 1927, p. 8.} Most published their first work in the \textit{Bulletin} after several failed attempts, and many aspire to write the Great Australian Novel.

From the diversity of women profiled and the fine detail of their various struggles, the reader is given the sense that they too could be a writer. Many interview subjects describe how they cope with ‘every woman’s bane’ – a lack of time.

‘How do I work?’ asks poet Kathleen Dalziel. ‘I scribble at odd times, put it aside and, if what I have written is not lost altogether, I take it out some favourable day, then I work really hard at it, write and re-write, put aside, re-read and alter once more – and very often finish up by destroying it. If it does not seem too bad I send it away; but I am always disappointed when I see my work in print – it always seems so different from what I intended it to be.’\footnote{Bernice May, ‘Kathleen Dalziel’, \textit{Australian Woman’s Mirror}, 1 May 1928, p. 10.} Kathleen Dalziel has given all women poets a little lesson in their craft in those few words ...

These articles reveal not only the experience of writers, but also of readers at the time.

Bernice May presents herself as another \textit{Mirror} reader who has her own favourite writers and shares the pleasure of holding the Christmas issue in her hands. ‘I remember the shock I got on opening my \textit{Mirror} one morning some time ago to be confronted by her portrait,’ Zora writes. ‘I had always imagined that E. Sandery was a man, and not a woman.’\footnote{Bernice May, ‘Elizabeth Powell’, \textit{Australian Woman’s Mirror}, 30 October 1928, p. 11.}

A recurring theme is the difference between how a writer is imagined and how they appear. Zora forms an impression of Dulcie Deamer, based on her stories set in the Stone Age, as ‘a sort of jungle-woman, solemn of face and stolid of form, with wild, red hair and eyes of a strange sky-blue, a forest-calm about her’.\footnote{Bernice May, ‘Some Impressions of Writing Women’, \textit{Australian Woman’s Mirror}, 11 May 1926, p. 11.} But the actual Deamer is small, dark-eyed, restless and beautiful.\footnote{Bernice May, ‘Dulcie Deamer’, \textit{Australian Woman’s Mirror}, 14 July 1928, p. 10.} She expects Mary Gilmore to be ‘a very brown, very quiet and retiring woman’ but finds her to be ‘one with warm, friendly hands, the strongest face of all our women writers, and all kindness’.\footnote{Gilmore is profiled by Nettie Palmer in the \textit{Mirror} before Zora’s series begins, but she is mentioned in an earlier Bernice May piece, ‘Impressions of Some Writing Women’, \textit{Australian Woman’s Mirror}, 11 May 1926, p. 11.} And Ethel Turner is not the stooped, wrinkled, slipper-wearing authoress that Zora imagined when she wrote as a nine year old to Turner’s Children’s Corner persona Dame Durden.\footnote{As abve.} When a teenaged Zora, having moved from Brisbane to Sydney, turns up in Turner’s leafy street wearing a ‘flowery hat and blue muslin...
dress’ she is ‘dumbstruck’ to find her idol looks no older than she is and has ‘humorous blue-grey eyes’.

Zora remembers Ethel Turner advising that women should write about topics close to home, about the world they knew (which for Zora at the time meant cows). When Turner reads this in the *Mirror* she questions her earlier instruction, ‘Was I really as short-sighted as that – to give advice to stick to women subjects and the things close at hand, when all the world was calling to be written about?’ But Zora points out that Turner’s own fame was built on writing from her own experience.

Ethel Turner is mentioned as an influence by many of the writers interviewed. C. McEwen loves her ‘fresh, simple tales’ and also praises the late New Zealand-born writer Katherine Mansfield, ‘whose untimely death’, Zora tells readers in a later article, ‘the literary world is now grieving without, perhaps, realising what a marvellous contribution to feminine psychology she has left in her *Journal*’. Mansfield receives several mentions across the articles as does the English novelist and critic Rebecca West. Zora knows something of West’s biography, reporting that the feminist writer could recite the work of Dickens and Shakespeare at an early age. She calls West’s 1922 novel, *The Judge*, ‘surely the most garrulous book ever written’ and suggests that every woman should read it. (I followed Bernice May’s advice and found *The Judge* a fascinating story about women’s lives and the plight of unmarried mothers, but ‘garrulous’ is a good word for it.) Zora has an imaginary shelf on her bookcase in which every book is by a woman, and ‘Mary Gilmore’s *The Passionate Heart*, so full of thought and feeling, is pretty nearly in the right place when it is first on the shelf.’

