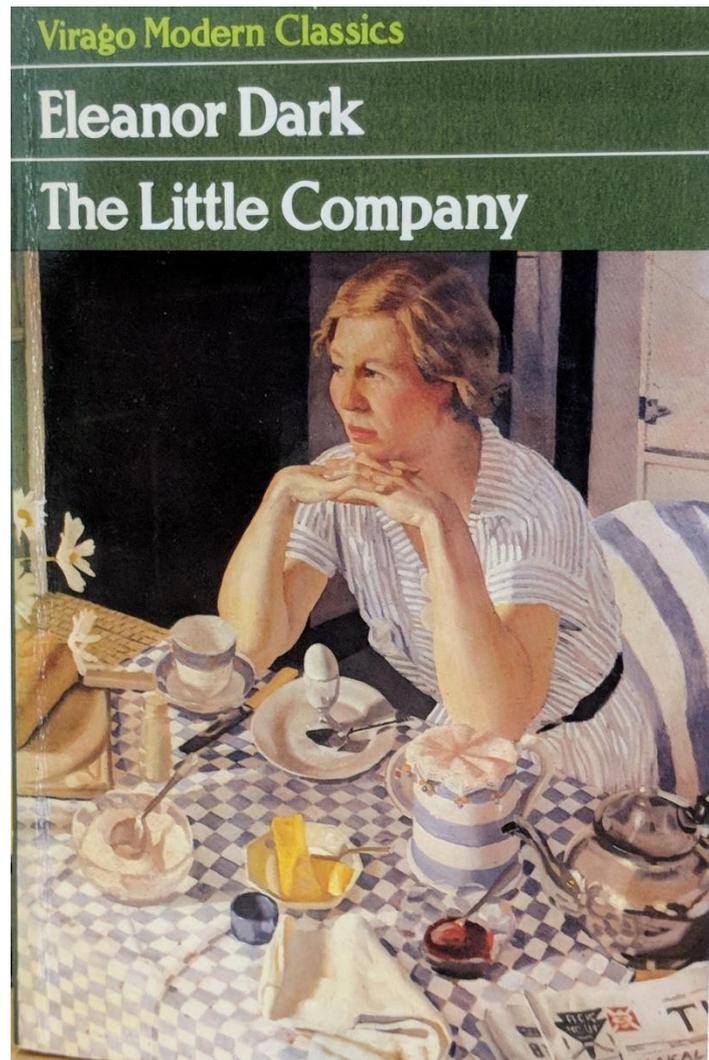


**On Pacification
The International and Domestic Referents of an Australian Artwork
Robyn Walton**

Abstract

This is a piece of creative non-fiction merging art commentary, literary analysis, and a personal account of the writer's research. Changes across time in the writer's understanding of an Australian painting – *Breakfast Piece* (1936) by Herbert Badham – are examined, with the writer's slowness to comprehend the painting's overt allusion to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (Abyssinia) highlighted. The writer's discovery that *Breakfast Piece* was reproduced on the covers of a 1985 edition of Eleanor Dark's 1945 novel *The Little Company* and a 1991 edition of Elizabeth Harrower's 1966 novel *The Watch Tower* provokes an analysis of these authors' treatment of international geopolitical affairs and local gender relations.



Herbert Badham, *Breakfast Piece* (1936) on cover of Eleanor Dark, *The Little Company* (Virago Press, 1985).
Reproduced with copyright permission from Virago/Little Brown.

‘... *Breakfast Piece* is an amalgamation of objects amongst which the artist has situated his wife.’¹

I began visiting Herbert Badham’s 1936 painting *Breakfast Piece* in the Art Gallery of New South Wales during the 1980s when I lived in Sydney. At that time the quality I most appreciated in the artwork was its tranquillity. A harmonious arrangement of pastel blue-greys and whites spiked with yellow. A palely sunlit domestic interior, à la Vermeer. A woman in repose at her kitchen table.

¹ Art Gallery of New South Wales website, www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/6381/.

The items arrayed as a still life on that table constituted the makings and accoutrements of a leisurely meal, breakfast deconstructed. Being fond of bric-a-brac, I liked these ‘period details’ while failing to fully understand they were modish or only slightly dated in 1936. Admiring the gleam on what looked to be a venerable silver teapot, I did not recognise the electroplated Perfect model of 1927 from the Robur Tea Company. The blue-striped Cornish jug looked quaint; I did not know Cornishware had come into production in 1926. The pressed-glass vase: that was a Depression-era product.

As for the woman sitting with fingers interlocked under her chin, she had to be older than I was. Her fair arms must have rounded out as she matured. (Actually, I was into my 30s and so was she.) Her house frock of fresh blue and white striped cotton was the comfortable equivalent of a man’s business shirt. The woman’s expression sometimes concerned me, however. She appeared not merely placid but wistful.

I saw, yet did not see, the vertically folded newspaper covering the table’s front corner, downstage left. Its headlines were only half-visible and inexplicably blurred, the letters oblique. In the top line was a word I took to be a Middle Eastern or North African place name. The second line began with a distinct word: ‘WAR’. So, I figured, the woman’s husband – for she wore a wedding ring – was away overseas, at risk. I accepted the genre character of the scene, the artist’s conjunction of quiet benignity with uneasy thoughts.

Deciding to move away from Sydney in the 1990s, I exchanged a Pacific coastline for one subject to Southern Ocean winds. I took with me the catalogue from a Badham retrospective mounted in Wollongong in spring 1987; a reproduction of *Breakfast Piece* was included.² Stepping into my new house at night after flying down from rickety Sydney, I found its rooms serene and chilly. It had been built in 1936, I discovered; that was a kind-of coincidence.

