



at Ivanhoe Station, East Kimberley WA 1935

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman
a partial view of Elizabeth Durack

presented by the artist's daughter

Perpetua Durack Clancy

at the University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle, 6 July 2008

Elizabeth Durack's portrayal of figures within the Kimberley landscape and its landscape into figures is the dominant leitmotif of her work. Over a long productive life her art evolved from simple line drawings, through part-abstract metaphorical works to the transcendent Eddie Burrup series of her last creative phase.

Elizabeth Durack (1915–2000) CMG OBE Hon DLitt (UWA & Murdoch) was the third of six children born to Michael Patrick Durack and Bess Ida Muriel (b. Johnstone); and a granddaughter of the pioneer Patrick (Patsy) Durack, a figure immortalised by Mary Durack in the Australian classic Kings in Grass Castles.



Cover of *The House that Took Off*

*I always had the Tendency
What tendency? what tendency?
the Tendency to take off, of course,
I said it on the cover – don't interrupt
or I shall never finish and I want –
I want to tell you all about it –
right from the beginning, right up to
the Day ...*

These are the opening lines of a story written and illustrated by Elizabeth Durack at a time when she was living and working in the north-west pearling town of Broome. I've used them here to start this talk because, remarkably, *The House that Took Off*, which was created when Elizabeth was still quite young, turned out to be both a portent and an allegory for what happened later in her own life.

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The title of this paper, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, alludes intentionally to James Joyce. He was a positive reference point for Elizabeth and, along with her share of an indomitable Aussie-Irishry, is a key to the whole. May I remind

you, as well, of the sub-title? – *a partial view of Elizabeth Durack*. ‘Partial’ in two senses of the word: that is, it will be far from a complete or definitive account and – given the speaker – how could it be an impartial view? In short, this *Portrait* will be an impressionistic one, conveyed largely through images in the form of photographs and examples of Elizabeth’s work. It will also include extracts from some of her writings.

Throughout the talk, I will be looking at and trying to answer three questions in particular:

Firstly, what were the circumstances that led Elizabeth Durack to become an artist? – one ‘who never stood still to watch the world pass ...’, who was constantly seeking new ways to express her vision, who had a pencil or brush in her hand almost every day of her life, and who consequently produced a prodigious body of work.

Then, what tendencies did Elizabeth possess that drove her to develop her gift, her ideas and her insights in original and innovative ways (despite little encouragement from sources where it mattered)?

And thirdly, what was the core – what was at the centre – of her artistic vision?

In attempting to answer such questions, I will follow a basic biographical convention and focus in order on three crowded decades – the 1920s, 30s, and 40s up until 1950. This was a watershed year for Elizabeth, for her family and, for that matter, our country as a whole.

Elizabeth’s family background (1915–1932)

The old Durack family home stood on the corner of Adelaide Terrace and Victoria Avenue in Perth, and was always known as ‘263’. It was demolished about 20 years ago and has been replaced by a big office block that is now called the Durack Centre.

Everyone loved the old home. The family moved there from Claremont in 1919. The sale, indeed the loss, of '263' during the Depression in the early 1930s cut very deep – not as deep as the loss of the Kimberley stations in 1950 ... but let the story of the stations stay on hold for now.

Elizabeth's memoir, *The Time of Our Lives*, begins:

By the time my memory starts to function consecutively in contrast to scattered points of recall, we are all living – my sister Mary and my four brothers – in our old house '263' at the corner of Victoria Avenue and Adelaide Terrace. And there we stayed all together throughout the whole of the 1920s – a tightly locked, self-relating family group, a closed circuit within the general mechanism of a small isolated city.

The proximity of Christian Brothers College across the road and Loreto Convent just two doors away further ensured our immurement. The children who travelled to school by tram from other parts of the city, let alone those from South Perth who took a ferry were, by comparison with us, globe-trotters

...



Reg, Mary, Elizabeth, Kim, William, David
with Bess and Nurse Stevens

The phrase ‘tightly locked, self-relating family group’ is pertinent to this *Portrait*. Initially it was her older sister Mary with whom Elizabeth was ‘tightly locked’, indeed dependent, and while the two remained very close throughout their lives, as interests and circumstances changed, it was to her brothers that Elizabeth turned. At first it was Reginald, who was in from the start with his sister’s most intense and ultimately tragic personal experience. Reg was also to be in at the start when she met the Sydney journalist Frank Clancy, my father. In fact Reg had first met Frank in Sydney and he understood Elizabeth’s attraction for Frank’s urbane bohemianism and for his extensive knowledge of world literature and art.

