

## **Citation**

Taylor, Cheryl. "Tropical Flowers: Romancing the North in Early Female Fiction and Poetry." Powerpoint Presentation. Refereed Proceedings of the Inaugural *Tropics of the Imagination Conference*, 2-3 November 2009. *etropic: electronic journal of studies in the tropics*, Vol 9 (2010), < <http://www.jcu.edu.au/etropic> >

# Tropical Flowers: Romancing the North in Early Female Fiction and Poetry



Seven Romantic  
Female Authors,  
1899-1937

# Elizabeth Perkins, O.A.M

Immediately I set foot in the place I loved it...When I got out of the plane—it was the end of April, and it wasn't very hot, but it was dry, barren, I knew I was home...I like to visit places outside of North Queensland but I wouldn't like to live or die in them.





# TROPICAL FLOWERS

Harriet Patchett Martin

Frances Campbell

Rosa Campbell Praed

Nancy Francis

Zora Cross

Dorothy Cottrell

Marie Bjelke-Petersen



# AUSTLIT

The Australian Literature Resource



WRITING THE

## TROPICAL NORTH

<http://www.austlit.edu.au/specialistDatasets/TropicalNorth>

The [Writing the Tropical North](#) subset contains information by and about authors who were born in, lived in, visited or wrote about areas of Australia north of the Tropic of Capricorn. It also includes information about journalists, columnists, editors, newspapers, periodicals and associated companies and individuals important to the cultural life of the region.

Begun in 2004 as Writers of Tropical Queensland, the subset widened its scope from 2008 to become Writing the Tropical North. The team of researchers based at James Cook University in Townsville are opening up the comparatively unexplored literature associated with the Northern Territory and northern Western Australia as areas of specific AustLit research focus.

From Zora Cross's novel, *The Lute Girl of Rainyvale: A Story of Love, Mystery and Adventure in North Queensland* (1925):



Here in the North, with the day a yellow panther thirsting in the heat, and the night a naked savage, lawless as love, incomparably chaste as Nature, splendid as passion and desire, even the most disciplined woman may turn in a moment back to the golden days of simple forest beginnings.



# Harriet Patchett Martin c. 1840-1908



*Datura Metalooides* : Thorn Apple, or Sacred  
Datura



# Harriet Patchett Martin

## *Cross Currents* 1899

It was such a night as one sees only in the tropics flooded in moonlight and as bright as day. One could distinguish the different shades of leaf and flower, the delicate pink of the oleander, the greenish white of the seringa bloom, the waxen hue of the magnolia; the air was full of soft sounds and mysterious murmurs, laden with nutty fragrance and the heavier scent of the datura and trumpet-blossom.

They had walked on till they had left the scarce habitations behind them, and Alma felt as if she were in some enchanted place. There was an unreality about this luxuriance of beauty, in the midst of which she and Hilarion were walking together as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. (30-31)

# Frances Campbell

*For Three  
Moons (1900)*

*Two  
Queenslanders  
and Their  
Friends  
(1904)*



# Frances Campbell

## *For Three Moons* (1900)

Townsville, with the full moon hanging over her house tops, is really very beautiful; that is, if you are on board a ship anchored in the bay, and you are looking at the capital of North Queensland from across the smooth sea, and you can just guess at the dim outline of the purple shore, thick with the blue gum and Moreton Bay fig clothing the rich hills down to the very waves.

The moon sailed aloft over the *Ilonia*, in all the beauty of the midsummer tropical night, over purple sea and wooded shore, where the little waves were breaking on a beach like silver, and lighted up the tin roofs of sleeping Townsville, dreaming in her fragrant gardens of the time when she will obtain separation, and be a capital of a country to herself.  
(p. 1)