The place name in Badham’s headline I remembered as ‘BENGHAZI’. That was incorrect, yet occasional leafing through my catalogue and return visits to the NSW gallery failed to dislodge the erroneous word in my brain. As I had only the haziest knowledge of Benghazi, I could not explain to myself why I ‘saw’ that word. Nor could I explain why I continued recalling *Breakfast Piece* while not always being able to remember the name of its painter.

*

Early in 2011, protests in Libya against the authoritarian rule of Colonel Gaddafi precipitated a revolutionary civil war which continued for most of that year. Along with many Australians, I skim-read accounts and sometimes looked away from awful sights on screens. Media outlets understood our need for lighter details: the playboy son enrolled at the London School of Economics was one. Benghazi, Libya’s second largest city, featured in early 2012 when attacks on two American facilities by Islamic extremists left the US Ambassador to Libya dead. As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton incurred blame: there had been insufficient security, her detractors claimed (and still do). This was Benghazi then, a fought-over place oil-moneyed since the 1960s.

² Christine Dixon, ‘Catalogue essay,’ *Herbert Badham 1899-1961, An Exhibition Organised by the Wollongong City Gallery* (Wollongong: Wollongong City Gallery, 1987) 9.

My brain failed to marry such *Realpolitik* with what I misremembered from *Breakfast Piece*. I didn't think about Badham's work when I read a fantastically vile 1909 novel, *Mafarka the Futurist*, set in a North African region that was probably the future nation of Libya.³ The Egyptian-born Italian founder of Futurism, Filippo Marinetti, wrote gleefully about the exploitation and massacre of black-skinned sub-Saharan mercenaries and workers in the colonised food-bowl. Black bodies were liquidised. Marinetti's tale climaxed with the creation of a new man, mechanised and proto-fascistic, who could soar through the sky.

Nor was I prompted to revisit the newspaper detail of Badham's painting in 2012 after watching a conference presentation that treated the 'Arab Spring' occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square, and subsequent occupations of public squares around the world, in utopian and aesthetic terms.

Belatedly, what did register with me, however, was the discovery that my own father, Frank, had fought in Libya as well as Egypt as a New Zealand serviceman. Since childhood I had known my Dad was in Egypt in the Second World War, and that he had been in tanks. A little research and I learned he had been in Libya too. The demarcation line across the desert had been drawn as recently as 1934.

My father had withheld from my brother and me knowledge of what he and his compatriots, *pakeha* and Maori, endured while on active service. We saw only a few small photos of Frank and other men (lean, tanned, bare chested, grinning) in Cairo on leave: in front of a pyramid, in a horse-drawn cart. My father did not brag or deplore or even speak of what happened in war, just as my Australian grandfather who had been mustard-gassed in the First World War was silent on existence in the trenches until, dying and delirious, he raved about rats and mud. Dad kept his medals and a thick book, the official history of his Division's exploits, tucked away in his lowboy. Suffering PTSD, he harangued our mother after drinking.

The Libyan region, I learned, had been invaded and occupied by Italy in 1911, when Europe's great powers were still colonising. Local resistance coupled with Ottoman and German use of the region during the Great War forced an Italian withdrawal. However, there was a re-conquest in the early 1920s, with a sustained war of pacification lasting through the 1920s and 1930s.⁴ In 1940, with the Second World War underway, Italian troops assembled in Libya went on the offensive, crossing the border into the nominally independent but British-inflected Egypt. New Zealanders entered the conflict in 1941 and for the next year were fighting chiefly in western Egypt, with several forays into sectors of Libya.

Transported next to southern Italy, my dad's group of New Zealanders fought their way north. The horrors of the battle of Monte Cassino were not mentioned when we children handled a couple of small photos of the Italian family with whom our father had been billeted after the Allies' 'liberation' of Rome. A girl with brushed black hair, her torso filling out her best white dress. As an adult, I once stood on russet gravel at the base of the rocky mount at Cassino, attempting to imagine attacking that stronghold from inside an armoured tank. I couldn't do it. Not far from that spot I bought a pair of shoes with wedge heels and gold-coloured straps. They came in a black cardboard box which I kept for years as a private, absurd memento.

³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka the Futurist: an African Novel (1909)*, trans. Carol Diethe and Steve Cox (London: Middlesex University Press, 1997).

⁴ One concise source of information which I read later is John Gooch's article 'Re-conquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy's Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922-39,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28.6 (2005) 1005-32.

Questions about cultural domination and appropriation – twin tools of pacification – began to hover around my mental image of *Breakfast Piece*. In 1936 Badham had chosen to include this foreign word I remembered as BENGHAZI. Had he been alluding to the increasing likelihood that a second Great War would break out between Europe’s most powerful nations? Or, in his mind, were all those potential combatants and civilians too far away to be more than greyscale letters at the edge of his chequered pastel cloth, there where the precariously placed still-life objects were at risk of falling to the floor if the cloth underneath them was twitched?

*

Growing familiarity with art practice equipped me to recognise *Breakfast Piece* as an exercise in perspective. Observe the diagonals, the source of the lighting, the sitter viewed from the right and slightly from above. Badham specialised in teaching perspective at the National Art School in its extraordinary premises, the old Darlinghurst Gaol. I’m guessing it was the breakthrough success of *Breakfast Piece*, purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales when it was first exhibited in the spring of 1936, that helped him gain the teaching position.

The sitter for *Breakfast Piece* was Herbert Badham’s wife, Enid, née Wilson, depicted as she was at the time of painting in 1936. She could not have been grieving for a husband absent in a war because her man was there with her. Badham had seen brief military service when he joined the Royal Australian Navy as a teenager, late in the First World War, but had not seen action overseas. As we lack a biography of Badham, I don’t know what impacts, positive or negative, that war service experience had on him or, by extension, those who lived with him.