Then there were Kimberley, William and David. Of all the men in her life, it was her brothers with whom Elizabeth was closest – sharing ideas, outlook and some almighty arguments. There’s not the time to elaborate on this bond here. Close sibling relationships are part of being Irish, I think. Certainly for Elizabeth, family ties remained strong and influential.

There’s no question that mother’s early life and that of Mary and her brothers was blessed and fortunate. ‘263’, all it stood for and all its surrounds, proved to be a wonderfully fertile environment for lively, bright children. Securely number three in a family of six, Elizabeth had parents who were very fond of each other, who were well educated, who had travelled, who set limits for their children yet actively encouraged imaginative pursuits. Their English nurse, ‘Snowy’ Stevens, read the classics aloud to the children after homework every night.

‘263’ was a house that welcomed a large extended family and many friends. It was a house with lots of rooms and, best of all, a cellar and an attic, along with a backyard that stretched all the way right down to the river. Elizabeth’s was a stable, near-idyllic childhood – a strong foundation that would stand her in good stead through turbulent years ahead.



Kimberley stations, approx 4000 kms from Perth

There's long been a bit of a myth (that neither Elizabeth nor Mary actually discouraged) that they 'grew up' in the Kimberley. In reality, while Reg, the eldest, was there and already in the saddle with his father from the age of two and Mary was on *Ivanhoe* at 18 months, Elizabeth's conception on *Ivanhoe* and, in due course, her birth in Goldsmith Road, Claremont on 6 July 1915 marked the end of a carefree, peripatetic life for my grandmother. Once Bet was born, Perth, not the northern stations, became home base for the family. The myth will probably persist but the fact is that the Durack sisters and their brothers all attended school in Perth during the 1920s and into the 30s.

Yet even this fact needs some qualification for, although physically based in Perth until they left school – when the three eldest went north to the Kimberley stations as fast as they could – all the children, from a very early age became, by osmosis as it were, deeply attuned to the lure and the lore of the north.

Since 1886 at the age of 21 their father, Michael Patrick Durack (frequently referred to as 'MP'), had been the general manager of five prime leasehold properties – the principal

ones being *Argyle* and *Ivanhoe*. The leases included wide river frontages and extended from East Kimberley into the Northern Territory. Together, they covered an area the size of Belgium.



Panoramic view of Carr Boyd ranges

To quote again from *The Time of Our Lives*:

... Our childhood was punctuated by our father's annual migration to the Kimberlies ... the biggest events on our family calendar were the day of his departure and that of his return. Our whole menage, like the bird world, was adjusted to this pattern ... whether Dad was in Perth or not family talk was predominately of the north ... of the seasons, the cattle, the country, markets and the blacks ...

Indeed it can truly be said that all the Durack children were shaped and, in different degrees, were influenced by and formed by the north.

In the case of both Elizabeth and Mary they were able, through their art, to venture further, deeper into the heart and soul of the land and its people. Being female perhaps had something to do with it.



Aboriginal stockmen and horses

As children they had met a number of the leading Aboriginal stockmen, who were, at the same time, senior tribal law men of high degree. MP, on his annual pilgrimage south over summer, would sometimes bring a few of these men with him by boat to Perth. Notable among them were Masha and Argyle Boxer.

Elizabeth often described a picnic at White Beach in Claremont when she and Kim went walking along the river's edge with Boxer and of how, at one stage, he bent down and picked up a little crab from under one of the rocks, placed it in her hand and said to her: 'Tis one your brother...' Years later Elizabeth was to incorporate the symbol or totem of the crab into many of her paintings.

Elizabeth did well at school. She was fortunate to have some outstanding teachers among the Loreto nuns and maintained a life-long contact with them – notably Mother Dolorosa and Mother Dominica. Along with her brothers she matriculated with distinction and could have gone on to University (then located in Irwin Street in the city) but an academic life was not on her agenda, not one of her 'tendencies'.

Arrival in Kimberley. Start of artistic collaborations (1933–36)



Koolinda in Cambridge Gulf near Wyndham

The *Koolinda* was one of several passenger and cargo ships that for years sailed up and down the West Australian coast and it was the ship that first carried Elizabeth north. It was a

well-known and affectionately regarded ship, and was still going when we were teenagers in the 1950s and 60s. I don't know what's happened to it.