The *Mirror* articles suggest that women – albeit white women with some education – can transcend social constraints to some extent if they do it with subtlety and humour. Zora is keen to meet Jean Devanny, who has the notoriety of being the author of a banned book, *The Butcher Shop*. They arrange to meet at the cinema when Zora is in the company of her mother and a group of female friends who are also writers. Devanny tells her to look out for a woman with a big nose, but appears ‘in black crepe-de-chine’ looking not unlike Zora herself. The two writers recognise each other immediately. At Zora’s suggestion they all walk ‘down

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into one of those lovely coffee dives in Sydney where men smoke and drink coffee and women usually are not’. Zora’s mother is ‘scandalised’ but appreciates the cheap prices. Zora writes about the characterisation of mothers in Devanny’s fiction, and about the group’s conversation during the interview. Her friends dissect the major novels of the day while Devanny offers advice about London publishers. All but one of them are mothers. Having had children young, Devanny lost a daughter in infancy and ‘began to write, as so many women do, through sorrow’. Zora is impressed that Devanny has achieved so much after starting to write at the age of twenty-eight: It’s a story that should be an inspiration to every woman who wants to write, for Jean Devanny did her woman’s work, married and mothered and reared her family before she took up her pen.

An author who combines motherhood with writing is Elizabeth Powell, better known by her pen-name of E. Sandery. Powell reads her fairy stories to her young son, and writes late at night when he is asleep. She had been an adventurous traveller. ‘A restlessness suddenly came over me,’ she tells Zora, ‘when I was writing the children’s column of the Register in Adelaide.’ She prepared seven months’ work for the paper – including fairy stories she both wrote and illustrated – and set out to see Australia. Her travels then took her to New Guinea, where she was not frightened to find herself among cannibals, although she was ‘appalled by the extreme primitiveness of the life’. Later, as ‘social editress of a city paper’, she realised that country papers could not afford syndicated material from overseas. So she bought a car and drove through New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland to meet as many editors as she could. She then formed a service to supply country papers with illustrated short stories, poetry and articles on domestic topics ‘from making puff-pastry to curing a crocodile of the measles’. If she had more time she would ‘write and write – oh, everything! – that usual womanly feeling that one can reach the moon’.

Another impressive interview subject is the elegant Iris Norton, publicity manager for Hoyt’s Pictures Ltd and ‘one of the busiest young women in Sydney’. As a fifteen year old, Norton turned up at the Sunday Times office and talked her way into editing the comics. She then edited Photoplay and began writing for Smith’s Weekly before becoming ‘the youngest publicity manager of a huge motion-picture firm in the world’:

322 Bernice May, ‘Elizabeth Powell’, Australian Woman’s Mirror, 30 October 1928, p. 11.
Iris Norton is just twenty-one, yet she carries on her splendid young shoulders the responsibilities usually allotted to two or three men. Her face is matured; dreams so firm and strong and full of grip, are the youthful hands of the flapper. But what a flapper! What a wonderful young thing! – not bothering to hold up the feminine torch, neither conceited nor proud of what she has achieved; just maintaining a big position over the heads of men by sheer brains and that which is born with one – power.

When Zora visits Norton at her office, she is planning her imminent weekday wedding. When one of her staff assumes she will be away from work that day she informs him she will be working until 2 pm. Norton believes that ‘women are ideally suited to publicity work … because of their innate sense of the artistic, their understanding of little things that usually escape men, and their ability in making the most of a good thing or a bad thing.’ ‘Yes, I’ve got ambitions,’ she tells Zora. ‘Oh, millions! I want a chateau on the Mediterranean. I want to write great novels and plays there and return with a band.’ Zora concludes by telling Mirror readers, ‘After meeting Iris Norton, I cannot help adding that I feel prouder than ever of my own sex.’ Under her married name Iris Dexter, Norton became a noted correspondent in the Second World War.324

Not much older than Iris Norton, Eleanor Dark is a quiet gardener rather than a flapper.325 I knew that Zora had interviewed Dark, whose maiden name was Pixie O’Reilly, because she mentioned visiting her at Katoomba in a letter to John Le Gay Brereton.326 After a ‘delightful day’ Zora and five-year-old April had been given a lift home in the Darks’ car. It was April’s first trip in a car, and she had asked why they couldn’t take everyone with them who was waiting for the train. I look through the Mirror for an interview with Dark but don’t find one until I discover that she used the pseudonym Patricia O’Rane for her Mirror poetry.