Enid and Herbert had married in 1927 and in his *On the Roof*, a year later, Badham had shown his bride sociably lunching with visiting family members, her golf clubs in the foreground.⁵ Water views, a stylish red coffee pot (a wedding present): how we live, so gaily, in Sydney. The couple’s daughter, affectionately known as Chebby, was born in December 1928 in Clairvaux private hospital, and the family continued to live in the apartment in Vacluse as Herbert’s career emerged.

In his *Self Portrait – Man with a Glove* of 1939, Badham would depict himself as a conscientiously flamboyant Artist: cravat, lips clamped on a pipe, right hand extending forward as he pulled on a leather glove.⁶ The allusion was to Van Eyck’s portraits in which gloves signalled authority and civility. Where Van Eyck used a dark Baroque background, Badham deployed the objects of a domestic interior, including a painting in his characteristic style showing a woman posed in a sitting room, gaze averted. When I looked again at *Breakfast Piece* after considering the self-portrait, I was conscious of the unseen painter requiring command in that Vacluse room.

Researching the life of the English painter-author Wyndham Lewis, I discovered that in 1919-20 he had created a similar self-portrait, now lost.⁷ Lewis was a combative and psychologically damaged war veteran inclined to look to totalitarian solutions. He was impressed by Mussolini’s 1922 March on Rome following the collapse of the Fascists’

⁵ Catalogue 6, 21.

⁶ Catalogue 12-13, 23.

⁷ *Self-Portrait with Chair and Table*. A photograph of the painting is reproduced in Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) plate 66.

Pacification Pact with the socialists. Lewis drew his wife, nicknamed Froanna, yet in daily life she remained near invisible, even to visitors to the succession of London flats the couple occupied.

It would be misleading to push comparisons between Badham and Lewis. However, the observable similarities in the way these men expressed and represented themselves and others encouraged my suspicion that *Breakfast Piece* had never been simply an experiment in perspective or an appreciation of a loved one's peaceful mood. Enid had been directed to sit behind the objects Herbert had arrayed so impractically. Her boiled egg: balanced, untapped. A cigarette packet lying open: her morning smoke not yet enjoyed?

Badham depicted his wife's blue eyes as averted from her painter, her gaze directed toward the sunlight. It was possible to feel myself an intruder on a forced and discomfiting set-up. Tranquillity manufactured is tranquillity diffused.

*

Those blue eyes averted from the painter were also averted from the newspaper. If Enid had already read it, had its frontpage news dispirited her? Sitting at my computer screen in my house in Melbourne, I saw that the headline began with 'MAKALLE', not 'BENGHAZI'. I had misremembered for decades.

The Australian National Library's Trove supplied what Badham obscured – a cascade of page one headlines and subheads, some lines bold or italicised or both:

THE SUN, Sydney, Thursday February 13, 1936

MAKALLE CENTRE OF ANOTHER BATTLE

WAR ON AGAIN

Italians' Counter-attack

AKSUM OUTPOSTS

Withdrawal Story

OIL SANCTIONS' MOVES

Eventually the report began, with battlefield news:

Indicative of the increased activity now being shown in Abyssinia is a report that the Italians have begun an extensive counter attack in the Makalle sector ...

Resistance fighters had achieved the odd success, and had taken the opportunity to put on the aggressors' clothing and weaponry:

[Rasse Youm] ... has started his own Caporetto brigade with equipment from the slain Italian Caporetto brigade, fitting them out in khaki shorts, boots and puttees, but not using the black shirts.

Lower down was an update on the League of Nations' consideration of instituting an embargo on member nations transporting oil to Italy.

Reading more widely, I learned Italy had invaded independent Ethiopia (then commonly named Abyssinia, alternate spelling Abissinia) in October 1935. This incursion marked the beginning of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War. On their first attempt at conquest, in 1895-96, the Italians had failed.

That many of us have never heard of that 1935-36 struggle, or have forgotten hearing of it, does not mean it was minor news at the time. For months, I found, Australia's morning and afternoon dailies relayed European reports of the back and forth moves of the unequal conflict. We still hear and read allusions to the Spanish Civil War of that decade, yet a fascist conquest in the Horn of Africa now goes unmentioned.

You may wonder which major powers jumped in to actively defend the Abyssinians. None did. Indeed, France and Britain, leaders of the League of Nations, made a pact to offer Italy two-thirds of Abyssinia in exchange for concessions. Many Africans in the worldwide diaspora volunteered to travel to fight in support of the Ethiopians' resistance but were blocked by their own governments. Some Italian women in Australia donated their wedding rings to an international appeal for finances to help Italy battle on despite League sanctions. Brisbane's Catholic Archbishop, a defender of his state's considerable Italian population, said that if the Italians conquered Abyssinia they would 'use their civilising power to civilise the people'.

Late in December '35, Italy began using chemical weapons on the Abyssinians. Aircraft dropped canisters of poison gas. A Red Cross field hospital was bombed. By May '36, after Badham had finished his *Breakfast Piece*, the Italians were ready to perform a triumphal long-march to the capital. For their March of the Iron Will they mobilised a column of cars, trucks, tanks, artillery carriers, motorcycles and horse trucks, a spectacle of mechanised power. It was only heavy rain which prevented the final stretch, the leaders' entry into Addis, being carried out on horseback in full panoply.

While Ethiopia was declared conquered in 1936, this diverse nation was not entirely pacified. In February 1937, an assassination attempt was met with a violent crackdown by the occupying forces. Thousands of Ethiopians were massacred or imprisoned.⁸

Occasionally in Sydney during the 1980s I had met Ethiopian-Australians at the home of an Aussie couple who had lived in Ethiopia and whose daughter, my age, had been born there. The couple had gone to Africa in the 1950s with the Sudan Inland Mission, a Protestant organisation which had been particularly influential prior to the Italian invasion. As evangelicals, they had no truck with Catholicism or Ethiopia's long-established Orthodox faith, nor with the country's pagans and Jews. In that Sydney household, I heard of Ethiopia as a beautiful country, the Switzerland of Africa, and saw an old photo of the matriarch as a young missionary worker on horseback in the highlands. If Mek'ele was mentioned I failed to associate the sound of the word with the old spelling of the place name, Makalle, that I had seen (but failed to register) in the Badham painting.

