



Kimberley Society

Book Note

***True North: The story of Mary and Elizabeth Durack* by Brenda Niall. Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2012. Paperback, 291 pages plus ix, illustrated (some colour). ISBN 9781921758928 (or 9781921921421 for Ebook). Recommended retail price \$32.95.**

This book is written by a prominent Melbourne-based biographer who was awarded an Order of Australia for 'services to Australian literature as an academic, biographer and literary critic' in 2004. Her preface acknowledges the unstintingly generous cooperation of Patsy Millett (Mary Durack's daughter) and Perpetua Durack Clancy (Elizabeth Durack's daughter). It also comments on the remarkable archive of Durack papers held by the Batty Library in Perth where the author and her sister, Frances O'Neill, shared the lengthy task of reading just some of those papers. The 'stimulating exchange of ideas that followed' can be imagined quite readily given that a key piece of the archive consists of a full set of intimate letters exchanged by Mary and Elizabeth during World War Two.

It was barely five years after the war's end that their father, Michael Patrick Durack, died. He left behind not just a devastated family but also a priceless trove of personal diaries, letters and company documents. That material would give rise to a number of books about the Duracks—books written by Mary and by others—and would inform numerous articles, documentaries and theses.

The first chapter of the book, as might be expected, positions Mary and Elizabeth within their family. Born in 1913 and 1915 respectively – Mary in Adelaide and Elizabeth in Claremont (WA) – they had four brothers. Reginald Wyndham (Reg) was born in 1911, Kimberley Michael (Kim) in 1917, William Aiden (Bill) in 1918, and David in 1920. Their sweet-natured mother Bess, despite coming from an Anglican family, accepted that her children would be brought up in their father's Catholic faith, and that he would often be away from home. Their childhood was privileged and their talents were nurtured.

Brenda Niall traces the development of Mary and Elizabeth's careers, as writer and artist respectively, weaving those stories into their interaction with their parents and siblings, their marriages, motherhood, and their place in the broader community. Another very strong thread is the sisters' bond with the Kimberley and its Aboriginal people. The result provides an overview of their lives and their creative output; an overview that will appeal both to the reader interested in them as people and to the researcher interested in the bigger picture. The sisters come through as feisty, independent women who found ways around obstacles that would have stilled or stifled lesser beings.

A bonus in the book is the comprehensive index, which thoughtfully identifies the various Duracks in terms of their relationship to one another. But perhaps the nicest part is the carefully chosen selection of photographs that will allow those readers who did not have the privilege of knowing Mary and/or Elizabeth to gain a better sense of who they really were.

Cathie Clement