I know that for Elizabeth, going north at the age of 17 was like reaching a long-awaited promised land. Reg and Mary were already there and, for several happy years, the land did more than fulfil its promise.



ED in horse yard ... and on horseback crossing Ord River



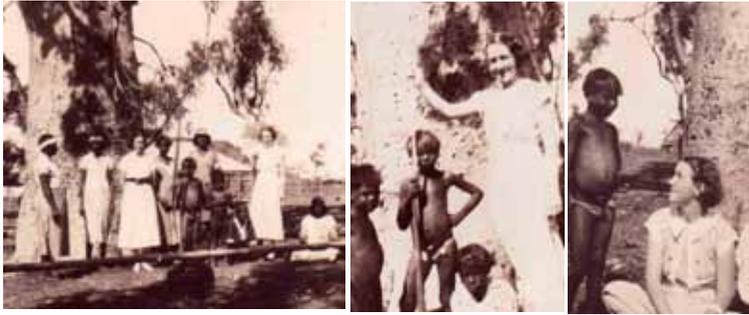
ED, Mary and Michael Patrick



Mary, Bill Jones, ED and Reg

Remember that Elizabeth already had a vicarious involvement with the Kimberley. Once she was actually there, it surpassed expectations. Together with Mary she delighted in everything: the land and all its features; all the bush creatures – even

cockroaches, stick insects, centipedes – every bit as much as flocks of exquisite birds; not to mention the joy of reciprocating warmth and recognition, good humour and shared stories with the Aboriginal people.



ED and MD with Mirriuwong women and children

It was around this time that Elizabeth, with her father, was taken by some of the senior men of the stations to view vast galleries of rock art – masterpieces by artists unknown. As the first original murals Elizabeth had ever seen, their impression upon her was profound.

To cap all this, a man from a neighbouring station turned up for lunch at Argyle one day ...



TAN on horseback

TAN and ED

This ultimately doomed relationship was to affect her entire life and, towards the end, she admitted that TAN's loss, interwoven

with later experiences where she shared others' losses, became an underlying refrain to all that she did, to almost all the work she ever produced.

In the meantime, the future was bright, if undefined.



HD Moseley, MD, MPD, member of Moseley Commission,
RWD, ED, Paul Hasluck, *Argyle*, July 1934

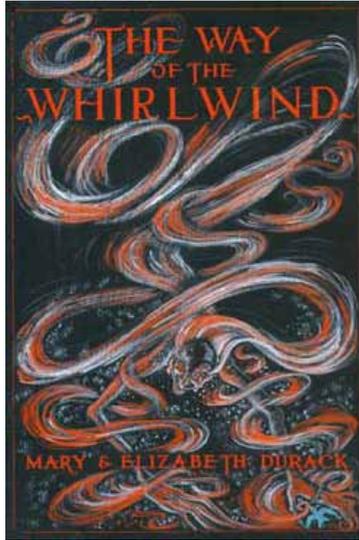
Coinciding with personal and social life, and the stimulation of being in the north together, it was no time before Mary and Elizabeth began collaborating – writing and illustrating stories about life on the stations.

Their first published works appeared in Perth's *Western Mail* in 1933.



early illustrations

Their first book, *All-About*, was published by *The Bulletin*, Sydney in 1935. *Chunuma – Little-bit King* appeared the following year. *The Way of the Whirlwind*, published in Sydney in 1941, reveals a marked transition in artistic style.



Cover of *The Way of the Whirlwind*

By 1936 the sisters had two books published and a third on its way. They had spent almost three continuous years in the north and were ready to broaden their horizons.

Overseas travel and study (1936–37)



Departure from Wyndham on the *SS Fremantle*

Elizabeth and Mary departed for Europe in May 1936. I think their first stop was Port Said. It was Mary (most of the time more 'responsible' than Bet) who kept a full diary of their travels. This I haven't seen but here's an extract from a letter to the family written by Elizabeth on board ship and dated 20 June 1936:

... We went inside the Great Pyramid of Ghesa? [sic], just Mary and I and an Egyptian guide. They have got it dimly illuminated with electric lights and a wooden ladder affair to facilitate climbing up to the King's chamber – an endless number of steps – one has to bend over all the way. Very cold inside and the voice echoes and re-echoes. The King's chamber, exactly in the middle of the Pyramid (as you know) is completely stripped except for the stone coffin up one end (which I got into) frightful smell ... down endless more steps and we got to the Queen's chamber – this too completely stripped. Colossal pieces of solid rock ... Finest place for a murder I've seen yet, though some of the tiny streets would be rather good too.