When Zora meets Dark, who would go on to write acclaimed novels such as The Little Company and A Timeless Land, she is the young wife of a country doctor, Eric Dark, and the daughter of a famous poet, Dowell O’Reilly. The garden in which Dark continues to dig and plant during the interview is a romantic setting of perfumed violets and flowering lucerne trees. Life had not, as yet, brought a great mass of experiences her young way, but she had been given a garden. Dark wants to make her own way as an author and writes a small

326 Zora Cross to John Le Gay Brereton, 17 August 1928, John Le Gay Brereton papers, 1889–1933, MLMSS 281/5, State Library of NSW.
amount each day. She can only write when she feels driven and thinks ‘all women have to be
driven to write’. She doubts her ability to judge her own work, but won’t let anyone see it
until she is satisfied.

The friendship between Zora Cross and Eleanor Dark appears again when Zora interviews
Dark’s neighbour Nina Lowe by the fire at the Darks’ house.327 Eleanor calls them to lunch
and Eric Dark carves the roast while the black cat, Felix, perches on his shoulder. The Darks’
baby, Michael, plays with a book Zora has returned after a ‘long loan’. The Blue Mountains’
literary scene appears in this article as it rarely does in Zora’s letters. When Bulletin writers
Eric Lowe (Nina’s husband) and Osmar White turn up for lunch the conversation turns to the
standard of writing in Australia and how hard it is to keep up. White says he is planning to
spend the summer in a cave writing a novel. ‘What luck to be a man!’ someone responds (but
Zora stresses that it wasn’t her). ‘Anyone going off anywhere to write a novel at any price,’
she assures the reader, ‘has nothing but my sympathies.’

Zora takes the train back to Glenbrook after accepting some of the Darks’ mountain violets
and tucking them into her coat. Arriving home, she sits down to write the article, but her
daughters remind her she needs to water the zinnias. As she stands ‘merrily hosing’, she
thinks of Nina Lowe, another garden-lover, before she hears the voice of ‘Mrs Next-door’.

‘Hard at it?’ the neighbour asks, and Zora tells her she is trying to write an article.

‘An article! What on?’

‘Nina Lowe. Any wiser?’

Mrs Next-door recalls one of Lowe’s titles and says, ‘I always look for her stories.’

‘You must take the Mirror?’

‘Don’t we all?’

The articles are full of anecdotes like this from Zora’s life. A bank teller recognises her name
and gives her his cousin’s book of poetry to read. Its author is Grace Ethel Martyr, the subject
of an interview in August 1927.328 She recalls a ‘musical friend’ in Brisbane in 1916 taking
her for a coffee at an ‘enchanted place’ run by the poet E. Conneau.329 At first she thinks it
looks like a wine bar and tells her friend, ‘I don’t like wine, it makes me bilious,’ but he

329 Bernice May, ‘E. Conneau’, Australian Woman’s Mirror, 3 April 1928, p. 11.
assures her he brought her there to taste the best coffee she’s ever had. Even though she disguises her identity as Bernice May, she writes about being in the company of ‘the late David McKee Wright in 1917’ when she met Nora McAuliffe, editor of the Bulletin’s women’s page. David called McAuliffe ‘the truest singer of them all’ and Zora ‘pouted jealously and replied, “But I don’t want to be a poetess, of course. I am much more interested in prose.”’

There is a sense of joyful correspondence between Zora and her fellow poets. While many of the letters would have been written for the purpose of the article, they are presented as a natural camaraderie between writers. Zora’s children appear occasionally. She gives a book of stories for young girls by Hilda Bridges to her daughter, who reads a few pages and announces ‘Oh, this book is good! It’s worth eightpence anyway.’ Zora takes her three children by train ‘up the flower-haunted North Shore line from Sydney to Turramurra’ to interview E. Beaufils Lamb, an older woman with the ‘presence of a poet’. The writer is amazed that the journalist has travelled so far to interview her, exclaiming ‘All these riches coming to me so late in life!’