The Derg Marxist coup of the '70s which had precipitated the flight of many citizens and foreigners from Ethiopia was scarcely alluded to at that dining table – much as Badham had positioned words at the edge of the eating surface. It was to be kept in perspective as part of missionaries', and humanity's, larger existential drama of mighty battles and displacements. I

⁸ For a recent, detailed account see Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame* (London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers, 2017). For more on Mussolini's rule and empire, see various books by R.J.B. Bosworth, most notably *Mussolini* (new edition) (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

did not hear mention by my fellow guests, the Australian Ethiopians, of the annual remembrance of the February 1937 atrocities; perhaps this was out of deference to our conservative white hosts. There was no Bob Marley in the air either, no discussion of Rastafari beliefs about Haile Selassie as *Jah* and Ethiopia as Zion.

My peer, the daughter, did not care to be associated with her birthplace, Ethiopia, and preferred to live away from her Sydney family. Missionary kids and other so-called Third Culture kids commonly report feelings of not belonging anywhere as they mature into adulthood. Resenting the expectation of exemplary behaviour placed on them as children, they may pretend to adhere to rigorous codes while slyly doing differently. Tired of tea poured from a proselytising teapot, this daughter went for the forbidden cigarettes.

In the years after those meals, I encountered several Westerners' books about Ethiopia. They were notably solipsistic. Evelyn Waugh's efforts seemed to share some kinship with that immature daughter's mix of reluctant acknowledgement and derision of both expats' and locals' behaviours. After two short stints as a correspondent, he produced first a non-fiction volume he titled *Waugh in Abyssinia* and then his satirical novel *Scoop*.⁹ Samuel Johnson used Abyssinia as his setting for his 1759 philosophical romance – short title *Rasselas*, working title 'The Choice of Life' – about a junior prince confined to a palace in a happy valley.¹⁰ Johnson's young man escaped to Egypt to trial other ways of living, his experiments ending with the probability he would return to his homeland. Was happiness attainable, enquired Johnson, whose mother had lately died back in provincial Lichfield; what constituted the well-lived life?

So, what did Badham mean to convey when he included those blurred headlines speaking of 'MAKALLE' and 'AKSUM'? Picasso in his 1937 *Guernica* went for explicit images, most memorably of dismemberment, to point to the brutality of the aerial bombing of a Basque town. By contrast, Badham's reticence in his 1936 painting must seem feeble. But it is an alternate model of how to reference and provoke thought about battles and sufferings. Old-fashioned, unsubtle, but he did try, as cartoonists do with their labels.

At least, I think he tried. There are other Badham paintings in which a marginal sign or notice, partially obscured, depicts words. It is one of Badham's tics as the wry Artist Observer of contemporary Sydney. Another is to draw himself at the sidelines of a crowd as a pipe-smoking, owl-eyed Observer. Sometimes the meaning of the words matters, and humour is generated by the conjunction of a peeling notice with heedless passengers, pedestrians, diners. But at other times the viewer may wonder whether the words, and the objects on which they are printed – placards, tin signs, newspapers -- are meaningful to the artist only as graphic shapes and vectors in his composition.

The afternoon newspaper folded on the leading corner of the Badhams' breakfast table shows the left upper quadrant of its front page. The half-visible words of the newspaper banner, headlines and subheadings are there, indeed, but so are symmetrical shapes in an advertisement. Trove shows me the full picture. There are two advertisements occupying the upper part of the farthest left column, one positioned above the other, and both are for bottled products suitable for illustrating in a narrow column. Pick Me Up sauce is at the top. A more expensive bottle –

⁹ Evelyn Waugh, *Waugh in Abyssinia* (London: Longmans, Green, 1936); *Scoop: a novel about journalists* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1938).

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia: A Tale*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

filled with Hennessy cognac – is shown in larger scale below it. For the newspaper’s editor, pragmatic considerations of commerce and layout trumped any thought that putting bottles of tasty sauce and alcohol beside news of warfare might signal a lack of due seriousness and decorum.

*

That Badham may not have intended to elicit thought about the colonising war in Ethiopia is possible. And it’s even more possible that he did not intend to prompt thoughts about the selfhood and autonomy of the woman sitting for him.

How did Enid feel about repeatedly sitting for extended periods for exercises in perspective? Was she posing under sufferance? Her feelings and thoughts seem flattened behind an impassive face. In the painting chamber Enid had to allow the freedoms of an independent being to be taken from her in the interests of her husband’s patternmaking. The inelegant modern-day description of her facial expression would be ‘resting bitch face’.

Two mature, married men to whom I showed the image expressed curiosity about how Badham was feeling and sympathy for his possible troubles. Perhaps the painter felt lonely and under-appreciated when his wife looked away, seemingly indifferent to his enterprise? Did he feel insecure, they wondered, because she was failing to attend to him at a deep level? If she was quite strong and reflective, even purposeful, was she consciously closing out her husband?

One name for the use of a body situated at the centre of a carefully contrived exercise in composition and perspective is ‘objectification’. And that is pretty much what the AGNSW in its online characterisation of the painting both does and ascribes to Badham: ‘*Breakfast Piece* is an amalgamation of objects amongst which the artist has situated his wife.’ It was not until a couple of years ago that I discovered this anonymous online description. Had I read it earlier, then presumably I would have noted the adjacent sentence referring to how the newspaper headline announcing Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia is a counterpoint to the ‘tranquil morning mood’.¹¹

The word I would choose for conveying my suspicions about Badham’s treatment of his wife is ‘pacification’. It would be a relief to be proved wrong. I merely speculate. If we give credence to the notion of Enid keeping her thoughts to herself and withholding the appreciative attention her husband regarded as his due, then we can also imagine the human object metaphorically situating her painter. The painting becomes an object lesson in subversion and passive-aggression, its tenor increasingly distant from tranquillity.