# Rosa Campbell Praed, 1851-1935



National Library of Australia

nla.pic-an24793813-v

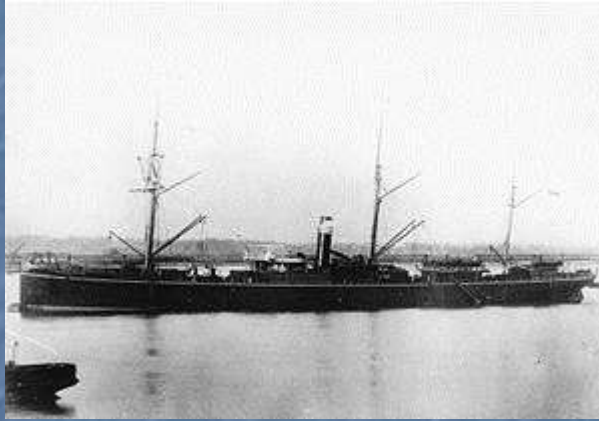


# Rosa Campbell Praed: *The Lost Earl of Ellan* (1905-6)

## Narrawan:

The store buildings lay along one side of the yard—three slab-walled, bark-roofed humpies, with low earthen-floor verandas, in which were saddles waiting to be mended, green hide ropes in process of making, carpenter's tools, leather saddle-bags, and a variety of station properties. On the other side of the yard was the kitchen building, with a large stone chimney, a corrugated tent at the end, and the Chinaman's hut attached behind....The meat-house was quite at the end of the store wing, and had hides stretched on its bark roof—a primitive mode of curing—and blocks of sawn gum-tree trunks, scored from the chopping of meat, set against the wall of the veranda, while there were dry little heaps of salt on a rimmed wooden slab beneath the window. Just here disagreeable blow-flies hovered, and on a bare gum-tree close by a number of crows perched in line and cawed lugubriously, like a set of ghouls biding their opportunity. (9-10)

# Alice Nicklin and "Quetta" Remains, Thursday island and Somerset



Nancy Francis  
"Black Bonnet"  
1873-1954





## Black Bonnet and Her Daughters

By BERNICE MAY



**I**

SUPPOSE it is an indication of how much she admires Henry Lawson that Mrs. Nancy Francis, of North Queensland, chose for her pen-name "Black Bonnet." And between the good Australian of Lawson's poems, washing up without a sound and going off to church regularly, and Mrs. Francis, busy with her household cares, her hoes and garden and bush and nature-study, there is certainly many a bond. Strangely enough, it was over the name of Henry Lawson that I first became really conscious of Mrs. Francis and her writing daughters. It was in Angus and Robertson's, just after that firm had brought out the beautiful volume of Lawson's collected poems, and I was told that, having heard of the little outpost of Australian literature far away in the great colorful land of the North, they were posting a volume to the Lawson-lovers. Before this I had read in the BULLETIN of the young girls who were writing Red Page verses at thirteen and fourteen, but the romance and the real glamour of the writers did not catch me till that day. It all seems many ages ago, and since then the dealness



L. Patricia Francis.

of temperate life in New South Wales—I belong to Queensland—has ever and over again been made bright by letters of romantic beauty from Black Bonnet.

To journey to Cooktown from Sydney is like taking a trip to another continent, and those writing girls—for Black Bonnet is a girl among her girls—live far beyond that, keeping in touch with letters and

literature chiefly by the vast enthusiasm of Black Bonnet herself.

Recently I read the MS. of a powerful novel written by Patricia Francis, who wrote verses to the BULLETIN at thirteen and edited a paper on the Adhesion Table-land at twenty. I could not help thinking how like the Bronze girls in their love life of literature these Australian girls are. Patricia writes with passion; and the fact that her sister Kathleen, as well as Christobel, has been contributing to Australian newspapers for some-years-now speaks for Black Bonnet's training as nothing else could.

When one thinks of the old pioneers, and hears people mourn that the old spirit is dying out of Australia, one thinks of a woman like this and is silent. She came to Australia with her three little girls seventeen years ago. She did not come to a city; not even to a town. She went behind what is called Australian civilisation and found the real Australia as few born Australians have done. One does not know whether her crisp articles on nature-study, her accounts of the blacks and their ways, or her verses are the most remarkable. Perhaps it was natural for her to sing, since her mother sang before her. Finding herself among the wilds of North Australia as a young English wife and mother, she seems to have embraced Australia as warmly and as tenderly as she embraced her little girls. She actually lived first at a place called Weary Bay; but one sees her bright and rosy and soulit with love and enthusiasm for her new land even there, before she moved further away. It was too far from home for the little tender English girls to attend school, so their mother taught them and instilled into them that love of literature which has brought such happy results. One thinks of the happiness a writer must experience when a book is published, but how small that joy must be compared with the joy of a mother who sees her work done so nobly. For such work, as all women know, is noble.

When Mrs. Francis wrote and told me that she had educated her little ones herself I naturally asked how. She replied:

I never gave them fixed lessons for long. It was arithmetic one time, and another subject when convenient, but chiefly reading. You can trace Patricia's early affection for Carlyle in the long periods she was still in spite of protest. You can imagine it all, perhaps—the children in the jungle to the creek, or lying in the long grass in the forest, watching the scrubble, the birds and the butterflies, reading, drawing, and writing and setting pieces.