In the years after David’s death, this connection with other writers and the activity of interviewing them was a solace as well as a source of income. In an interview with writer and librarian Gertrude Hart, Zora writes of a long-distance friendship formed through letter writing. Hart operates a roadside library in a remote part of Victoria, stocking up on romantic fiction because ‘A woman’s life is more monotonous than a man’s’ and she wants to offer an escape from drudgery. Being a librarian, for Hart, is a matter of empathy – of ‘reading your people as closely as you read your literature’ – and she is also sensitive to Zora’s need. One Christmas when Zora is trying to be cheerful in front of her children by telling herself that ‘gum-trees were not monotonously grey, but really a fine, rosy colour’, she receives a letter and a parcel from Gertrude Hart: Chinese lanterns, soaps, and sweets, and aeroplanes, and handkerchiefs, and books, and all sorts of fairy things like weeny bottles of scent, and chocolate balls, and cards, all carefully packed in separate boxes, came out of the parcel from a writer who understands a child’s heart ... In the middle of the article, Zora

333 Bernice May, ‘Writer and Librarian: A Long-distance Talk with Gertrude Hart’, Australian Woman’s Mirror, 8 July 1930, p. 11.
mentions that her dinner is burning, and uses this as a comparison with Hart’s efforts to write while being constantly interrupted in the library.

When Zora interviews David’s former partner Beatrice Osborn, who wrote as Margaret Fane, the two writers spend most of the time laughing.334 They both confess a lack of spelling ability, which Zora says is a sign of genius. Fane talks about her collaboration with her de facto partner Hilary Lofting. Calling herself ‘perfectly lazy at the manual work of writing’, Fane says she comes up with the setting, plot, characters and conversations then Lofting goes away and writes the story. Because Lofting is so well travelled, ‘I can send my characters anywhere’. Zora describes Fane as a clever writer, a good critic and a light-hearted companion, as well as being ‘a most excellent cook’.

Fane is one of several writers who claim to be ‘Australian before anything’. She had been urged to write by friends, but only took it up in 1917 (around the time David starting seeing, but not living with, Zora). In her column in the P.F.A Quarterly Journal, ‘Margaret’s Letter’, she mentioned in 1920 that she had been re-reading Zora’s two poetry collections and ‘as usual, couldn’t put them down’. She had recently met the poet and describes her as ‘very young-looking and – unspoiled, I suppose is the word, for all that she has got into her short life’. In one paragraph Fane generously sums up Zora’s life to date:

It is a most interesting life. After making a really rather special ‘hit’ in the Education Department as one of their star teachers she suddenly left the teaching altogether and went on the stage. There, in a very short time, she was playing ‘leads’ in the best touring companies. Just as suddenly she dropped the stage for literature, where as you and Australia knows, she has ‘made good,’ as she did in her two discarded professions. You would never guess, from her simple, unaffected manner, that she was the author of the two beautiful inspired books and of the equally musical and true poetry which ‘The Bulletin’ prints nearly every week. It is rather charming, I think, to be so absolutely unspoiled and simple with that wonderful wealth of song hidden away.335

Zora clipped the notice and sent it to George Robertson.

Reading Zora’s Mirror profiles one after another, I begin to wonder whether the writers are competing with each other to come up with more mundane forms of inspiration:

334 Bernice May, ‘Margaret Fane’, Australian Woman’s Mirror, 1 January 1929, p. 10.
I think of things quickest when I’m ironing. It is so quiet and brainless and warm ...

Or more romantic interests:

I love ridiculously long, polished filbert-nails ... I love horses and gallops in the morning, and cats! ... I love profiles and silhouettes in a half-light ... and all beautiful things.

Or more flapper-like self-descriptions:

I am a lazy, vagabond sort of person who has no aesthetic fancies, no neurotic leanings and no secret sorrows.

One writer sends up her more earnest colleagues: ‘And she will tell you humorously that she does not want to write “the great New Zealand novel”!’

When asked for her philosophy of life Dulcie Deamer, in a hurry to get to her next appointment, answers: ‘Everything is worthwhile and nothing is wasted.’ When asked for hers, Patricia O’Rane (the Mirror pen-name for Eleanor Dark) says she doesn’t have one. Working patiently in her large garden, she says, if she did, ‘it would be the opposite of Dulcie Deamer’s’. Zora suggests Dark is having us on. She is one of the few authors interviewed whose work is still in print.

Dulcie Deamer was already fascinated by Zora Cross when Zora turned up to interview her in mid 1928. She had heard through friends – the Triad’s Frank Morton and Theatre magazine editor Lala Fisher – that Zora believed her romance with David McKee Wright was one of the great literary romances. Deamer had visited Wright in his attic office at the Bulletin where he paid her for poetry and gave gentle instruction on the correct use of English. Having been warned by Fisher ‘that he might erotically attack [her]’, she found him not at all lascivious and wondered about the relationship between the white-haired, violet-eyed Celtic poet and the author of Songs of Love and Life. Deamer, a world traveller, prolific writer and the undisputed Queen of Bohemia, found Zora emotional and intense. She liked her but felt sorry for her: ‘she was so much “all heart”, and therefore a person without armour’.336

Zora admires Deamer’s strength, calling her ‘frank to the point of daring’. The unconventional Deamer feels a need to state that she is ‘no feminist’.