Deborah Beck, archivist and historian, interviewed the Badhams’ daughter, Chebby, in 2017. By then a very old woman, Chebby recalled, seemingly with more indulgent bemusement than rancour, her impatience to get away and go off with her friends when she was a girl and her father had requested her to stay still in some posture or location while he drew her.¹²

In the slim file of Badham records at the AGNSW I found correspondence from 1985. Virago Press had requested permission to reproduce *Breakfast Piece* on the front cover of a

¹¹ Art Gallery of New South Wales website, www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/6381/. If the statement that the headline announces an invasion is to be taken literally, it is incorrect, since Mussolini’s troops had invaded in the previous year.

¹² Private conversation with Deborah Beck, National Art School, Sydney, 17 May 2017.

reissue of a 1945 Eleanor Dark novel, *The Little Company*. Chebby had written back on behalf of her mother, then aged 85, telling Virago Enid was pleased with the plan and ‘delighted with the compliment paid to my father’s painting’. ‘Incidentally’, Chebby added, ‘she was amused at the idea of becoming a cover girl’.¹³ Such a nicely tongue-in-cheek remark. Although I note, now, there is no mention of either mother or daughter having read or planning to read Dark’s book.

This begs the question: have I read it? The answer is yes, but only recently with appreciative attention. I remember being introduced to Carmen Callil, the Australian-born founder of Virago, when she was briefly in Sydney in 1986 or 1987. Doubtless Callil’s visit had some component of promotion of the reissued Australian classics with the artworks on their covers. It’s possible, then, that I saw the Dark reissue at that time, noticing its cover and flipping through the opening pages, and I seem to have a residual memory of one character, the protagonist’s daughter, who like me was working in Sydney.

When finally I decided to read *The Little Company* ‘properly’ and to investigate its background, I learned it addressed Australian society and gender relations in the 1930s and the war years of the early 1940s. Notionally at least Virago’s choice of the Badham painting was apt. Unable to find an available library copy of the 1985 reissue, I turned to the 2012 ebook.¹⁴ Almost immediately I saw the second sentence of the novel: ‘From the Sunday paper, fallen on the grass beside Gilbert Massey’s deck-chair, bold black headlines announced: A.I.F. NOT IN BENGHAZI RETREAT.’¹⁵

So, there it was. More than likely my wrong-headed association of *Breakfast Piece* with Benghazi originated in the mid to late 1980s when I handled a copy of the Dark reissue, seeing the Badham painting close to the capitalised word BENGHAZI.

Dark’s storyline begins in April 1941. In February the Allies, Australians included, had captured Benghazi from the Italians. Churchill had then called a halt to a further advance west, saying troops needed to be withdrawn to defend Greece. And in early April, with Allied forces withdrawing, Benghazi was captured by Axis. Dark’s headline is a modification of a *Sun* headline from Sunday 6 April: ‘No A.I.F. Troops in Bengazi [*sic*] Skirmishes.’¹⁶

Gilbert, an author, is presented with sympathetic insight by Dark, while his wife Phyllis is scorned for her uninquisitive conservatism. Telling the couple’s story in flashbacks, Dark describes how by the ‘increasingly uneasy’ years of the mid-30s Phyllis was ‘resentfully conscious’ that child-bearing and rearing and zealous housekeeping had sapped her physical appeal: ‘By 1935 she had already begun to look bulky and to move slowly; the bright colouring, which had been her chief claim to prettiness, had faded from her cheeks and eyes.’ And what Phyllis had understood as Gilbert’s financial anxiety during the Depression years had to be acknowledged as ‘something much more – an anxiety about the world in general, a nagging dissatisfaction, a mounting anger, a sombre obsession’.¹⁷

There is much polemical dialogue in Dark’s novel. By contrast, the silence of the Badham painting could seem a relief from contestation and credos, until one reflects on how

¹³ This letter from Chebby Badham to Virago (1985) is contained in the AGNSW Archives in *Papers of Herbert Badham* (MS1997.7).

¹⁴ Eleanor Dark, *The Little Company* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012).

¹⁵ Dark 9.

¹⁶ Ian Fitchett, ‘No A.I.F. Troops in Bengazi Skirmishes,’ Cairo, Saturday. *The Sun* (Sydney), Sun 6 April 1941, 1.

¹⁷ Dark 76.

much is going unsaid in that Vaucluse scene and how much, perhaps, there has been silencing or self-censorship.

For all their wordiness, Dark's politicised characters are not as productive as they would wish. Since the release of his 1937 book *Thunder Brewing*, her Gilbert has not published. Rather, he has read intensively, newspapers especially, 'watching the headlines, and, even more narrowly, the obscure little paragraphs; reading not only the lines of print, but between them; sorting facts and relating them, sifting evidence, accumulating and discarding, toiling laboriously like an ant to add his grain of comprehension to the world's sum.' He has been 'awake only in his mind' while functioning in the contemporary world 'like a sleepwalker'.¹⁸ The metaphor of sleepwalking was popular in both socio-political and psychologically oriented literary writing of the 1930s and early 1940s. Patrick White, for one, used it in his *The Living and the Dead* (1941), another novel about the conflicts and dilemmas leading up to the Second World War. (White focuses on Londoners' responses to the Spanish Civil War.)¹⁹