Out into the good old sunshine again a fellow pours water over our hands from an old champagne bottle (tip) we leave our camels (tip) and get into the car again ... Went to a fine shop run on western lines and bought a hat ... Many Egyptian girls there in western dress – marvellous eyes and puffy cheeks ...

Car and Dragoman returned for us at two and we went to the mosque of Mohammed Ali – glorious place, mosaic and exquisite blue and gold inlaid in a colossal ceiling – floor covered with beautiful green carpet. Before we went in we had shoes of string tied to our feet (tip!) they are taken off on departure (tip!). Our Dragoman spouted information to us all the time but that wasn't what interested me (one could get that out of any book any day) ... it was the faces passing around us and the atmosphere of great reverence inside the mosque ...

These few paragraphs from a 20-page letter provide a glimpse of 21-year-old Elizabeth's lively interest in other human beings and cultures. It was a 'tendency' she maintained throughout her

life – an eye for detail and for observing people and situations with empathy and light detachment.

Once in London, Elizabeth enrolled at the Chelsea Polytechnic, then as now, a leading art school. Exactly how long she attended the Polytechnic is hard to gauge. It was probably for about six months – not long enough to knuckle under and gain a proper diploma but long enough to gain a distaste for what she later described as the ‘dead hand’ of the Academy. Initially, though, she took the classes seriously as this extract from a letter to her brothers (written from 11 Ormonde Gate, Chelsea, SW3, in October 1936) reveals:

... When I start to write a letter these days I find I am suffering from the exact reverse of what I did up in the north – here there is too much to say anything in detail and there, ‘out there’ there wasn’t enough of anything to say much ... For instance, I could tell you of how I leave here three days a week and walk down Kings Road past many shops selling a variety of things from antiques to brussels sprouts and underclothes to artist’s materials and up the steps of the Polytechnic and along numerous corridors full of young people and eventually into room 11 where a pale blue model with scarlet toenails stands in statuesque attitudes on a dais the while I and about 30 others endeavour to express her ...form on paper. This is one of the things that I could go on talking to you about particularly as it happens to be holding my interest and enthusiasm rather strongly at the moment ...

While the Durack sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, enjoyed and appreciated the wonders of London, unlike others of their generation who settled into the great European art centres (I think particularly of the artist Kate O’Connor) there was no question that their hearts and minds remained in Australia:

For anyone who has been even for a short time intimately in touch with the things that grow (not in parks) and nights with stars and a moon (no one knows there’s a moon in London) to live here for any length of time is unthinkable ...

Mary and Elizabeth visited an uncle in Dublin and drove across to the west coast and County Clare, from where Durack ancestors had set forth for Australia in the 1840s. From there they crossed the Channel and travelled through France, Italy and Sicily.



MD and ED beside an old castle



ED kissing the Blarney Stone

Return to Australia

By mid-1937 the sisters were back in Perth. They had aimed to be away longer but a combination of homesickness, lack of money, a European war scare and ‘a mother’ cut short their travels. Mary soon found work at *The West Australian* newspaper, and settled back quite contentedly. Elizabeth, however, like countless others on return to Australia after the stimulation of the outside world, went through a very unsettled phase. By now she was more ambitious, yet unsure of how and where to direct her talent for which there was no clear or obvious outlet. It was not long before she claimed Perth to be intolerable and headed back to the Kimberley stations where there was even less solution for her ambitions and restlessness.

Somewhat desperate and as ever short of cash, she wrote from *Argyle* to the Chief Medical Officer of the Northern Territory applying to become a nurse. She was accepted as a trainee and started at the Darwin Hospital in August 1937.

Within a month she had also started a 'Diary of a Probationer' – a rare, largely irreverent, record of life and medical practice in the old Darwin hospital before the war.



ED with other Darwin nurses



and with Sister Edith McQuade White

Elizabeth lasted eight months as a nurse. Here's a snippet from the Diary dated 4 November 1937:

... I am not working well ... The old willingness is going out of the feet and hands and all my fingers do all the time is itch to get at pencil and paper. If only I could wander around at peace and under a cloak of invisibility I would indeed be happy. But all these scribblings that I've got here are done under the utmost difficulties – I keep my sketch book in my pocket and have to shove it away every time I hear professional footsteps approaching and if I do get seen with pencil and paper I just assume an expression of grave concentration and make a show of counting the patients and jotting down who is on a full diet and who on a light etc ...

