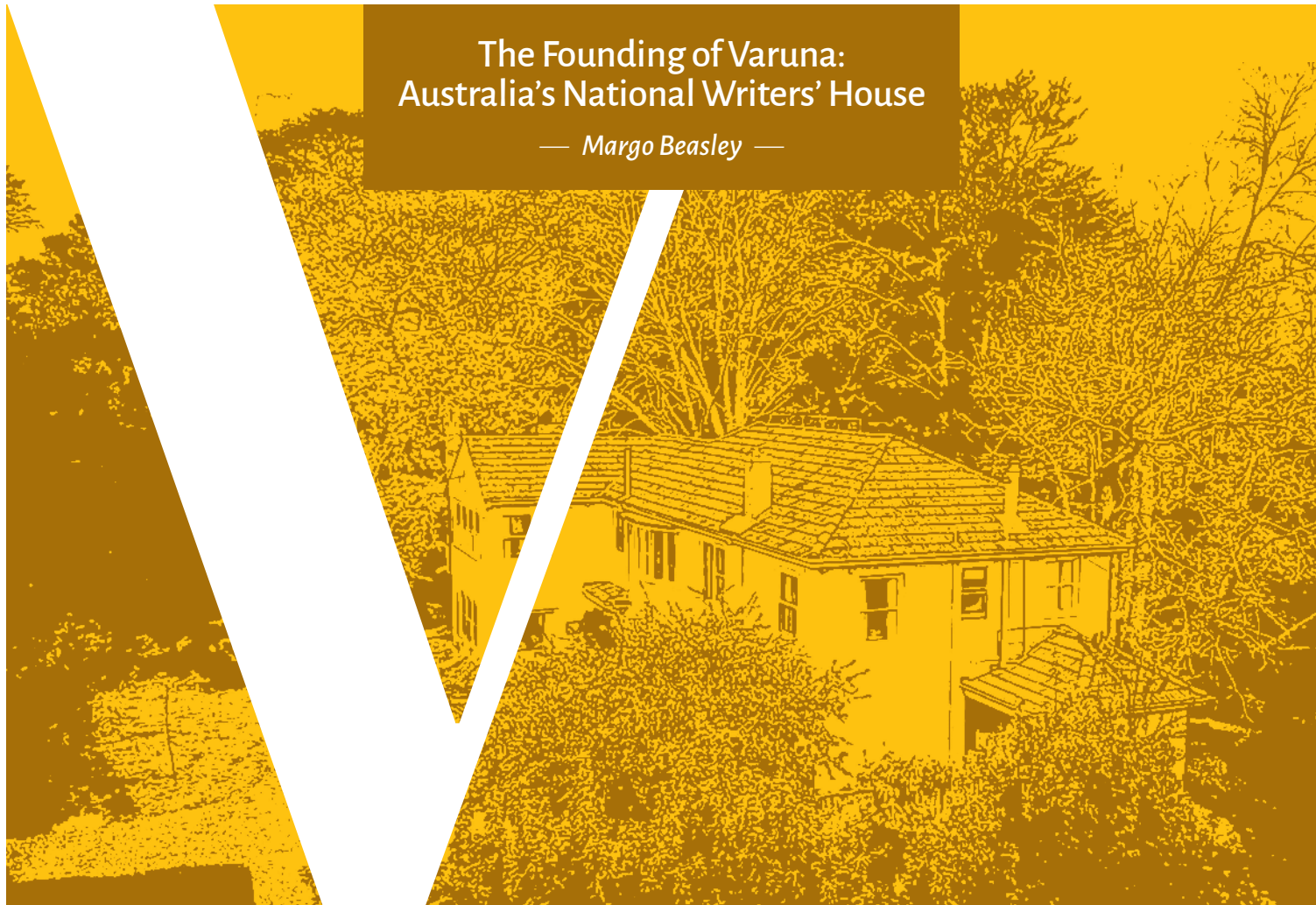


The Founding of Varuna: Australia's National Writers' House

— *Margo Beasley* —





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The Founding of Varuna: Australia's National Writers' House

VARUNA was once the home of Eleanor Dark (d.1985), and her husband Dr Eric Dark (d.1987). Located in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales, the property was gifted to the Australian writing community in 1989 by their son Mick Dark. Both Eleanor and Eric Dark were closely connected with the cultural heritage and physical landscape of the Blue Mountains, as well as many of the progressive social issues of their times.