At the end of 1942 Dark's Gilbert is still 'poring with miserly concentration over remembered scraps of news. ... ROMMEL NOW IN TRIPOLI AREA. RUSSIA LAUNCHES FOURTH MAJOR OFFENSIVE.'²⁰ For a person close to any such wartime action, it cannot be understood as trivial or fragmentary. Yet from the distance and perspective of Australia, it may be classed as one piece in a large, kaleidoscopic picture; and, in the creative work of the visual artist or author, the words referring to it may rest at the edge of a tabletop or sit crammed on a page undistinguished from other headlines. Dark's Gilbert is overtaken by an urgent desire to 'get on with his task of recording and interpreting' some part of 'this enormous world-story'.²¹

Along the way to this ending, Gilbert's reveries about the recent past gloss the key conflicts of the 1930s, including the war in Abyssinia. His fellow Australians' indifference and absence of foresight incenses him:

Hadn't he seen the vast majority of his country's seven million inhabitants moving through life in the bewitchment of a familiar routine, stepping from today's problems to tomorrow's, declining to meet those of next week halfway? They knew there was fighting going on in China – but, cripes, when wasn't there fighting going on in China? They knew that Mussolini was dropping bombs on Abyssinian natives – but when haven't natives got it in the neck? They disapproved in theory; this Musso, they thought vaguely, was beginning to throw his weight around too much.²²

Two pages later, Gilbert is channelling the thoughts of his radical sister, Marty, and Communist brother: '[Y]ou can't have nations just walking in and grabbing other nations. Look at Austria. Look at Abyssinia. Maybe they were just a bunch of savages, but all the same ...'. He fumes that the League of Nations failed to go to Abyssinia's aid despite its covenant pledging

¹⁸ Dark 318.

¹⁹ For a more extensive discussion of this see Robyn Walton, 'Utopianism in Patrick White's *The Living and the Dead*,' *Cercles* no. 26, 2012. White's novel was first published in 1941, by Viking in New York.

²⁰ Dark 318.

²¹ Dark 318.

²² Dark 125-26.

that, if a member nation were attacked, all the others had to go to its help. ‘Abyssinia was a member, and so were we. ... Why?’²³

Gilbert directs some of his rage at his wife. Why hadn’t she cared, back in 1934 and after, when the conflicts that were the precursors of the Second World War were in the news? He mimics Phyllis’s past efforts to downplay conflicts and keep her thoughts serene:

“Oh – China!” That was not our business. Then, “Oh, Abyssinia ... well ...!” Then Spain. “But, Gilbert, that’s a civil war.” ... Then Czechoslovakia and Munich. “But he’s trying to keep the peace, Gilbert!”²⁴

In her resistance to her husband’s provocations and lectures, Phyllis could be seen to be practising self-pacification. There are glimpses, however, of her anger. Gilbert recalls how ‘[s]he looked at him with hatred’. He explains (or rationalises) this to himself: it was ‘not, he knew, a personal hatred of himself, but woman’s hatred of man’s mysterious, mischievous, destructive activities’.²⁵ A piece of polemical writing by Gilbert’s sister is introduced to say the words Phyllis cannot and may not want to formulate. Marty claims men rationalise their ‘criminal muddling’ and blame the women ‘who have poured themselves out with misguided, sacrificial recklessness ... women who have stunted their brains, lost their alertness, narrowed their vision, and all but renounced their very humanity to make good his senseless orgies of self-destruction ...’²⁶

Noting that Australian scholar Drusilla Modjeska had contributed an introduction to the Virago reissue of *The Little Company* and knowing she had written on art as well as literature and women’s issues, I took myself to the Rare Books room of my state library to discover her insights. Taking the paperback from its plastic sleeve, I was delighted to see the colours of the reproduced painting were undimmed. The image had been cropped, however, causing Enid and the table of objects to fill the space. The folded newspaper was still there in part, the letters MAK all that remained visible of MAKALLE.

Modjeska proved to have nothing to say about the cover art. She may not have even known of the choice when she wrote. What she had to say about the novel was couched in terms of developing understandings. As with my experience of looking at the Badham painting on and off over decades, she had visited and revisited Dark’s fiction. This was her second essay on *The Little Company*, and as she was then (in 1985) approaching the age that Dark had been when she wrote the book, she felt better able to ‘appreciate the thinking and rethinking of a woman in the middle of her life’.²⁷

Earlier, Modjeska said, she had argued that *The Little Company* was ‘a retreat from feminism under the pressure of broader political issues raised by depression and war’. She had seen Phyllis as an expression of Dark’s exasperation with women who ‘make conventional values their own, [who] become guardians of conservative and often misogynist ideologies’.²⁸ I

²³ Dark 127.

²⁴ Dark 131.

²⁵ Dark, 131.

²⁶ Dark, 131

²⁷ Drusilla Modjeska. ‘Introduction to Eleanor Dark,’ *The Little Company* (London: Virago, 1985) ix.

²⁸ Modjeska, xiv-xv.

nodded in recognition as I read. Those closing words of the sentence tallied with how I have been inclined to regard my mother, also named Phyllis.

Modjeska continued: 'I am now not so sure.' Another way of looking at Dark's representation of Phyllis 'is as a powerful indictment of social conditions that result in such maiming of the female self'.²⁹ Blame may be shifted then from some individuals to social conditioning. Should I agree, since with increasing age and perspective I have learned to concede due allowance for upbringing, privations and hurt when I think ruefully or indignantly about my mother's severity and co-dependence? The blame that Dark's Marty directs at men en masse for dutiful women's diminished wellbeing sits between Modjeska's alternatives of blaming these women and broadly indicting institutional and social limiting of women.

*

At the stage I was noticing similarities between Badham's painting and Dark's novel, a woman from the book group I belong to read my draft essay. My description of the painting reminded her of the themes of an Australian novel we'd read a couple of years earlier, Elizabeth Harrower's *The Watch Tower*. I agreed, while thinking: 'Oh no, too much!' I couldn't further complicate the tale of my evolving appreciation of *Breakfast Piece* by mentioning Harrower's novel. It had not been published until 1966, and most of its action took place after the 1930s.

