

Tropic Days: Literature and Art of North Queensland

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The following is a transcript of the 2004 Foundation for Australian Literary Studies Lecture presented at Mackay by Professor Peter Pierce, Chair of Australian Literature at James Cook University.

It is a great pleasure that – on my first visit to Mackay – I have the opportunity to give the first lecture here under the auspices of the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, which was established forty years ago by Professor Colin Roderick. My topic is ‘Literature and Art of North Queensland’, but knowing that I was coming to Mackay I was initially distracted by another interest, and tempted to ask who was the most famous sportsperson to be born here? This person was the child of a Mackay sugar farmer and early on did it hard. In a career that led to international acclaim, there were also suspensions, resentment, setbacks. To the question ‘Who am I?’ the answer is of course George Moore, the champion jockey with the highest rate of winners to rides of just about anyone, anywhere. He won a Derby in England on Royal Palace, besides a 1000 and 2000 Guineas and an Ascot Gold Cup. In France he won the Prix du Jockey Club (that country’s Derby) and a Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe on St Crespin. In his early years he rode for a battling Sydney jockey called Tommy Smith. Moore never won a Caulfield or a Melbourne Cup, so they were races that he did not rate.

What he knew about other, literary associations with Mackay we cannot be sure. Thea Astley’s novel *A Kindness Cup* (1974) was based on an incident – and its aftermath – at The Leap, near here. In the same decade, Faith Bandler wrote *Wacvie* (1977), the story of her father. Kidnapped in the New Hebrides in June 1883, he was taken to Mackay where he was auctioned on the wharf, in effect being ‘sold as a slave ... [who] worked on sugar plantations until he escaped in 1897’. So it has been the grimmer history of a place known to the Larrakia tribe as the Valley of Changing Lights and Shadow that has attracted some creative writers to Mackay. With the city’s other artistic associations we will deal later. For the moment though, let me introduce the body of this talk with some words by a writer who spent a good deal of her life abroad, in escape from the moral and professional strictures that she experienced in Australia. The writer Charmian Clift said that ‘the one certain thing about going north in

Australia is that the further north you get the further north you want to go'. With luck, we will be taking that sort of journey this evening.

The title of this excursion into the literature and art of North Queensland (north from and including Mackay that is) comes from one of the four books by Edmund James Banfield that were inspired by his long sojourn on Dunk Island. This was, amiably enough, *Tropic Days*, published in 1918. Consider some of the other enticing titles that the Pacific Ocean and its Australian littoral have suggested: *Outcast of the Islands* (189-), *A Pattern of Islands* (1952), *By Reef and Palm* (1894), *My Crowded Solitude* (1926), *Sugar Heaven* (1936). The first of these is a novel by Joseph Conrad who, along with Robert Louis Stevenson, was the keenest observer of those who worked among the islands of the Pacific, or ended up on their beaches. He was an admirer of one of the great boastful adventurers of our literature, Louis Becke, whose *By Reef and Palm* told stories based on his experiences in the Pacific as supercargo, blackbirder, associate of the notorious 'Bully' Hayes. Becke's stories – as distinctive a contribution to the *Bulletin* of the 1890s as Lawson's – are morally complex, although not at the expense of entertainment. Becke opened up a region to an Australian readership that thought it knew something of the Pacific and hence was more susceptible to the enhancement of romantic action that he gave to his fiction. At the same time – and regretfully leaving him with this final observation – Becke disguised in his stories satirical commentary within adventure romance. The moral latitude of island life was contrasted pointedly, and especially as it affected marriage, with domestic arrangements on the continental shore. Let Becke introduce one of the themes of this talk: the licence that life in North Queensland afforded artists and other desperates, because it was free of surveillance, had shucked off domestic cares.

I mentioned Arthur Grimble's *A Pattern of Islands*, a book about his work in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands that was a set text for me in high school, in far away Tasmania in the 1960s. (In the United States, by the way, it had the less dreamy title of *We Chose the Islands*.) Jack McLaren's *My Crowded Solitude* was another incongruous Tasmanian school text. Its oxymoronic title fronted the story of life on a coconut plantation on the western side of Cape York Peninsula. Jean Devanny's *Sugar Heaven*, an account of the canecutters' strike of 1935, would surely not have been prescribed there, or on the mainland. Devanny, born in New Zealand, came to Australia in 1929 and joined the Communist Party. She was expelled during the war, for alleged sexual impropriety. Most of her Australian years were spent in North

Queensland, where she was a political activist, had a significant role in the state branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers and in the North Queensland Field Naturalists' Club. *Sugar Heaven* is set in the canefields around Silkwood and Mourilyan. Mark a second theme: for Devanny this vast North Queensland region, far from metropolitan centres, was not only a scarcely-tapped literary resource, but a place where an independent and combative spirit could seek to change society. And yet she had to work as well. Devanny appears on the front cover of the *Australian Journal* for February 1952, looking out of the porthole of a diving bell in the waters off the Green Island jetty. Carefully she recorded that 'I felt acutely alone, but as I was lowered away the amazing nature of the new experience effaced all consciousness of self'. Devanny was talking about doing without an aqualung, but those last words, concerning the effacement of the consciousness of self, have resonance for many of those who ventured, intrepidly or apprehensively, into the tropics.