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While the *Bulletin* and *Mirror* veteran Constance Clyde served thirteen days in a London prison for the cause of female suffrage ‘among other things’, the only time the word ‘feminist’ appears is when authors claim not to be one.

‘Truly, are you an anti-feminist?’, Zora asks writer and actress Mary Marlowe.

‘Absolutely,’ says Marlowe, ‘I feel sure that in the race for material things in life woman must always take a second place by the mere fact of her emotionalism, without which no woman is worth her salt.’

Zora’s response reflects her own, and the *Mirror*’s, ambivalence. ‘No doubt it is pretty true,’ she writes as Bernice May. ‘In gaining so-called “rights” so many richer privileges may be lost which physically and emotionally are better for us.’ These articles celebrate the authors’ femaleness, considered to be at odds with feminism.

While many writers adopt pen-names to mask their gender and improve their chance of publication in places like the *Bulletin*, the articles show other reasons. Eleanor Dark began writing under her maiden-name Pixie O’Reilly, choosing Patricia O’Rane because she doesn’t want to be known as the daughter of the famous poet Dowell O’Reilly. Prolific authors like Dulcie Deamer write under several names in order to get more work accepted. Zora uses a pen-name for work she considers inferior.

Whatever the reason, using a pen-name is thumbing your nose at immortality. You don’t expect this work to be collected and pored over by the readers and biographers of the future. You have written it for money (Nettie Palmer told a friend she wrote for the *Mirror* ‘just to buy family shoe leather’), for the delight of seeing your work in print, and to move or entertain thousands of readers. Let it fall to dust.

For several women writers of the period, Zora’s articles are the only remaining records of their writing lives. Even for more well-known subjects, they contain information not found elsewhere. Biographers of Jean Devanny and Nettie Palmer cite the *Mirror* interviews in order to demonstrate how their subject was viewed by her contemporaries. Carole Ferrier finds Zora Cross ‘rather more favourably disposed than many towards’ Devanny, and

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337 Bernice May, ‘Constance Clyde’, *Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 3 July 1928, p. 11.
338 Zora’s *Mirror* articles seem to stop after an article is published by H.M. Green, ‘Katharine Susannah Prichard: Her Place in Australian Literature’, *Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 28 April 1931, p. 11.
Deborah Jordan quotes Zora’s assessment of Palmer as the ‘most important critic of Australian Literature writing regularly for our periodicals’.\(^\text{341}\)

As Bernice May’s interviews in the *Mirror* peter out, an article on Katharine Susannah Prichard by literary critic and university librarian H.M. Green appears. Subtitled ‘Her Place in Australian Literature’, the article’s literary judgement contrasts with Zora’s sense of enjoyment or even promotion. ‘Women are playing so important a part in the word of fiction nowadays,’ writes Green, ‘that even in so masculine a country as Australia it is not altogether surprising to find the two best novelists of the day to be women.’\(^\text{342}\) (I believe H.M. Green put Henry Handel Richardson alongside Prichard.) This ranking of authors and assignment of literary value – in ‘so masculine a country as Australia’ – would leave many of the writers Zora interviewed in the dustbin of literary history. In Green’s 1961 *A History of Australian Literature: Pure and Applied*, Zora Cross ‘is seen to have a place in the history of Australian poetry, but it is not quite what her admirers imagined’.\(^\text{343}\) As Green’s book ends in 1923, many of the authors Zora interviewed were unlikely to make it in, but major Australian literary histories in later decades also left them out. Of thirty-six authors interviewed, five are mentioned in the 1998 *Oxford Literary History of Australia* and six in the 2009 *Cambridge History of Australian Literature*. Both in her selection of authors, and in the picture of them she creates, Zora produced an alternative snapshot of literary culture.