Two weeks later, two Canberra friends – a conservator and an archivist-author – were staying with me. Sitting after breakfast at my table, a repurposed trestle work bench, we were discussing our recent reading, writing and art viewing when the conservator said, 'There's an edition of *The Watch Tower* with that Badham painting on the cover.' As best he could visualise the image on the cover, it was a detail; the checked tablecloth was what you saw. My friends promised to post me their copy as soon as they reached home.

One week later, I held the book, a 1991 Imprint edition published by the venerable Angus & Robertson company, by then owned by the international HarperCollins. There Enid sat at her kitchen table. The image had been cropped only to the same extent as the one on the Dark cover. But, situated within broad white margins, it looked diminished and washed-out. Again, I did not know who had chosen this painting to complement a novel by an Australian woman. And had I not known how brilliantly insightful and searing this Harrower novel is, I might not have opened the pale cover to begin re-reading.

When war is declared in September 1939, eleven-year-old Clare Vaizey asks with a child's acuity: 'What are they doing it for?' Her narcissistic mother responds: 'You can read. There's the paper. Find out.'³⁰ On Saturdays, seated on the 'cushiony red seats in the lilac-scented disinfected dark' of the cinema, Clare and her elder sister, Laura, glimpse the expansion of the war: 'the bombed cities of Europe ... the deserts of the Middle East ... the northern jungles'.³¹ They feel 'inadequacy, hollowness and frustration'.³² Later, a Dutch post-war immigrant will be invited into the sisters' household, but these newsreel allusions indicate the limits of Harrower's representation of the horrors brought about by war. Her topic is domestic

²⁹ Modjeska, xv.

³⁰ Elizabeth Harrower, *The Watch Tower* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991) 21.

³¹ Harrower 23.

³² Harrower 24.

abuse, specifically the pacification of Laura and Clare and the sporadic resistance put up by Clare. Warfare is not only the backdrop but, in her narrative, a parallel engagement.

With her father having died early, her mother determined to leave Australia, and her hopes of a tertiary education thwarted, Laura is at a loss to know how to adequately support herself on a factory wage and help Clare finish secondary school. Enter a provider in the form of her employer, businessman Felix Shaw. Despite knowing this complex man's erratic behaviour from daily observation and having heard him boast of admiring Hitler and the Gestapo, self-sacrificing Laura marries Felix. She and Clare move into his substantial Neutral Bay house, where the mental cruelty enjoyed by this dark-haired Bluebeard character is soon apparent. The sisters become psychological prisoners. Felix's belittling tirades, threats, heavy drinking, and outbursts of violence serve to terrorise them into not daring to leave, while his occasional shows of charm and gift-giving manipulate Laura into forbearance. His is classic controlling behaviour. Laura is intimidated into first, silent submission and second, siding with and enabling his viciousness.

The kitchen table, not unlike that of the Badhams although more upmarket, becomes emblematic of Laura's captivity, and Clare's. In one episode, Laura briefly escapes by going into the city on a Saturday afternoon. While ineffectually searching the newspaper for accommodation and a job, she sees her existence with Felix in perspective, realising that little by little she has resigned away her selfhood 'from a desire for peace at any price'.³³ Her will too paralysed for her to act in her own interests, Laura returns to the house, where Felix and Clare are eating at the kitchen table. She and Clare exchange 'bleached' glances.³⁴

On another occasion, the sisters sit polishing silverware in 'the pleasant lemon-and-white kitchen smelling of silver polish and bananas and pears, full of Saturday afternoon quiet'.³⁵ In this superficially tranquil setting, Laura has been echoing Felix's arguments against paying taxes to fund social services, with Clare taking the contrary view. Laura not only defends Felix but has internalised his domineering attitudes. She tells Clare to clean faster and stop being 'argumentative and moody'. To Clare's eyes, her expression is as 'defiant and venomous as Felix's was when he made some such controlling remark'. Clare rails against her sister's fearful refusal to be true to her real nature. Living in this household, she declares, is 'like living in an asylum. The air even seems demented.'³⁶

A haggard figure in the pleasingly appointed kitchen, Clare pleads for Laura's agreement that she be allowed to go away. Laura replies with an instruction to fetch a tea-towel, following it up with the ultimate threat: 'If you go, don't ever come back or try to get in touch with me for any reason, because I won't be here.'³⁷ This veiled acknowledgement of suicidal ideation is halted by the sounds of Felix's return from the hotel he co-owns. Urgently, shame-facedly, the women clear the table. Felix enters, 'out for a little blood sport'.³⁸

As Jennifer Osborn notes in her review essay on *The Watch Tower*, when Clare finally frees herself it is without Laura's help. Women and girls subjugated by or cognisant of domestic

³³ Harrower 109.

³⁴ Harrower 110.

³⁵ Harrower 122.

³⁶ Harrower 121-22.

³⁷ Harrower 122.