Not one word of the patience that must have gone in all this—nothing save the joy in it all. Is it any wonder that Patricia should write BULLETIN stories while still in her teens?

Kathleen has ever been my favorite poet among the girls. Something tender and

wistful in the very method of her verse is sweet and true. It would not be fair to take up space here by quoting poems more of which find themselves to extracts.

While Kathleen teaches school her two sisters Patricia and Christobel make money



Nancy Christobel Francis.

with their pens. Books they have written together they share, and a wonderful bond of sisterhood has sprung up between them. Some time ago I saw a little child-book written and illustrated by them—a delightful story of a platypus.

"How I long at times for a creepy novel, a box of chocolates and no bright ideas that nag to be put on paper," Black Bonnet herself writes to me, and it reminds me of Mary Gilmore, who in her first passionate days of great poetry declared she could not take her hands out of the cooking-basin and washing-up dish fast enough to run away to her pen and write some fiery line that had flashed to her across her domestic work. There is much of the great Australian-woman pluck and spirit and energy about Black Bonnet, just as there is about Mary Gilmore, who makes her broad declaration to all writers, patient and impatient, that hains and domestic duties should never detain a woman from writing which she must do.

In Black Bonnet's case there seems to be no need at any time for anyone to urge her on to her singing; she is looking broad and listening "to hear if it burns," as the Irish say, and she is singing a BULLETIN song, and she is thinking of her girls, or of her boy (*Love-leaf-which at twelve*), and she

(Continued on page 35)

Article on Nancy Francis and Her "Writing Daughters" by Zora Cross ("Bernice May") in the *Australian Woman's Mirror*, 24 May, 1927:

"the journey to Cooktown from Sydney is like taking a trip to another continent..."



## Nancy Francis: "Queensland Luck"

I had never been so far north before and was accustomed to hear my Sydney friends speak of North Queensland as a dreadful place impossible for white people and only fit for black or coloured folk. I found a delightful climate, a summer that lasted all year round, grand and beautiful scenery, healthful breezes and cooling rains. Our house was covered with yellow allamanda, the verandah hung with orchids, brown, purple and feathery cream, which we bought from the blacks who brought them into town from the scrub. (*The Northern Herald* 15 August, 1923, p. 28)

# "Queensland Luck"



Stately cedars and kauri pines, red oaks and beeches were here, not singly, but in groups. Mighty trees, whose identity was hidden under the tracery and scroll work of the trees, buttressed, arched and groined, like the columns and pillars of a grand cathedral. (*The Northern Herald* 29 August, 1923, p. 28)

The trees were full of birds, parrots screamed from one to another, white cockatoos winged overhead, their yellow tinted under-feathers and crests showing against the clear sky, while pigeons cooed, and made love in the shade, or busily fed on the tall tops of the plum trees. Strange growths, wonderful orchids and ferns draped the sepia trunks and branches, and delightful scents perfumed the air. (*The Northern Herald* 29 August 1923, p. 29)

# Nancy Francis: "Cedar Bay" (1932)

I mind it well

The jungle drops quite steeply to  
the bay,

Where is a crescent flat, well  
grassed and edged

With palms and she-oaks leaning  
from the sea.

Great boughs bend over, set in  
wave-lapped sand,

Form a dim colonnade; on either  
hand

Beach lilies blooming. Through each  
dusky tree



Are white and amber jewels—  
orchids ledged

To light the crannies of the  
enchanted way....

The camp we pitched

Beneath the talking trees close to  
the shore;

The beat of homing pigeon wings at  
eve

Close overhead, the lonely curlew's  
cry,

The great moon swinging to the  
purple dome...

Ah! It is Paradise, my Northern  
home!

*Peace spreads her mantle 'neath the  
brooding sky,*

*Beauty and joy their spells in silence  
weave,*

*And all my love is there for  
evermore.*

# Zora Cross (1890-1964)



# Zora Cross: "Home-Sickness"



## STANZA 1

I want my own North land again tonight,  
St George and Brisbane, Cairns and Charleville.  
There is a coldness at this mountain height  
That touches me with hands too cool and still  
And sends my thoughts like wandering summer  
flocks  
There where the Johnstone runs through  
Innisfail,  
And all the precincts of my Gympie rocks  
Are showered with the hoya blossoms pale....