An article in the *Mirror* of 20 March 1928 almost reads like a parody of one of Zora’s interviews. Titled ‘Zora Cross’, its author ‘F. C. Brown’ is unknown to me but is a close friend of Zora’s.\(^\text{344}\) They met in the street in Brisbane through a mutual friend during the war. A busy actress, newspaper editor, elocution teacher, concert organiser, Zora appears: ‘spotted with red printers’ ink. She was slight and pale, and rather terrific with energy’. She extracts promises from the writer: to contribute articles to her newspaper for the payment of ‘a postage-stamp or two’; to pick up props for a show at the Tivoli that night and to ‘take charge of part of the show’. She laughs about the five shillings a week she receives from the paper, but then says it’s ‘a fairly good “salary,” because she is able to promote her shows and those of her friends. When they visit the newspaper office and she is asked to look at the proofs of

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\(^{342}\) H.M. Green, ‘Katharine Susannah Prichard: Her Place in Australian Literature’, *Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 28 April 1931, p. 11.


the latest issue she is mock-outraged: ‘What!’ she cried; ‘I write your paper for you, get in half the pictures, even bring in ads and ask the newsagents to sell it – and now you want me to read it! What next!’

As vividly as the piece brings Zora to life as a young, flamboyant arts entrepreneur in wartime Brisbane, it contrasts with a view of her at home in Glenbrook more than ten years later. Having become ‘inseparable friends’ with Zora, the writer visits her in the Blue Mountains. In her fragrant garden with a view of ‘green gullies, purple spurs and blue hills’, Zora’s personality seems unchanged although she is ‘plumper and happier looking’. She asks the writer to help hang out the washing and water the fowls. When asked if she ever misses the crowds and the city she shakes her head, ‘As long as I can write I don’t mind where I am.’

Like the pieces Zora wrote for the Mirror, her own profile – by a writer whose gender is not disclosed – combines journalistic candour with the romance of authorship. Its style is eerily similar:

Zora has no wish to travel, no love for expensive hats, frocks or shoes, would like to conduct a girls’ newspaper and, except for purely “literary” work has no method in her writing … She has never attended a race meeting, nor heard Madame Melba sing, nor Mr. Hughes speak, and she doesn’t want a Ford car. She loves dictionaries, and her favourite possession is the Oxford, which occupies a corner of her study.

Browsing the literary pages in February 1944 Mary Gilmore saw a review of a new book by Zora Cross. ‘How? When? And where?’ she wrote to Zora. ‘What is the name of the book?’ Then she saw the book’s title at the top of the review: This Hectic Age. She enclosed a clipping of the notice, which called it ‘a piece of quick, breathless fiction to fit the times’, while also appreciating its ‘ touches of insight into the feminine mind’ and declaring that ‘Wartime Sydney springs to life with amazing vitality in this book which contains some of the finest descriptions of modern city life written.’ Gilmore was sure that Zora was the first to set a novel on the streets of Second World War Sydney. She hoped the book would be a success. She had also seen the news that Zora’s son, Ted, was engaged. ‘May every good thing in happiness be theirs.’

345 Letter from Mary Gilmore to Zora Cross, 24 February 1944, Zora Cross papers, Box 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Sydney.
Zora posted Gilmore a copy of the book, which had been published by the Sydney office of the London Book Company Ltd. ‘I have written it from my heart in all sincerity,’ she told her friend in a short note on the publisher’s stationery. She would appreciate any mention Gilmore could give it in the press. Zora’s mother was ill, and her daughter April had left her job due to ill health. ‘Anything you can do will be welcome.’

What did Mary Gilmore make of This Hectic Age? The book’s black and red cover, with bold white type, promises ‘A stupendous epic, startling in its realism of wartime revelry. A frank and fearless narrative of the age we live in.’ The paper used for this economy edition is thin and brittle, held together with two large staples. The margins are narrow, chapters beginning mid-page to cram the text into a slim 128 page volume. An advertisement on the back page with the banner ‘SEX and MARRIAGE’ promotes ‘A Marriage Manual’ with advice on ‘sexual disharmonies, hygiene of sexual relationship, and many other important subjects’.

The story introduces a young country girl, Eve Wilson, who leaves her home town of Milton Vale by train for a working holiday in Sydney. Eve is shocked, but also compelled, by the vice and excess of the city. The war has allowed a criminal class to flourish and enthral innocence. She is shadowed by white slave traders, accosted by louche men, exposed to all kinds of luxuries and temptations. (The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II calls the book ‘clumsily written’ but acknowledges that it was unusual for its time in not relying on stereotypes.)

The book’s pulp presentation and often clichéd prose make it possible to read it as a celebration of sex and violence on Sydney’s wartime streets rather than the critique I imagine Zora intended it to be.