And in a letter to Reg back on *Argyle*:

... I am so hungry to tell everyone about the storm that came across the bay yesterday afternoon – the grey and the jade and

the frangipani blossoms in a panic at his approach – there were beds to be pulled back, blinds to be pulled down and I had a very full pan in my hands but I stole two minutes ...

She did like storms. Here she humanises the storm. It is ‘his approach’ not ‘the approach’. Wind and movement became such strong features of her art that sometimes one can almost feel their physical presence.

In early 1939, a few months after resigning from nursing, Elizabeth flew to Sydney where she met Frank Clancy for the first time and then on to Melbourne where she met his sisters, Abbey and Pat.

From there Elizabeth returned to Argyle as a large Vice-Regal visit was imminent. Her father had asked that she and her brother Kimberley be there to assist.



Lord Gowrie and party at
Lissadell Ord River crossing



and the ‘Guard of Honour’ on
arrival at *Argyle*, July 1939

Around this time – it’s not long before the start of the war – Dr Isaac Steinberg visited *Argyle*. He was seeking a place where persecuted European Jews might settle. He nearly succeeded in achieving his goal but ultimately too many cross-currents prevailed and his plans to bring Jewish people to the Kimberley came to nothing.



Steinberg assistant, KMD Isaac Steinberg and ED.
Ord River in background, mid-1939

Through all this, a whirlwind courtship with Frank was under way – much of it conducted by telegram via the open pedal radio between Sydney and *Argyle*, to the intense fascination of all those listening in.

The years 1939 to 1945

The courtship led to marriage in Sydney in 1939 and then children – Perpetua and Michael.



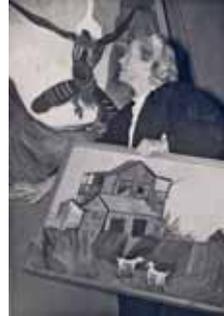
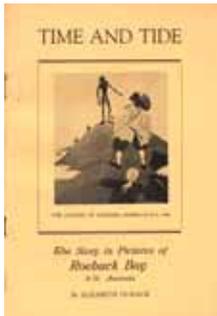
ED with Perpetua, and holding a page from the pictorial strip *The Great Drought*, published in the *Sydney Telegraph*, 1941

Frank, no less than Mary and other family members, greatly encouraged Elizabeth's gift. Conscious of her latent restless talent he backed her need to break away from illustrating children's books and producing newspaper strips – although there's no

denying such activities paid the bills. Frank well realised that Elizabeth was unusually determined and single-minded. And to this realisation I think his own life and happiness was sacrificed. Their marriage was never formally dissolved but in effect it lasted for only a few years.

The years 1945–50 and the start of an independent career

A temporary solution arose with the offer from Mary's husband, the aviator Horrie Miller, to caretake his house in Broome over the Wet. This Elizabeth readily accepted and, in November 1945, with my brother and me, she left Melbourne for Broome. Within nine months she had produced almost 100 paintings and held her first exhibition, entitled *Time and Tide*, in the old Museum and Art Gallery in Beaufort Street, Perth.



Time & Tide catalogue and with works from the exhibition

This exhibition marked a turning point – the start of an independent life and career. Selections from *Time and Tide* showed in Melbourne and Sydney in 1947. The work, informed by her experience of the land and people of northern Australia, was ambitious in scope, content and size. It incorporated current social and also historical themes – themes that were decidedly Australian yet far from the mainstream or the fashion of the day.

The work struck chords in the big cities, frequently among the public at large, but not with the critics. It was work they could

not place; it did not fit easily into any current theory, school or ism. Its subject matter was unusual, its ideas radical. It was from a remote, inconsequential part of Australia. It was by a woman from a pioneer family, perceived as squattocracy – a woman, moreover, who appeared intent on breaking into the hallowed halls that (surely she should have known) were reserved strictly for men.

There were ways and means of dealing with such audacity ...

Dismissal by influential critics Elizabeth managed, largely, to disregard. She knew that lack of official recognition would not stop her from developing as an artist. She was driven, compelled to work – her need to express ideas on paper and canvas as strong as the need to satisfy thirst. Her source of inspiration remained the north and, from 1946 to 1950, she was constantly on the move between the Kimberley stations, Broome and Beagle Bay. In the last she found, with the Sisters of St John of God, some peace and refuge from the hubbub of post-war town and station life.