The large house, along with its extensive gardens, is now run primarily as a retreat for writers: a place where writers can work in productive silence away from the demands and distractions of daily life. Set amongst gardens established by Eleanor Dark, 'Varuna' has powerful associations in the minds of many of Australia's writers as a place of peace and solitude, inspiration and creativity. It is also a place of strong community, with writers sharing meals in the evening and enjoying lively conversations around the open fire.



Eric Dark's office at Varuna, 1990

Distinguished historian the late Professor Manning Clark described Varuna as:

a place for writers and others seeking inspiration ... [and] a continuation of the work of Eleanor Dark. In her novels and her other works she made a contribution to the intellectual and spiritual life of all Australians. She led us to understand who we were. She taught us that we could stand alone.¹

The transition from the Darks' spacious private dwelling to a cultural institution took place across the late 1980s and the early 1990s and was propelled by a committed group of people whose motive might broadly be described as dedication to the preservation and promotion of Australian culture and identity.

Eleanor and Eric's son, Michael (known as 'Mick'), was key to the entire process. After the death of his parents, Mick inherited Varuna, and, being a noted and dedicated environmentalist, his first thought was that the house might become an environmental centre. However, at the suggestion of the writer Roger Milliss, a family friend of the Darks, the idea of a residential centre for writers also

¹ Cited in *Varuna Newsletter* Dec 6 1990.



The house before renovations, 1990

took root. For a time, it seemed possible that Mick Dark's inheritance would be able, in some form, to provide for both.

In the wake of Eric Dark's death in 1987, a seminar about the lives of Eleanor and Eric, organised by librarian John Low, was held at Katoomba Library, and ideas about Varuna becoming a writers' centre were aired publicly. In April the following year, an organisation called the *Friends of Varuna* (which would become the *Eleanor Dark Foundation* eighteen months later) was established at another public gathering, this time at the nearby Wentworth Falls School of Arts. On this occasion, papers on the lives and work of the Darks were given by their close friend, the bookseller and activist John Apthorp, and David Lawton, a professor of literature who was also a local alderman. The writer Robert Carter spoke about the general benefits to writers of writers' centres.

A handful of writers' centres existed elsewhere in Australia and the world, but none had the same precise conditions or objectives: the transformation of a handsome middle-class home into a (then unfunded) residential retreat where writers could stay for extended periods of time, preferably for free, to foster their art. Developing a model towards which to work was the task of the first committee members of the *Friends of Varuna*



Bay window in the dining room at Varuna, 1990

which comprised a mixture of (mainly local) writers, editors, librarians, academics and arts administrators. Mick Dark was chair; Carolyn Leigh secretary; John Low treasurer; and Rhonda Flottmann, Maggie Deahm, Ivor Indyk and David Lawton general members.

Mick Dark was the keystone of the new organisation. He outlined a proposal that he sell the house to a foundation which would establish and maintain a writers' centre,

and proceeds from the sale would be used to set up an environmental centre. Other issues raised on the day, and subsequently, went to the heart of the committee's preoccupations for the next several years: what kinds of writers should come to Varuna and for how long; how should they be supported; might corporate sponsorship contribute; and how should Varuna be publicised and promoted? The necessity for fostering relationships with government ministers and arts bureaucrats, with a view to ongoing funding, would become an enduring focus of attention.

In May 1988, *Friends of Varuna* committee members met for the first time at Varuna, and Mick escorted them through his childhood home. What they saw was the house that Eleanor and Eric had lived in for over sixty years: a by then somewhat neglected two-storey, five-bedroom dwelling and separate garden studio, which Eleanor had designed and in which her award-winning novels were written. The Darks' furniture, library and mementos were still in place (many remain today), and it was there that they had entertained artists, politicians and fellow writers, played tennis and gardened. From their home they had immersed themselves in the surrounding bush, embarked on ambitious rockclimbing excursions, and taken family and friends to a secluded furnished cave further down the mountain.

Months of vigorous and passionate activity followed this first tour of the house and there was wide discussion amongst committee members and other supporters about just how the whole visionary scheme for Varuna might function. The house needed significant work but equally pressing were such questions as: who would be eligible to stay there (should partners also be allowed to stay, for instance); how many fellowships should be offered; how many residencies would be feasible at any one time; and



South side of the house, circa 1980s

should non-fellowship writers also be able to stay and if so, how much should they pay? Committee members met with local writers to seek advice on what they thought might work for them: Peter Bishop, Jennifer Maiden, Frances Pollon, Ken Quinnell, Nadia Wheatley and Tom Whitton amongst them.