The London Book Company issued a second edition of the book in the mid-1950s with the new title The Night Side of Sydney. Before I hold a copy in my hands, I wonder if it might be a more expensively produced edition in a more prosperous era. But the cover strikes me as even cheaper-looking. A black and white watercolour shows a hunched, hatted male figure lurking in a doorway under a streetlight. A handwritten title of ballooning capital letters filled with red dots gives the book the feel of illicit street fiction, or a modern handmade zine. Part of the text on one page has been cut off when the book was trimmed, reminding me of a bootleg copy of The Quiet American I once bought in Hanoi.

346 Letter from Zora Cross to Mary Gilmore, 28 February 1944, included inside copy of Zora Cross, This Hectic Age (Sydney, London Book Co., 1944), Mitchell Library copy in Mary Gilmore collection, H 2013/90.
The company is still advertising ‘A Marriage Manual’ (the price having remained at 15/-), as well as the ‘most exciting books ever written’: The Fast Lady and Love. (The second is by Elinor Cross and only one copy remains, in the National Library. I can find no other mention of this author, and it is possible that Zora wrote the book under a pseudonym. A love and marriage manual for women, the book’s references to history and poetry could be attributed to Zora.)

The standard disclaimer on the first edition has been amplified and now reads, ‘It cannot be too strongly emphasised that all characters and places mentioned in this book are entirely fictitious and have no reference to any person or persons living or dead.’ Was Zora concerned that people would read into the novel her own experiences in the First World War or those of her daughters in the second? If anything is clear about this book, it is that the author and the publisher did not intend it to be a permanent addition to literary culture – collected, analysed, cited.

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About a kilometre from where Zora lived in the Blue Mountains to the west of Sydney, an arrangement of concrete blocks the size of single bed mattresses lies outside the entrance to the Glenbrook visitors centre. I’ve been told by a member of Zora’s family that Zora Cross’s face is carved into a sculpture there, but it’s below my line of vision and at first I walk past without noticing it.

The huge fallen dominos of the memorial carry symbols of the region’s natural and cultural history: a waratah and a lyrebird, a miner and a bushwalker.

Two female faces are cut into the cement. Each has a loose bun and a long, flat nose. Gum leaves and white pebbles lie in the dip below their chins. One of the faces looks asleep, while the other stares upwards. I pick her for Zora. Not expecting the monument to be at ground level, I thought I’d look straight into Zora’s stone eyes, but she’s at my feet.

When I ask at the counter for information on the carving, an A4 sheet is produced from a small filing cabinet. Unveiled in 1986, the blocks represent different parts of the Blue Mountains. Zora is on the first block because she lived at Glenbrook, the first town you encounter on the rise of the Great Western Highway. She keeps company with a sprig of

wattle, the zigzag railway and the ‘red hands’ cave painted by Aboriginal people hundreds of years ago.

The other face is Eleanor Dark, the publicity shy novelist and resident of Katoomba who once suggested, ‘If I could arrange the literary world to my satisfaction writers would never be photographed, and would be known by numbers instead of names!’ Dark has a more dynamic monument in the writers’ centre, Varuna, at her former home. *Everything is worthwhile and nothing is wasted.*

Like any monument, this concrete carving is unsatisfactory in the justice it pays to past achievements. But if we keep brushing off the fallen gum leaves, it is more than the writers themselves would have expected.

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Sonnet

Say what you will of me when I am gone.
Saying is easy. Words both burn and bleed.
I shall have been much worse than that indeed;
For I have suffered much and that leads on
To making others suffer. While we con
The book of Life we often let weeds seed
In Love’s deserted garden and tears bead
On holy roses Death was born to don.

I would be human, not immortal, here.
Friends, tune your piping to Truth’s bitter note.
The salt of sin will sting beyond the grave;
But add, in some already lost ghost-year:
‘She turned a leaf of poetry and wrote
Across the feminine reserves there:
“Brave.”’

— Zora Cross, *Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 11 August 1931, p. 14
Conclusion

Hundreds of children wrote letters to the *Town & Country Journal* in the early years of the twentieth century. Dozens of authors called George Robertson their publisher. Many women lost brothers during the First World War. And almost every female poet of note appeared in the *Australian Woman’s Mirror* in the 1920s and 30s.