# "Home-Sickness"

## STANZA 3



How can I think of home and check my sighs  
For the bauhinia hills of Herberton,  
Cane waving in the spear where Goondi lies  
Green as a carpet by a genie spun?  
Chill is this moon, clean-cut as pallid ice,  
It seems not the same lamp that lights my  
land,  
All dappled with the dust of tropic spice  
A-swoon in a blue dream and bamboo-fanned....

# "Home-Sickness"

## STANZA 7

Oh, give me my own home—its carelessness,  
Its prodigal wild wealth of fruit and flower,  
The spell of its indifferent caress  
Its scarlet banksia or hibiscus bower.  
Give me its bougainvillea embrace,  
Its stinging trees, its orchids poised for  
flight,  
The filmy green of the wild cedar lace  
Seen through the sleeves of wattles silver-  
white.



# *The Lute Girl of Rainyvale (c. 1925)*

She saw through the open door the moonlight-coloured waters, blue as lapis-lazuli, spread out like a lake of gems for miles about them. The ruby-tinted ship lit up by hundreds of mellow electric lights, must have looked to the unforgettable stars above it like a great jewel set in a jewel as lovely as itself, so calmly did the steamer move on.

Something of the warm persuasive tropic soul of the sea slipped imperceptibly into Melise's soul. For she leaned little nearer Dale; and she scarcely knew herself for the girl who had boarded the steamer so reluctantly at Brisbane; and had suffered the first part of the voyage alone in her cabin (p. 49)

# *The Lute Girl of Rainyvale*

## The True Tropics?



A strange smell of copra mixed with tar, and the heavy sweet scent of tropical fruits and sugar came out to meet them from Townsville. She is only an echo of the real North, but the breath of the distant Northern farms and fisheries is there. (p. 55)

# *The Lute Girl of Rainyvale*

## The Passionate Tropics



Mourilyan to Innisfail (Rainyvale):

In a near farm they were burning off the cane, and as still night came down suddenly on the scene she drew in a deep breath of delight. Let come what would, this was adventure, this was romance! (p. 125)



# *The Lute Girl of Rainyvale*



Anything at all might happen in such a fairyland world as the North. (p. 75)

But the North had a breath of comradeship in its air for all people. Quarrels are difficult to provoke in a land where Content has had home, Ease and Indifference their being. (p. 62)