The *Eleanor Dark Foundation* held its inaugural general meeting in November 1989, having been incorporated as a company limited by guarantee a couple of months earlier. *Friends of Varuna* committee members formed the *Eleanor Dark Foundation's* first board and Mick Dark became its president, a position he retained until his death in 2015. Later, a management committee to oversee day-to-day details was set up, and notable subsequent additions to the Board included George Zdenkowski, academic and lawyer, and Jill Hickson, literary agent. The new entity was more than just a name change; it represented the transition from a relatively informal group with a heartfelt ambition into a legally functional structure which could both apply for, and administer, funding. However, broad funding and policy conditions were not as favourable as they once had been.

The Whitlam Labor Government of 1972 had promoted an atmosphere of cultural nationalism with generous arts funding in the 1970s, but by the time the *Friends of Varuna* and the *Eleanor Dark Foundation* were finding their feet in the late 1980s, economic rationalism had seen a significant decline in public sector support for the arts. Competition for the arts dollar was keen, illustrated by a spat between campaigns for purchase of rival writers' houses in the pages of *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The Varuna camp wrote that far too much press attention was being given to a push for a possible state purchase of *Wyewurk*, the house in which *British* novelist D. H. Lawrence had stayed for a few months in the 1920s. The letter posed the rhetorical question: why should the briefly rented dwelling (decades earlier) of a foreign writer be recognised over a house which was designed and lived in for more than sixty years by a great *Australian* novelist?²

Labor Premier Neville Wran had promised in 1985 that New South Wales would get a writers' centre. Although Labor and Wran were no longer in government, the former premier's assertion lent credence to the idea that a (state) Ministry of the Arts purchase of Varuna was not out of the question. The *Friends of Varuna* and the *Eleanor*

2 Letter from Rhonda Flottmann *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 12 1988.

Dark Foundation wanted, ideally, such a purchase along with ongoing funding from the Australia Council for the Arts. This solution would have meant that Varuna would be viable as a writers' retreat, but that there would also be money to fund Mick Dark's environmental centre.

The strength of the Dark legacy and the worthiness of the project meant that various arts funding bodies did indeed listen, and respond, with both sympathy and enthusiasm. But there was never really going to be enough money to fund the preferred options and grants were always going to be tied to the goals of the funding bodies. There were meetings and informal discussions with significant individuals such as Thomas Shapcott, director of the then Literary Arts Board of the Australia Council; Peter Collins, Minister for the Arts in the NSW Liberal government; local state Labor member Bob Debus; Gianfranco Cresciani from the Arts Ministry, and with other influential people. An approach to Clyde Holding, federal Minister for the Arts in the Hawke Labor Government, went unanswered. Later in the piece, federal Labor ministers Ros Kelly and David Simmons' offices were visited for the purpose of seeking enhanced federal funding, and gaining tax-deductibility status.

The meetings, phone calls, lobbying, grant applications and nurturing of interpersonal relationships eventually paid off, with less funding than was requested but with enough to make a start. Nothing was forthcoming for a direct purchase of the house from Mick. In June 1988 a \$60,000 grant was provided by the Heritage Conservation Fund (via the Minister for Local Government David Hay) and in July 1988 the Literary Arts Board of the Australia Council provided \$10,000 to employ a firm called Business Arts Connection to assist with establishing the *Eleanor Dark Foundation* as a properly constituted not-for-profit writers' centre. At a NSW Literature Awards dinner in September 1989, Minister for the Arts Peter Collins announced a grant of \$70,000 and further funding of \$35,000 was granted by the Western Sydney Area Assistance Scheme to cover the cost of a part-time director and clerical assistance of 7-10 hours per week. There was also a one-off donation of nearly \$10,000 from a company called Theatre Freehold to fund residencies for playwrights and screenwriters.