Zora Cross stands out among them because her uninhibited letters, poetry and journalism convey a strong sense of what it was like to be a Queensland schoolchild, a suddenly famous author, a bereaved sister and a woman trying to balance writing with domestic obligations. Her childhood letters were distinctive in their sheer volume, in the quality of their observations of rural and urban life, in their humour, and in the fact that she managed to demonstrate through a national newspaper the shift in her personality from obedient child to questioning adolescent. The intimate tone and content of her letters to George Robertson gives us a substantial insight into the power imbalance between a young female author and publisher, while her unpublished manuscript ‘Rose Brown’ highlights the conservatism of Australian publishing culture at the time. By placing her fallen brother in a domestic context rather than limiting his identity to a generic soldier, and by foregrounding her own experience of loss – ‘’Tis I, not you, who grieve’– Zora Cross challenges conventional approaches to First World War commemoration that still prevail. And in her interviews with women writers of the 1920s and 30s, from Eleanor Dark to Dulcie Deamer, she does not reduce them to their contribution to the literary canon, as many critics have done. She reveals their reasons for writing, their method, the challenges they overcame, and how they lived as writers. By including herself in these articles, and recording scenes in which she interacts with her subjects, she preserves an understanding of these women both as individual writers and part of a literary community that is engaging almost a century later.

Through all these sources is a voice that belongs to its time but also resonates in ours. In her 2015 book *History’s People: Personality and the Past*, Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan writes of the ‘particular pleasure in hearing a voice which reaches across the decades or centuries and reminds us that we share a common humanity. We read the great diarists – Samuel Pepys, for example or James Boswell – because we find them such entertaining and interesting individuals.’

In this thesis I have given precedence to Zora’s

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voice, showing how she created herself – or many selves – through language. Another attribute MacMillan identifies in individuals who make a contribution to history is curiosity. Zora Cross was a curious observer of the literary world she belonged to. In her writing and in her epistolary relationships, she questioned the conventions that governed both human relations and literature. By testing the boundaries of what readers and correspondents would accept, she was able to show the constraints that she and her contemporaries faced in expressing their personality and their views on society.

Before I decided on the themes that make up this thesis I began writing chapters based on Zora Cross’s relationships with her various correspondents. Three of them – Ethel Turner, George Robertson and Mary Gilmore – became thesis chapters because they enabled me to engage with different kinds of primary sources and gave rise to arguments for Zora Cross’s significance. Other chapters – on Zora’s relationships with editor and literary critic Bertram Stevens, artist Norman Lindsay, librarian and literature professor John Le Gay Brereton, and long-time Angus & Robertson employee Rebecca Wiley – I drew on but did not include in full.

At one of my annual reviews (having written this thesis part-time over four years) I presented a draft chapter on the friendship between Zora Cross and Rebecca Wiley. Wiley wrote a 600-page memoir of her time at Angus & Robertson, with several pages about Zora Cross and David McKee Wright. In my chapter I included a scene drawn from the memoir’s introduction in which Rebecca, in a nursing home and suffering from arthritis, sits up in bed balancing a writing pad on her lap to get down the story of the old days of the firm. The fact that she was battling physical pain to write showed how important she considered these memories. Perhaps some of that pain came through in the writing, so her judgement was harsher than it might otherwise have been. When I met with the review panel, one of the members wondered if this background information belonged in a thesis. ‘I want to know what she wrote,’ he said. ‘I don’t care if she was sitting up in bed drinking a cup of tea while she wrote it.’

I wouldn’t say I faltered, or retreated, after that meeting, but perhaps I reined myself in. I sought to explain rather than let the primary sources speak for themselves. My thesis makes four arguments: for Zora Cross’s contribution to Australian juvenilia, publishing history, war history, and literary history. It addresses the inadequacy of memorialisation, how we choose to honour or ignore past achievements, and the role of the archive in maintaining the status of
certain individuals. But much more could be made of Cross’s published and unpublished work. She is ripe for the kind of biography that admits contradiction and uncertainty; that asks, as Drusilla Modjeska has written, ‘what biography might mean if we took as our subjects those who are not usually considered “worthy” of “A Life” – and if as a result of this choice, we let our own story as a biographer onto the page, what would that tell us about the way a life became a narrative?’ In corresponding at length with the kind of people whose archives are valued and preserved, Zora Cross left behind so much evidence of her daily and inner life, her relationships, her personality and her milieu. To do justice to this material would mean abandoning some of the orderliness of narrative for the chaos and complexity of life. ‘I’m not always myself, Dear Mr Robertson,’ Zora confided to her publisher in 1918. ‘Sometimes I am a poetess, sometimes an actress, sometimes only a charwoman, but in all moods and all characters, my attitude of mind towards you does not change.’

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