

## ***National Landscapes: The Australian Literary Community and Environmental Thought in the 1930s and 1940s***

*Jayne Regan*

In 1944 Nettie Palmer, a leading figure in the Australian literary community, asked “what is the human value of this last Continent, which stepped straight into the age of industry, world-communications, world-wars, and accepted them all?” Her question, posed at the height of World War Two, captures well the anxieties that drove Australian literary production across the 1930s and 1940s. The heightened sense of international emergency incited writers to attempt to resolve the conflicts inherent in their settler status more urgently than in previous decades. Writers set themselves the task of ushering in an era of cultural “maturity” in Australia as a bulwark against a variety of perceived external and internal threats. The Australian environment was co-opted into this mission.

This project will explore the biographies and literary output of eight authors – Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls, Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, Ian Mudie, William Hatfield, and Flexmore Hudson – who wrote directly or indirectly about the Australian environment in the 1930s and 1940s. These writers were alert and articulate witnesses to environmental and cultural transformations across the 1930s and 1940s: their writing registered the difficulties of closer settlement, the rise of institutionalised science, the environmental implications of new technologies, the environmental and cultural disruption caused by engulfing dust storms, and an emerging ecological consciousness. Their imaginative engagement with these processes – available to us in the books, poems, stories and letters they left behind – reveal the ways that contemporary environmental issues provoked and deepened literary concerns about white Australian belonging on the continent.

Although they did not always share a unified environmental, political or even literary sensibility, this cohort of authors was united by a sense of the social responsibility of writers and a desire to locate in Australia’s varied landscapes a national culture that they hoped would prove robust in the face of the catastrophes of the early to mid-twentieth century. Collectively, they enable an exploration of the specific inflection that crisis acquired within the Australian literary community during the 1930s and 1940s and how environmental sensibilities became entangled in the nationalist literary response to international political developments.