It was evident that inadequate public sector funding meant private sector funding would have to be sought. One such discussion point, for instance, was a suggestion

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Eleanor and Eric Dark

The Dark Family

Eleanor Dark (née O'Reilly) was born in Sydney in 1901 and was a renowned Australian novelist, the most well-known of her ten novels being *The Timeless Land* (1941). Dr Eric Dark was born in Mittagong in 1889, and was a medical practitioner as well as a writer, activist and keen rockclimber. An active member of the Labor left and a committed socialist, Dr Dark wrote books on politics and medicine.

Eleanor and Eric married in 1922 and moved to Katoomba in 1923, where they purchased a modest weatherboard home on a two-acre block in Cascade Street. A short walk away from Katoomba Falls and the magnificent escarpment overlooking the Jamison Valley, the house had been named 'Varuna' by its original owners after the ancient Indian god of the moon, the sky and the waters. It was to be the place where Eleanor wrote most of her novels, and where she spent over sixty years of her life.

Eric's son, John, from Eric's marriage to Kathleen Raymond (who died shortly after giving birth), joined his father and stepmother for some of the time at Varuna, and in 1929, Eric and Eleanor's son Michael ('Mick') was born. In 1938, the Darks built a separate writing studio in the garden



Eric, John, Michael and Eleanor, January 1937

and the following year, they replaced their modest cottage with a roomy two-storey brick house with a stucco exterior. Both the house and studio were designed by Eleanor, their large north-facing windows catching the sunlight.

Eleanor was a keen gardener, building dry stone walls and creating pathways through a mix of exotics and native plants, as well as planting an orchard. These gardens are still tended by her grandson, Rod. Rod's mother, Jill,



Mick Dark

remains actively involved in Varuna and enjoys taking visitors on tours of the garden. After gifting the property to the writing community, Mick was a keen visitor to the place that had been his family home, and spent many an evening by the open fire, conversing with writers and people from the community. He was a member of the Board of the *Eleanor Dark Foundation* until his death in 2015.



Richard Neville and Jenny Swain at fundraising auction for Varuna in 1992

that residencies could occur across nine months of the year whilst the remaining three months could be devoted to income-generating workshops, seminars, readings and residential weekends. Sponsorship of residencies might also be possible. Potential sponsors for residencies – the Australian-New Zealand Foundation, the Sydney Myer Foundation, and the Australian Conservation Foundation amongst them – were approached. Novelists Morris West, James A Michener (an open admirer of Eleanor Dark's work), Thomas Keneally and Peter Carey

were approached – along with conservationist and philanthropist Dick Smith – but with little success.

There was, nevertheless, success at modest levels. Mick guided several paid walks to the Darks' cave over these early years, and group outings to the Q Theatre in Penrith brought in a few dollars. In 1992 an auction was held in the Varuna garden — the writer Richard Neville, an involved and active supporter of Varuna, was the auctioneer — of literary memorabilia, which included signed manuscripts, and Eleanor Dark's fur coat. It raised \$5,000, enough to fund 10 weeks of fellowships. Frugality was a necessity and money was saved wherever possible. Requests for fee waivers were often made: the *Eleanor Dark Foundation's* first tax return was done for free and the Blue Mountains City Council agreed to waive one-off development application fees. A bar preventing (then expensive) long-distance calls was put on the house telephone, free publicity was sought over paid, and there was occasional discussion of possible means testing of writers for residencies.

Small in-kind donations also helped. In 1990 Varuna gained a computer, printer and software through a joint venture between the Ministry for the Arts and Apple Australia, and in 1992 Apple Macintosh provided a laser printer and

MYOB software. Sophie Cunningham donated books from McPhee Gribble publishers and in 1991 the poet Michael Sharkey made a private donation of \$1,000.

All of this funding and fundraising was towards Varuna as a writers' centre of some kind, but the *Eleanor Dark Foundation's* articles of association gave equal weight to both this purpose and to the proposed environmental centre. Given the reality of the funding situation, a different strategy was adopted: Mick would *give* the house to the *Eleanor Dark Foundation* on the understanding that some monies would be provided by the Foundation for the establishment of the environmental centre on another site.

The gift was not without its financial and legal complications but once it had occurred the *Eleanor Dark Foundation* was able to provide some funds towards the setting up of an environmental centre and shop called The Big Tree on Waratah Street, close to the centre of the Katoomba township. The Big Tree's aim was to promote environmental awareness at community and government levels, especially in relation to the Blue Mountains; the intention was also that it would provide advice, conduct

research and operate educational programs. However, within a fairly short period The Big Tree experienced financial difficulties and it closed at the end of March 1991.