North Queensland as mere artistic setting is not my interest tonight. Inevitably writers have exploited its landscapes, beautiful and dangerous, and also its distance from jurisdictions of the kinds that I have already mentioned: domestic and legal. Think of such 1930s adventures of tropical lawlessness as *Typhoon Treasure* and *Chips Rafferty in King of the Coral Sea*. Dunk Island is one of the settings for Maxwell Grant's thriller *Barrier Reef* (1979), which deals with the illicit trades of bird-smuggling (out) and drug-running (in to Australia). In one of his early novels, *Gallows on the Sand* (1956), Morris West wrote of the hunt for the remains of a Spanish treasure ship that lies near 'one of the hundred islands and atolls strung like chips of jade and emerald along the coral thread of the Great Barrier Reef'. I first encountered the Reef in Hobart, when my parents bought me Leslie Rees's *Digit Dick and the Great Barrier Reef* (1942). The title would not now pass muster perhaps, but the book did then. Rees wrote it after a visit to Hayman Island. North Queensland has, in fact, a venerable history as a setting for children's literature. The wreck of the *Charles Eaton* in 1834 in the Torres Strait was a tale used by Charlotte Barton in *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* (1841). This was, incidentally, the first children's book to be published in Australia. The story of survivors of that wreck was taken up by the journeyman opportunist Ion Idriess in his stirring and misleadingly titled *Headhunters of the Coral Sea*, which appeared in 1940, almost one hundred years after Barton's book.

Thrillers, children's books ... North Queensland has also been visited by drop-ins who might have been enticed into print or paint therefore, but who did not choose to stay for long. They

are not my prime concern either, although some of them deserve a mention. When the painter Fred Williams made a two-week visit to Dunk and Bedarra Islands in 1973, he found subjects for his art, but was also aware of such long-term artist residents in the Family Group as the sisters Yvonne Cohen and Valerie Albiston. From 1939 until the late 1970s they lived on and off on Timara Island. Novelist and playwright Alex Buzo took his Tasmanian-born heroine with 'the perfect pair' to Townsville in a much-resented portrayal of the city in *Pru Flies North* (1991). Playfully, Louis Nowra introduced the Cairns campus of James Cook University to literature in *Abaza: A Modern Encyclopaedia* (2001), Abaza is a large, corrupt country not far north of our tropic coasts. The exiled author of the encyclopaedia, Golec Umbaba, lives at a homosexual resort to the north of the city, one that is successful beyond the dreams of real developers. It is fetchingly called *Homme on the Range*. This list could continue, including for instance short stories by Janet Turner Hospital in *North of Nowhere, South of Loss* (2003), or longer ago – and more exotic – a novel by the Danish-born, adoptive Tasmanian and physical culture teacher who was also related to a Queensland Premier. I refer to the steamily-titled *Jungle Nights* (1937), by Marie Bjelke-Petersen. Title apart, it reads like a tourist brochure: 'Everything in Cairns had that mirage-like air. Its wide streets with their long central plots filled with poinsettia, frangipani and other colourful shrubs; the cream tinted Eastern-looking houses...'.

Out of her latitude, Bjelke-Petersen is responding to the strangeness of the tropics, is bracingly resisting their allure. Others would surrender whole-heartedly, at times with great creative gains, at others at the risk of self-destruction. Considering the associations of a handful of them with North Queensland, I was led to think of these things: how they began and participated in myth-making about the tropics, and what sorts of myths they tried to forge. How intimately and constructively linked with each other a number of them were. Here I am thinking in particular of painters – Donald Friend, Russel Drysdale, Ray Crooke among them - who shared time in, and experience of the tropics, while benignly they influenced one another. This was a genuine fellowship of artists, not as localised or as legendary as the Heidelberg School in Melbourne in the 1890s, but as important in the history of Australian art.