# Dorothy Cottrell (1902-1957)

*The Singing  
Gold*

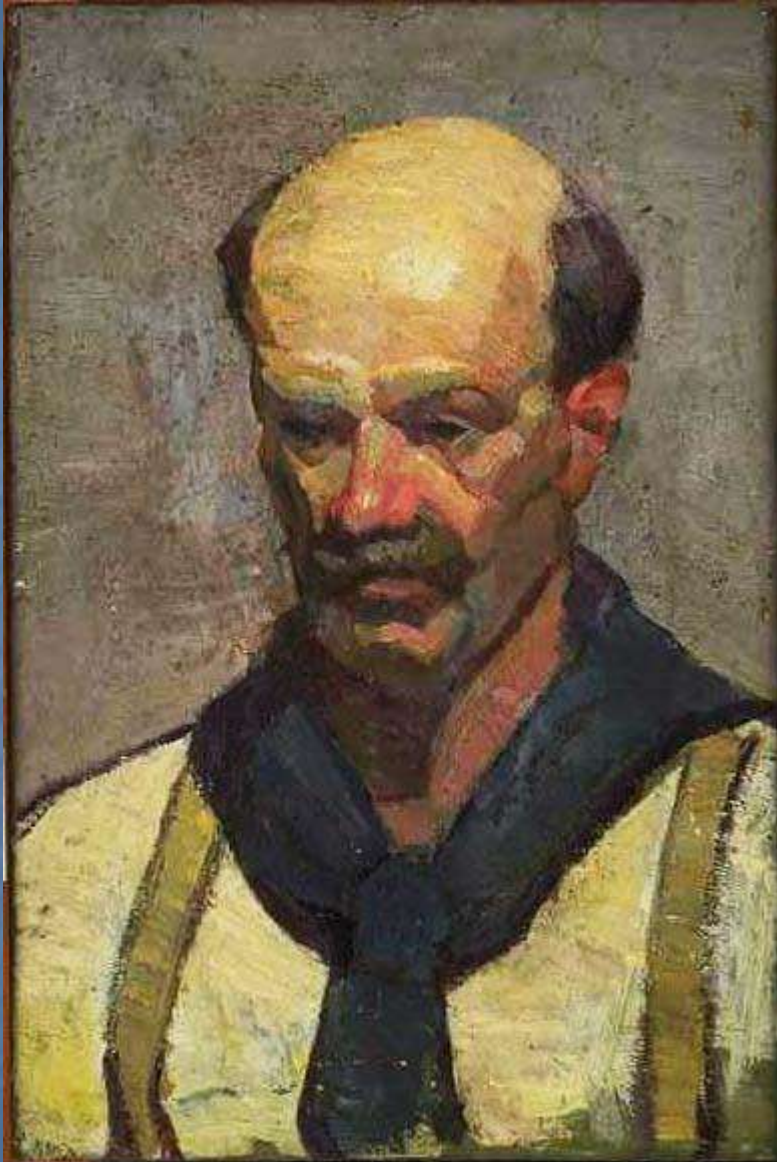
1928-29

Short  
Stories

1932-51

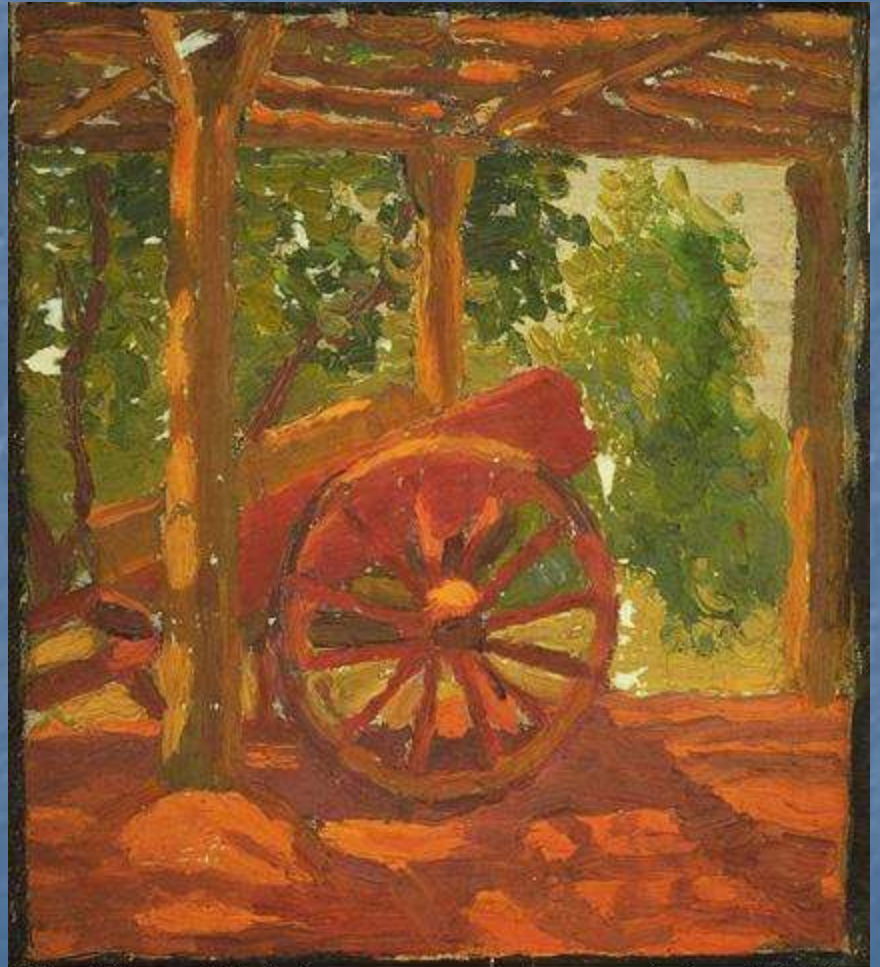


Dorothy Cottrell, c. 1920,  
"Portrait of a Man," and  
"Bough Shed, Elmina."



National Library of Australia

nla.pic-an2812897-v



National Library of Australia

nla.pic-an2812903-v

# Dunk Island and E. J. Banfield



Portrait of Banfield  
by Jack Loutitt, 1967

Dorothy Cottrell's painting of Dunk Island, to which she and her husband eloped in 1923. Banfield died on the island in June, while the young couple were visiting Bowen.

# *The Singing Gold*

We stood together amongst our piled possessions, and panted... We stood now in an effulgent world of strange brilliant peace and light... possessing that most compactly magical thing in all the world, a tropical island... The divine setting for adventure, for youth, for love; never to me quite real.

There were wistful brown casuarinas against a smoke-blue horizon; ragged yellow-flowered beach hibiscus among the sedge; umbrella-trees lifting candelabras of red coralled flowers with the fire-green butterflies about them....