A couple of weeks earlier, NSW Minister for the Arts Peter Collins had opened Varuna officially as a writers' house. That happier occasion was held in the garden and attended by 250 people – friends, family, locals and sponsors – and the writers Richard Neville, Dorothy Hewett and Judith Clark (Eleanor Dark's biographer) spoke of the Dark legacy and Varuna's future. The minister had earlier described Varuna as 'exactly what a writers' centre should be'.³

Whilst the hard graft of fundraising was taking place, other very down-to-earth tasks were undertaken. Before any writers could stay at the house, conservation and heritage had to be considered and sympathetic repairs and alterations undertaken. A conservation plan of the house was developed by heritage expert Chris Pratten, and photographer Max Hill documented the entire house and its contents before members of the Dark family removed their personal objects. Architect Nigel Bell drew up plans to enclose the north-facing upstairs balcony to provide

3 Cited in *The Weekend Australian* May 19-20 1990.

workspaces off two small bedrooms, and for an extension to the lounge room which included a small terrace. Interior designer Desmond Freeman did the interior design and colour scheme and used his extensive corporate and commercial connections to acquire carpet, beds, desks, curtains, patio furniture and other items as donations; and Sebel contributed six ergonomic chairs. Many professional services were provided for free. Friends and supporters undertook working bees on the house and garden throughout 1990 and there was a succession of tradespeople through the house for months on end. As late as December that year, the director Rhonda Flottmann was remarking she still needed to find beds, bedlinen, lamps, shades, bedside tables, china, pots and pans, drawers and filing cabinets for the writers arriving early the following year.

Somehow, most of what was needed had arrived when Varuna began as a writers' house in earnest in 1991. The final task of deciding who would be awarded a fellowship, allowing them to stay for free at Varuna, came from the fellowship selection committee which consisted of writers Beth Yahp, Dorothy Porter and Richard Neville, as well as Desmond Crowley from the NSW Ministry for the

Arts, and Carolyn Leigh and Rhonda Flottmann from the Foundation. Fellowships were awarded to writers Alan Close, Judith Lukin, Wilga-May Rose, Barbara Brooks and Judith Clark (to work jointly on the biography of Eleanor Dark), Carolyn Van Langenberg, Gabrielle Lord, and Yasmine Gooneratne, for periods of between two and six weeks. Vogel winner Gillian Mears was offered a partial fellowship. Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* was the first published work to have been assisted by a stay at Varuna. She wrote a playful thank-you poem to the Dark family, published in *The Australian* newspaper.

*Yielding up thanks while words begin to flow
Smoothly as mountain seasons in their cycle
In every trope and metaphor they know,
To blessed Eric, Eleanor and Michael.*⁴

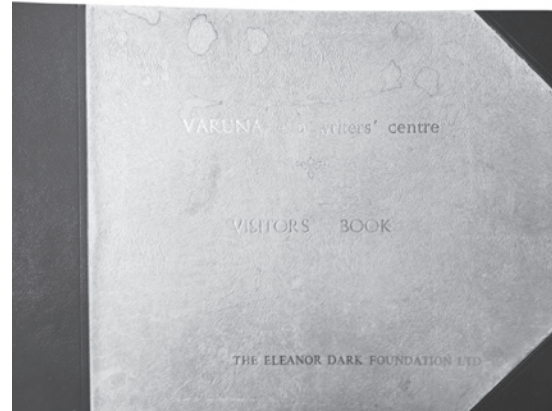
The quid pro quo for these early fellowships was that writers would give public workshops and readings at Varuna. One such was given in May 1991 by Barbara Brooks and Judith Clark where they discussed, fittingly, Eleanor Dark's ideas about the role of the writer in society. They said:

4 *The Weekend Australian* March 16/17 1991.