Some of these painters came to North Queensland during and because of the Second World War, which was a signal enabling, and happily harmless experience for them. In various ways, then, and when they returned, they were 'escape artists' (in the title phrase of Gavin

Wilson's brilliant 1998 book and catalogue of the exhibition of 'Modernists in the Tropics'). They sought escape from society, family, oppressive sexual mores. In a crucial sense what some of them deeply desired of the tropics was a type of internal exile in Australia, where they could live unremarked until they needed for commercial reasons to reconnect with mainstream Australia, and where their behaviour (Donald Friend's homosexuality, the eccentricities of Ian Fairweather or Xavier Herbert say) went unreprieved. In North Queensland their time was untrammelled, their imaginations could be imposed upon freely by the places to which they had removed. Wilson observes that 'Escape ... can be equated with the fear of capture and confinement: by domesticity, by cold weather, or by the boredom into which any life lived habitually in the city or the country can so easily descend'. I want to talk – as they wrote, and painted – not of what they escaped, but of what they found: solitude, the sea, the jungle, the outcast state, the balm of freedom from intrusion into their lives and thoughts. Let us follow some of them now – Friend, Banfield, Herbert, Drysdale, Fairweather, Crooke, Oldfield and others, in passing.

When 'beachcomber' first rolled into the language, it meant a wave. Later it would conjure up those folk who walked beaches without haste to see what the waves had brought in from the sea. Beachcombers were not those wrecks of men who desolately find themselves 'on the beach' in stories by Conrad, Stevenson and Becke. They are contented souls, able languidly to relish 'drowsy noons and evenings steeped in honeyed indolence' (in John Keats's words, if sadly in another context). The most famous Australian beachcomber, a spiritual descendant of Henry David Thoreau and a recluse on a tropic island within the Great Barrier Reef for nearly thirty years, was Edmund James Banfield. A journalist as his father had been, Banfield came to Australia from England in 1854, when he was two. After working in western Victoria on the *Ararat Advertiser* (which remained in the possession of the Banfield family until the 1960s), he moved to North Queensland. He was a reporter and sub-editor on the *Townsville Bulletin* and became an advocate for North Queensland separation. The newspaper work led to a nervous collapse. Banfield decided to lease (and later selected) a portion of land on Dunk Island, where he had once camped. His creative life began after he moved there in 1897.

Banfield knew the Aboriginal name for the island, Coonanglebah, but he preferred Dunk, believing that the names that James Cook had bestowed 'judicious and expressive – are among the most precious historic possessions of Australia'. Sighting this 'tolerable high

island' in 1770, Cook named it for George Dunk, First Lord of the Admiralty, Earl of Sandwich and inventor of the snack that enabled him to linger at the gaming tables. On Dunk, Banfield's health improved. Here, he felt, was possible 'the abandonment of all serious claims upon time and exertion'. Yet that classic statement of the blandishments of the tropic deprecates Banfield's level of activity. For long a keen naturalist, Banfield observed the life on and around the island, on land, in the air, at sea. He discovered a new species of rat, which was named after him. Although he and his wife would weather cyclones, and unwelcome visitors, they rejoiced in 'this isle of dreams, of quietude and happiness, this fretless scene; this plot of Eden'. [Irreverent aside: when I stayed on Dunk in 1987 the makers of a cigarette commercial film on the main beach backed it with Johnnie Farnham's 'A Touch of Paradise'.]

Banfield's first book, *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* (1908), was followed by three more, each as alluringly titled as his most famous. They were *My Tropic Isle* (1911), *Tropic Days* (1918) and – published posthumously – *Last Leaves of Dunk Island* (1925). When Banfield died of peritonitis in 1923, it was three days before his wife was able to attract the attention of a passing steamer. Now Banfield and his wife lie under a cairn of stones in a clearing behind the Dunk Island resort, in the rain forest, near the swinging bridge over Goo-Tchur creek. The grave is well-tended. The site is quiet, same for bird song and the rummaging of crimson-headed bush turkeys. Banfield's obdurate solitariness was the bedrock of his literary achievement. A gentler version of this quality informs the reveries of every beachcomber. His epigraph announces that 'If a man does not keep pace with his companions/Perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer/Let him step to the music that he hears'.

Besides the resort, and a farm, most of Dunk Island is a National Park. But not all. In 1967 Eric McIlree, Chairman of the then owner of the island, Avis Rent-a-Car, ceded land surrounding Banfield's grave to the Crown, which in turn vested it in the University College of Townsville, now James Cook University. That this occurred was the result of another of the visionary endeavours of Professor Colin Roderick, on behalf of the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies which he established, and under whose auspices I am lecturing tonight. McIlree died soon afterwards when his motorboat exploded on Sydney Harbour. Banfield's huge collection of Aboriginal and New Guinean artefacts was tracked to his

niece's home in Ararat, then subsequently transferred to Townsville. The collection was destroyed when cyclone Althea struck the city on Christmas Eve 1971.

