Eldershaw, Flora Sydney (1897–1956)

by Maryanne Dever

Flora Sydney Eldershaw (1897-1956), author and critic, was born on 16 March 1897 at Darlington, Sydney, fifth of eight children of native-born parents Henry Sirdefield Eldershaw, station-manager, and his wife Margaret, née McCarroll. Flora was a grand-daughter of Finney Eldershaw, author of Australia as it Really Is (London, 1854), and a cousin of the water-colourist John Ray Eldershaw. She grew up in the Riverina district and boarded at Mount Erin Convent, Wagga Wagga.

At the University of Sydney (B.A., 1918), Eldershaw studied history under G. A. Wood and Latin under T. J. Butler. In 1916 she met Marjorie Barnard, a fellow student. To the shy Barnard, Flora appeared a ‘dark-haired, vivacious girl, a fountain of energy, ideas and laughter’. Eldershaw served (1917-20) as secretary and treasurer of the university women's union, then accepted a post at Cremorne Church of England Grammar School for Girls. In 1923 she moved to Presbyterian Ladies' College, Croydon, where she rose to senior English mistress and head of the boarding school. Her Catholic upbringing precluded her promotion to headmistress.

Using the pseudonym ‘M. Barnard Eldershaw’, Flora and Marjorie collaborated on their first novel, A House Is Built (London, 1929), which shared first prize in the Bulletin novel competition with Katharine Susannah Prichard’s Coonardoo (London, 1929). On occasions, Barnard and Eldershaw together drafted an outline before each worked on sections which the other revised. They wrote Green Memory (London, 1931), The Glasshouse (London, 1936) and Plaque With Laurel (London, 1937). Under her own name, Eldershaw published Contemporary Australian Women Writers (1931, an address to the Australian English Association, Sydney) and several articles in the Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society; she also edited The Australian Writers' Annual (1936) and The Peaceful Army (1938). In 1938 Eldershaw and Barnard produced a critical study of Australian literature, Essays in Australian Fiction (Melbourne); an historical work, Phillip of Australia (London), was followed by My Australia (London, 1939) and The Life and Times of Captain John Piper (1939) which was commissioned by the Australian Limited Editions Society.

A leading figure in Sydney literary circles, in 1935 Eldershaw had become the first woman president of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, an office she was again to hold in 1943. With Barnard and Frank Dalby Davison, she developed policies on political and cultural issues, and helped to transform the F.A.W. into a vocal and sometimes controversial lobby group. Her literary friends included Jean Devanny, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Tom Inglis Moore, Prichard and Judah Waten. In 1938 Eldershaw helped to persuade the Federal government to expand the Commonwealth Literary Fund to include grants (as well as pensions) for writers and funding for university lectures on Australian literature. She was a member (1939-53) of the C.L.F.'s advisory board. Vance Palmer described her as being 'passionately devoted' to the interests of the fund and the board's 'most valuable member'.

Tired of teaching, in 1941 Eldershaw joined the Department of Labour and National Service; she worked for the division of postwar reconstruction in Canberra and later transferred to the division of industrial welfare in Melbourne. She gave advice on women's legal rights, working conditions and equal pay, and extended her interests to the welfare of Aboriginal and migrant women.

Despite the exigencies of her job, Eldershaw remained active in literary matters throughout World War II and delivered C.L.F. lectures on Australian literature at the University of Sydney in 1945. After delays due to wartime censorship and paper shortages, Eldershaw and Barnard's final...
novel, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow [and Tomorrow]* appeared in 1947 (the uncensored version in 1983). This book was widely considered to be the work of Barnard alone until recent scholarship established Eldershaw's contribution. Its political content was exploited by William Wentworth in 1952 to support his allegation that Eldershaw and other prominent members of the C.L.F. advisory board were communist sympathizers.

Failing on the grounds of health to gain permanent appointment in the public service, Eldershaw became a private industrial consultant in 1948 and a fellow (1950) of the Australian Institute of Management, but gradually withdrew from public affairs and by 1955 had retired to her sister Mary's property at Forest Hill. Flora died of cerebral thrombosis on 20 September 1956 in hospital at Wagga Wagga and was cremated with Anglican rites.

**Select Bibliography**
- *Parliamentary Debates* (Commonwealth), 1952-53, p 723
- *Australian Woman's Mirror*, 4 Sept 1928, p 12
- *Labour History*, no 46, May 1984, p 1
- *Walkabout*, 1 Oct 1959, p 8
- *Age* (Melbourne), 30 Aug 1947
- Marjorie Barnard papers (State Library of New South Wales)
- Flora Eldershaw papers (State Library of New South Wales)
- Fellowship of Australian Writers papers (State Library of New South Wales)
- private information.

**Related Entries in NCB Sites**
- Prichard, Katharine Susannah (friend)
- Palmer, Janet Gertrude (friend)
- Palmer, Edward Vivian (friend)
- Devanny, Jane (friend)
- Barnard, Marjorie Faith (friend)
- Moore, Tom Inglis (friend)
- Waten, Judah Leon (friend)
- Palmer, Aileen Yvonne (friend)
- Davison, Frank Dalby (colleague)
- Butler, Thomas John (teacher)
- Wood, George Arnold (teacher)

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