Back on *Ivanhoe* she built a grass studio on the banks of the Ord and met up with Jubul, a bark painter from Arnhem Land, whom she acknowledged as her only real art teacher. Those classes were quite informal ones – each responding to the other's art; each sharing and learning about the essentials of colour, design, technique and materials; each committed to the visual representation of ideas, dreams and experiences.

During these years Elizabeth held eleven solo exhibitions in four Australian capitals. The logistics alone ... I don't know how she managed it. Works were transported by air and ship from the north to Perth and then to Melbourne and Sydney on the Transcontinental train.

One late winter's day in 1948 on *Ivanhoe*, Elizabeth put some thoughts down on paper. Her essay, *Signature*, begun as a reflective response to dismissive critics, became a personal manifesto of her aims and ideas. Moreover, it answers one of

the questions asked at the start of this paper: What was at the core, at the centre, of Elizabeth's artistic vision?



Red Narga



Breaking Colts.



The Kid



Leitmotif

Well-known works from the period

Here are some extracts from *Signature* ...

... Hardly a statement made to date, no matter how favourably inclined or intended, seems to me to have any actual bearing on or relation to my own motives or ideas. No doubt practically every artist suffers a similar reaction, and if he is patient and forbearing so much more to his credit. I am neither.

The hardest single thing that I have had to contend with

when showing my pictures is not that people in the Australian cities know nothing about the aborigines, but that they all do know *something*. They come to my exhibitions with minds pre-conditioned – by something they have heard; some brief personal experience; some book they have read – prepared to see reason for some vague sensation of guilt they have been told is the correct thing to feel when viewing natives. Sometimes, as when some ancient family secret is stirred, active antipathy ...

Even as the whole of the arts (music, song, dance, painting, sculpture, drama,) are so readily interchangeable, so too are the various races of humanity, and although I may continue to paint Australian aborigines with increasing exactitude and literacy I look in painting them, not only at native people, but beyond them to all human beings. They are the notes, the words if you like, the movements, the expressions of thought and idea in general ... Perhaps because of this mental pre-conditioning I speak of, and the vexed social issues now gathering momentum around “the natives”, they are not the most fortunate choice of subject matter. However, I can neither help nor be concerned with this. It would be, in fact, nearer the truth to say not so much that I have chosen them but that they have chosen me, for among the many reasons why I turn continually to them – or they to me, perhaps – is that I am able in one bound as it were to *get at* the things I want, simple basic things, qualities inherent in the hearts of all peoples; but which often, with civilised people are so camouflaged ... that any attempt to pierce their formidable defences would be thwarted ...

It is this fusing and shaping on the part of the land itself – of living human flesh and bone – that makes the Aborigines for me an object of such constant joy, excitement and wonder. They are the very land incarnate, the very colour of the earth in its hundred shades and inflections, from golden sand to vermilion to deepest blue and purple. I never use any other colour to paint their skin but that which is on my brush from painting the ground beneath their feet. The harmony is exact and identical. The crevices of the rocks or sodden plains, the fire-spared summits or the charred limbs of the trees ... the yellow flowered kapok and the highlight upon flesh, the

down of grass at noon over the flesh-soft, hard-baked bone of the desert, and in the evening the muted purples of the hills wrapping alike themselves and their people in slumberous coitus ...

The pictures are simply to be looked at, each an entity in itself and representing a reaction or set of reactions to a sight, object, person or group that in some way has matched my ideas ...

A tide comes in and unevenness is levelled. A unity is reached through dissolution ... one is driven along by invisible impulses. At one moment the whole of the universe resides in the eye of a child. The next, the answer is patent in a group of goats on a stony hill. In one swift lunge of a horse's neck all force, harmonised and creative, is embodied.

What occurs? What is the mental, spiritual, physical unification that occurs? A fuse, suddenly and unexpectedly, is lit. Subject, thought, and idea with hand and eye mutely obeying, are unified into something whole, complete, and often unbelievably simple ...

1950 proved to be a watershed year, a time of major change and readjustment. By June, just as the cattle industry was starting to recover from years of struggle, the Kimberley stations were sold. A few months later MP Durack died.

Elizabeth returned to Perth, gathered up Michael and me from boarding school, and set up a studio in the first home she had owned.

She still had another 50 years of living and learning ahead and of persevering with her art, of striving to honour her God-given gift and of seeing it through to fulfilment.

This concludes my partial view of Elizabeth Durack. I hope that I've managed to give a bit of an impression of her as a young woman.

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