It was not until 2003 that the university's small claim on Dunk Island was remembered. Banfield's life is overdue for fresh remembrance. On Dunk he would no longer find 'the pleasures of the absolute freedom of isles uninhabited, shores untrodden'. Indeed he never had, for the Djiru people had fished there for thousands of years before Banfield withdrew from the world to create an idyllic, but strenuous life on the island. This was his sea-change, one that allowed him to find how 'Nature, not under the microscope, behaved', this from his refuge within the Barrier Reef's 'shield of shimmering silver'.

When Donald Friend first travelled to North Queensland in 1932, he was literally running away from home, especially from his pastoralist father. In the depths of the Depression he rode goods trains, begged, was once gaoled for vagrancy. All the while – like many after him and some before – he was trying to put himself as far as possible away from domestic life, and more generally, from the city. (We should remark in passing that artists form a small proportion of those – most of them men – who have, and still make this escape). On Magnetic Island he lived in a cave and reflected that 'You might call it a tropical paradise. Meaning, I suppose, that it wasn't full of tin roofs and mosquitoes, and it was warm'. He travelled on to Cairns where he lived in Malaytown and was befriended by a family of Torres Strait Islanders, much as Ian Fairweather would be at the end of the decade. With this family, the Sailors, Friend shipped out on a pearling lugger for Thursday Island, where 'the air was like warm treacle and scented with a number of half-familiar odours; molasses, frangipani, mango...'.

Ray Crooke went to Thursday Island during the war and was so entranced by it that he came back in 1949, to where 'the turquoise waters foiled the ochre islands and gleamed in gorgeous brilliance'. Like Friend, Crooke kept a diary, though not on the same scale (49 of Friend's survive, covering forty years). Each created an illustrated diary, in effect a hybrid form in which text and drawing complemented one another. On Thursday Island, Crooke found the signature scenario of so many of his paintings, that view from inside out, from a darkened interior into the tropic light. His human figures are languid in the heat. Crooke wrote of 'island people' that 'they tend to sit and look out into space – they might be thinking of a big fish, or maybe nothing at all'. As with Crooke, war service brought Friend to Thursday Island, or in his case, back to it.

He enlisted in 1942, the year in which his long friendship with Russel Drysdale began. They met in Albury where, according to Lou Klepac in his Introduction to *The Genius of Donald Friend*, 'the two artists found themselves like outcasts on a desert island'. Friend would soon encounter real ones. In September 1943 he was en route from Brisbane to the Atherton Tableland to be a guinea pig in a malaria experiment. Rockhampton disappointed: 'These Queenslanders build the most ghastly-looking houses, matchboard rickety affairs on stilts'. On the other hand, 'I love the rich, dark spendthrift trees, the mangoes, pawpaws and palms that cluster extravagant in shape and colour'. At first Friend sought his bearings in art. Innisfail had 'Dounaier Rousseau jungles'. The grand scenery of the Tablelands reminded him of Herman Melville's Typee. He left before the end of the year, passing through Mackay on a troop train in December. But the tropics lured him back soon after the war.

At the end of 1946 Friend was again in Malaytown, before proceeding to Thursday Island. He thought that its general dilapidation extended to the white inhabitants, 'not that they are picturesquely dirty beachcombers, but that they seem to have a tired and mildewed look'. While waiting impatiently for a lugger to take him further out into the Torres Strait, Friend worked towards an attitude of accommodation to the tropics that has lost none of its savour, or pertinence. He wrote: 'I had at last reached that saturation point of frustration, change and irritation that comes to all travellers in the tropics when, after long days of dealing with something that isn't there, they must give in – must discard all the frantic activity and planning, and go passively with the tide, becoming a species of Buddhist beachcomber'. But at last he got away, to Darnley Island and then to Murray Island. Of the latter he wrote that it was 'one of those symbolic places that one must somehow get to one day. Like Timbuktu and Byzantium'.

The appeal of North Queensland never abated for Friend, who was back in 1954 for a five-month trip with the artist Margaret Olley. The Sailors were still in Cairns, but Malaytown had been demolished and Alligator Creek drained. Friend pushed on to Port Douglas, where he slept on the beach, and then to Mossman and the Daintree. He found the latter 'beautiful in a very sinister way: rolling hills of coarse grass, rotting farmsteads, set in clumps of mango and palm against a background of purple hills covered with heavy rainforest, that reared their heads to masses of steaming cloud'. A few years earlier, in 1948, Xavier Herbert came to North Queensland. From Townsville he too pushed on to the Daintree. Occasionally he would wander into the rainforest, armed with *The Bushman's Handbook*, and having

instructed his wife Sadie not to worry until he had been gone a week. At this low point in his writing life, Herbert exiled himself in the tropics, far from the demands of publishers or funding bodies. He wrote tellingly to his brother of a condition that other artists have sought in North Queensland. Herbert said that he was in ‘deep psychic hiding’.

