Australian Literature and Embedded Knowledges: The Case of the Environmental Imagination
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4.00-5.30pm, Thursday 23 October, CCCS Seminar Room (402), 4th Floor of the Forgan Smith Tower

To think ‘environmentally’ or ‘ecologically’, as Buell warns us, requires thinking ‘against’ or beyond nationness even more self-evidently than thinking ‘culturally’ does. Much scholarly misrepresentation of the so called school of ‘cultural nationalism’ in Australian Literature is based in a failure to take into account these writers’ powerful commitment to the environment. This paper will focus on the lives and work of Vance and Nettie Palmer, two key writers and intellectuals in the interwar period by foregrounding their involvement with the environment especially in outback Queensland, rural Victorian, that is the Isle of Wight not London, Green Island not Brisbane and Mongat not Barcelona. Through their fiction, drama and criticism, the Palmers did embed and prepare the way to eco-critical thinking and writing and the recognition of the importance of Indigenous Australians. This paper will argue that the major task, is not as Val Plumwood found, to explain why people from a settler culture who claim to love their land have been engaged in destroying it so rapidly, rather how we might assess how texts are positioned locally and/or globally and secondly, in their openness or otherwise to social justice issues. By foregrounding the concept of environmental materiality in a discussion of the national imaginary, we can re-visit the Australian Legend in context of globalisation.

Deborah Jordan is author of Nettie Palmer: Search for an Aesthetic and is finalising a collection of Vance and Nettie Palmers’ courtship letters from 1909 to 1914 for publication. Deborah has worked as a scholar, professional historian, writer and consultant in the university, government and private sectors - in local history, maritime heritage, disabilities, cultural heritage, and Australian women’s history. She is working on a large nationwide project on ‘Publishing Economies’ with her specific focus being on the University of Queensland Press from 1964-1995.

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