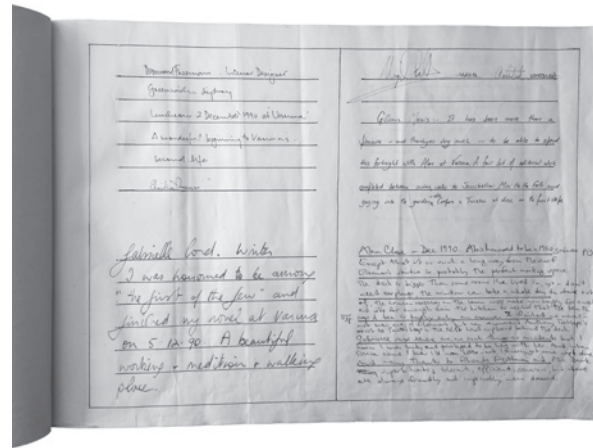
*Her work reflects major social and intellectual issues of the time, ranging from attitudes to Australia and ideas of national identity and national culture, the situation of Aboriginal people, the social upheaval of the depression, the embattled position of left-wing intellectuals during the war and cold war years, to the feminism of the 1930s. Her feminism and environmental concerns are timely now.*⁵

In 1991 the Varuna Salon Series was established. It took place on the last Friday evening of the month, was hosted mainly by Richard Neville, and presented guest speakers such as writers Faith Bandler and Robert Drewe, along with discussion and debate. An ongoing Literary Program was formed that year and included speakers for a feminist book fortnight, life stories workshops, poetry readings, a seminar on Eleanor Dark's *The Timeless Land* with Marivic Wyndham (another Eleanor Dark biographer), a seminar on Virginia Woolf, and a session on young adult fiction with writer Nadia Wheatley. The following year's program included a poetry and prose workshop with Dorothy Porter, a life stories workshop with Patti Miller, prose writing with Barbara Brooks, a talk on 'The artist in Australia in the 1930s and '40s' with Carolyn Craig, Evelyn Indyk on women

5 Blue Mountains Gazette May 21 1991.



First visitors' book, 1990



First page of visitor book, 1990

travel writers, travel writing for pleasure with Josephine Bastian, and a discussion titled 'Rooms of their own' with Drusilla Modjeska and Barbara Brooks, amongst others.

Varuna continued with Literary Programs and subsequently was engaged with the environmentally focused Artists for Life festival which included performances and readings in the Conservation Hut at Wentworth Falls. Varuna also held a public open day in November 1992 with writers Robert Drewe and Candida Baker attending, and readings by Beth Yahp, Gabrielle Lord and Stuart Coupe. The Australia Council funded a joint program between Varuna and the Blue Mountains City Council Library for a writer in the community in 1993. Poet Deb Westbury was funded to give workshops and provide advice to aspiring poets for a period of four months. There were weekends on crime fiction, a lunch with poet Kate Llewellyn, creative writing workshops, and book launches. The year of Indigenous people in 1993 saw an Aboriginal story-telling project, funded through the NSW Writers' Centre, with Liz McNiven visiting high schools between Lithgow and Penrith.

Throughout its early years Varuna's chief purpose of providing fellowships and residencies for writers was modified as time and practice dictated the best combination



of periods of duration and numbers of writers. Varuna's public programs also responded to the lessons of experience, and were altered according to successes, failures and fresh opportunities. Most funding then (as now) came from a mixture of state and federal arts funding bodies, with additional support from sponsors and partners.

After a period on maternity leave, director Rhonda Flottmann departed for Perth, Western Australia, in 1993. She had been a bridge between the very first public meeting to establish the *Friends of Varuna* and the fully-fledged *Eleanor Dark Foundation*. She was replaced as director by Peter Bishop, then a member of Varuna's Management Committee and editor of its newsletter, who remained in the position until 2010.

Varuna is literally and figuratively embedded in the landscape of the magnificent Blue Mountains. It symbolises in practical form the Dark family's lifelong commitment to the promotion of Australian culture and environment, a commitment shared and honoured by a small group of dedicated Blue Mountains people whose efforts turned the house into a highly respected fixture in the literary life of Australia. This legacy of the Dark family has now nurtured countless writers and their works, and its contribution to Australian culture is incalculable.





Eleanor's studio, 1990

About the author

Dr Margo Beasley is an historian and writer based in the Blue Mountains.

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Page 2: Black Forest Cherry Photography, 2017.

Pages 4, 5, 6, 7 and 18: Max Hill, 1990.

Page 10 (top): Max Dupain, circa 1945.

Page 10 (bottom): courtesy Mick Dark, 1917.

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"I imagine that when writers die, if they've written many, many wonderful sentences, they might end up somewhere like this – a beautiful old house with a room to work in, great company, lots of books, a fire, food on the table every night, and a garden! Thank you for this glimpse of paradise." – EMILY BITTO