That he emerged from it and in North Queensland completed his magnum opus, *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) was Herbert’s triumph, and Sadie’s. Australia’s longest novel was written in a galvanised iron shed behind his cottage next to the Red Beret pub in Redlynch. Herbert earned a living by cutting rainforest saplings, as a cleaner and porter at the Cairns airport (he was sacked), and as a relieving pharmacist across the North. This included a spell at the Mackay Base Hospital in mid-1965. He made friends among other artists who had chosen to live in North Queensland, with Ray Crooke (who painted Herbert for the Archibald Prize in 1964) and Percy Tresize. With Dick Roughsey, Tresize wrote seven children’s books about the Yalangi tribe of Cape York. In 1962 Herbert accompanied Tresize in an expedition that discovered rock art galleries near Laura, whose existence Europeans had not suspected. It was Herbert who found the so-called Quinkan Caves. This was a far journey from a bush childhood in Western Australia.

Herbert was a relentless and unscrupulous forger of myths about himself. North Queensland became the backdrop for decades of his supposedly heroic exertions. This vast tropic territory has seen others heroic, solitary battles by artists, both by those who chose to stay here, and by those who confronted it in their art at a remove. Think, in the latter case, of one example among many. The Chinese-Australian William Yang grew up on the family tobacco farm at Dimbulah and went away to Sydney to make a career as a photographer. He is also a live entertainer of a most unusual (if in another way a most common) kind – a travelling slide show operator and commentator. In two of his most powerful and amusing shows – *Sadness* and *The North* – Yang returned to his tropic and ancestral roots in North Queensland.

Other artists have drawn on the region’s semi-legendary history, whether in such popular accounts of the Palmer River gold rush as Hector Holthouse’s *Rivers of Gold* (1967) or Alan Oldfield’s series of paintings about ‘The Journey of Mary Watson’, which were executed in the late 1990s. Here is a story that begins on Lizard Island, which Cook named in August 1770 as he continued his interrupted journey in the *Endeavour*, now repaired after careening during a seven-week stay at what is now Cooktown. In 1881, Mary Watson was living on the island with her husband, a beche de mer fisherman, two Chinese servants and an infant child.

Her husband left on an extended fishing trip and after he did Aborigines arrived on the island to conduct annual ceremonies. Offended by the white presence, they killed one of the Chinamen and injured the other, who escaped with Mrs Watson and her child in the most improbable of vessels, a beche de mer melting pot. This was on 3 September 1881, as Mrs Watson recorded in her diary. By October they had drifted as far north as No 5 Island in the Howick Group, where all of them died of thirst.

The community of Cooktown would find its own ways to memorialise her. Oldfield's paintings, often in light and dark blues, with island silhouettes on the horizon behind the stricken fugitives, are sombre and uncluttered. They cast a domestic tragedy against the grand expanse of the tropics. Mrs Watson was buried in Cooktown, where lantana grows extravagantly over her grave. The Bulletin published a poem by 'A.F.' which proves once more that all bad poetry is sincere:

She kept them off, the black and devilish band,
The fiends accursed,
And in their iron craft escaped the land,
Alas! Upon the cruel and parching sand
To die of thirst.

Mindful of Mrs Watson's fate, the folk of Cooktown erected a memorial marble drinking fountain in Charlotte Street in 1886. It is an irony of tropic circumstance that on my first visit there the fountain was not working. There was no water to be had of a practical, or of a memorial kind.

The notion of 'tropic days' conjures images of warmth and idleness, of reverie, of the flight from the cares and cold of the south, or the north, depending from where you are coming. In *Tales from the Torrid Zone: Travels in the deep tropics*, the English writer Alexander Frater defined le coup de bamboo, 'a mild form of tropic madness for which, luckily, there is no cure'. The tropics are the latitudes of escape – from work, from domestic responsibility. The ersatz myth-making of travel brochures emphasises these temporary possibilities. Yet the writers and painters whose lives we have mentioned found that North Queensland was the region where they could work most productively. They escaped, but into creative exertion, as much as from irksome calls on their time. Doing so, they spent their tropics days in ways that have enormously enriched Australian culture, its literature and art in particular.