³⁸ Harrower 123.

abuse do not necessarily show solidarity.³⁹ Joan London, in her introduction to the 2012 edition of *The Watch Tower*, recounts not only how the novel impacted strongly on her when she read it in 1970 but how its contents stayed in the back of her mind, especially ‘the sense of darkness in sunlight’.⁴⁰

Both these observations are pertinent when I study the face of the woman in *Paint and Morning Tea*, the painting that Badham made in 1937, a year after *Breakfast Piece*.⁴¹ The sitter, so I understand, is a family member. She is shown seated holding uplifted a cup and saucer and gazing toward the light source while in the foreground her painter, Badham, sits at his easel. The combination of her expression of hauteur and her smart dress sense suggests she is a more worldly-wise woman than Enid and, the viewer guesses, not as subdued. She looks ready to head back out into the Sydney sunlight as soon as practicable. The sitter’s red hat and matching lipstick are not only counterparts of the hat and lip colouring in William Frater’s 1937 portrait of Lina Bryans, *The Red Hat*.⁴² Both the Badham and Frater paintings possibly reference the red hat and warm-toned lips of Vermeer’s *Girl with the Red Hat* (1665–1666).⁴³

*

Scrutinising *Breakfast Piece* again I noticed, as if for the first time, the huge black stripe through the left half of the background. Behind the objects and woman, a door stands open. An inclusion warding off claustrophobia, a cultural critic might remark. The door is rendered in solid black. Fernand Leger’s influence, yes. The black is repeated as stripes in the doorframe and in Enid’s belt, while a blue-striped fabric covers her chairback. As a charcoal shadow, the black reappears behind the sunlit newspaper. Technical device and artistic homage, certainly. A representation of the darkness which may stand behind tranquillity, that too.

Or, perhaps, a pipe is just a pipe, and the creation of the black slab was a practical ploy born out of the artist’s cash-strapped circumstances. For the Badhams were poor then by Western standards and Herbert was given to re-using even flimsy sheets of card. With the guidance of a conservator, I have studied x-rays of two Badham paintings, *Paint and Morning Tea* and *The Night Bus* (c. 1943).⁴⁴ It is evident that when necessary Badham worked with whatever was pre-existing. If a dark shape was too intransigent to obliterate, he incorporated it into his new composition, making it into a new object. In this way, for instance, a dark area in the lower right corner of a 1935 street scene became a dark box of artist’s equipment in the 1937 painting.

I have not seen x-rays of *Breakfast Piece* so cannot tell whether the black door is a reworking of some stubborn pre-existing slab of darkness on the board. Nor can I say whether

³⁹ Jennifer Osborn, ‘Review Essay: *The Watch Tower* by Elizabeth Harrower,’ *Transnational Literature* 9.2 (May 2017) <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>.

⁴⁰ Joan London, ‘The Only Russian in Sydney: Introduction to Elizabeth Harrower,’ *The Watch Tower* (Melbourne: Text Classics, 2012).

⁴¹ Herbert Badham’s *Paint and Morning Tea* is in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Melbourne.

⁴² William Frater’s *The Red Hat* is also in the collection of the NGV. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/5605>

⁴³ Johannes Vermeer’s painting is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.60.html

⁴⁴ NGV, 18 January 2017. Assistance given by Raye Collins.

the folded newspaper in the lower right corner covers anything other than a section of the breakfast cloth and tabletop.

Where the Badhams' tabletop is exposed, a finely checked, textured covering like mosaic is visible. It is dully yellow-olive, while the table's edge and legs appear to be white-painted wood. I can remember this kind of decorative, wipeable table surfacing from my childhood, when every bit of furniture we had was second- or third-hand. The material stuck to the tabletop was a variety of embossed oilcloth or linoleum. Where this material was wearing or damaged at the edges, a child's fingers could prise small pieces away. It had a dense, claggy black underside.

It is possible to liken such darkness to the horrors of war, the fate of the Abyssinians hilled and pacified by Mussolini's colonisation being one example. But whether I can justly assert there was darkness underlying the Badhams' relationship must remain an open question for now.

Robyn Walton is an Honorary Associate in the Department of Creative Arts and English at La Trobe University, Melbourne. Her PhD on the topic of Utopia and Colonisation was obtained at La Trobe University and her earlier degrees at the University of Sydney. She has taught at University of Technology Sydney and La Trobe University, has published short fictions, and is a literary critic.

Works Cited

- Bosworth, R.J.B. *Mussolini*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010.
- Campbell, Ian. *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame*. (London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers, 2017).
- Dixon, Christine. 'Catalogue essay,' *Herbert Badham 1899-1961: An Exhibition Organised by the Wollongong City Gallery*. Wollongong: Wollongong City Gallery, 1987.
- Dark, Eleanor. *The Little Company*. 1945. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012.
- Fitchett, Ian. 'No A.I.F. Troops in Bengazi Skirmishes.' *The Sun*. Sydney, 6 April 1941, 1.
- Gooch, John. 'Re-conquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy's Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922-39.' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28.6 (2005) 1005-1032.
- Harrower, Elizabeth. *The Watch Tower*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991.
- 'Herbert Badham, *Breakfast Piece*'. Art Gallery of New South Wales, www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/6381. Accessed 18 Sept 2018.
- Johnson, Samuel. *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia: A Tale*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927.
- London, Joan. 'The Only Russian in Sydney: Introduction to Elizabeth Harrower,' *The Watch Tower*. Melbourne: Text Classics, 2012.
- 'Makalle Centre of Another Battle.' *The Sun*. Sydney, 13 Feb 1936.
- Modjeska, Drusilla. 'Introduction to Dark, Eleanor.' *The Little Company*. London: Virago, 1975.
- Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. *Mafarka the Futurist: An African Novel*. 1909. Trans. Carol Diethel and Steve Cox. London: Middlesex UP, 1997.
- Michel, Walter. *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1971.
- Osborn, Jennifer. 'Review Essay: *The Watch Tower* by Elizabeth Harrower.' *Transnational Literature* 9.2 (May 2017). <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>.

- Walton, Robyn. 'Utopianism in Patrick White's *The Living and the Dead*.' *Cercles* 26 (Dec. 2012).
- Waugh, Evelyn. *Scoop: A Novel about Journalists*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1938.
- Waugh, Evelyn. *Waugh in Abissinia*. London: Longmans, Green, 1936.
- White, Patrick. *The Living and the Dead*. New York: Viking, 1941.

'On Pacification: The International and Domestic Referents of an Australian Artwork.' Robyn Walton. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 11 no. 1, December 2018.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>