There was life and colour and life, life, life... in the vine-rioting jungle on the orchid-knotted rocks; life rising from the coloured floor of the sea in pillars and reefs and flower-forms of coral...(pp. 120-1)

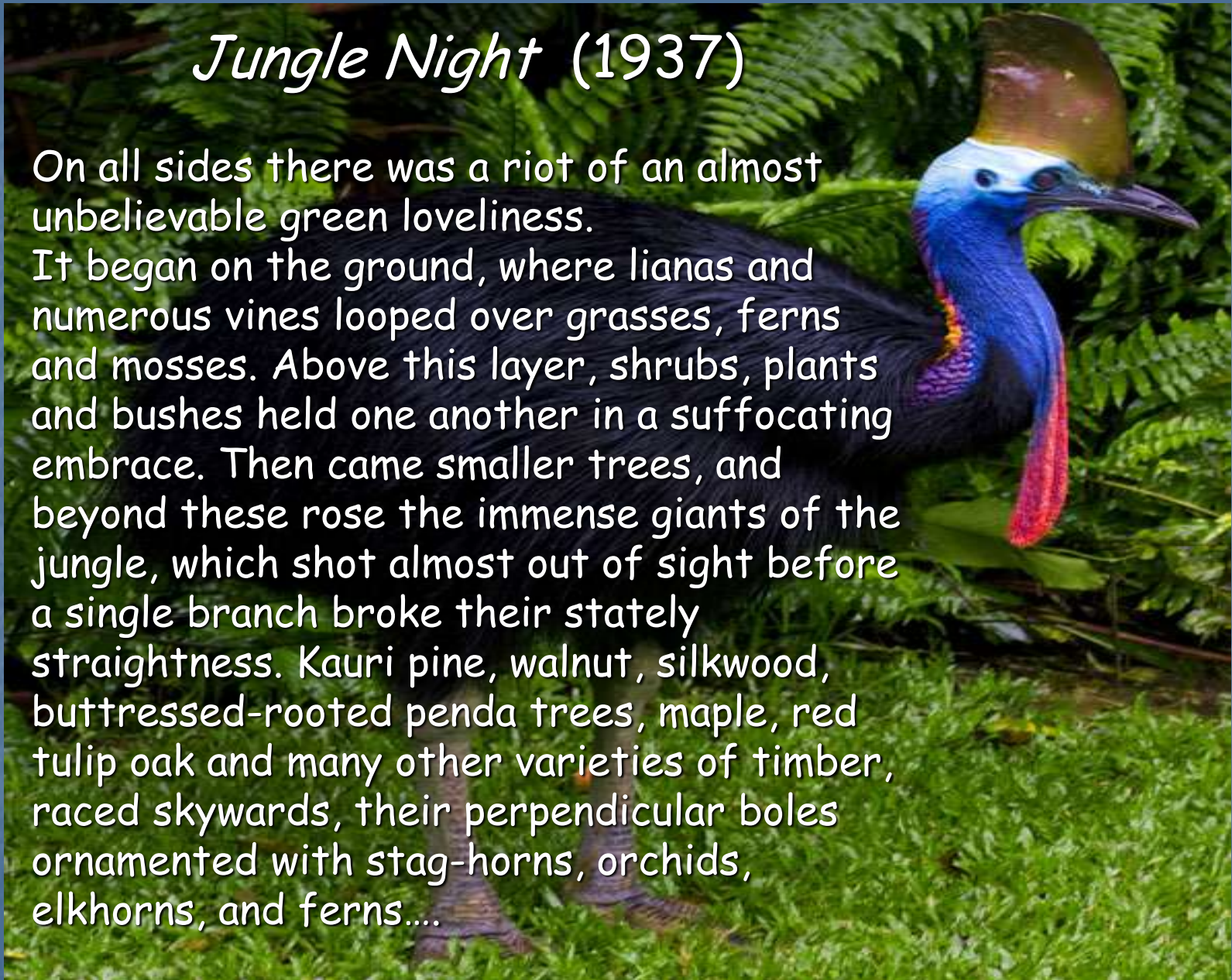


# Marie Bjelke-Petersen 1874 - 1969



## *Jungle Night (1937)*

On all sides there was a riot of an almost unbelievable green loveliness. It began on the ground, where lianas and numerous vines looped over grasses, ferns and mosses. Above this layer, shrubs, plants and bushes held one another in a suffocating embrace. Then came smaller trees, and beyond these rose the immense giants of the jungle, which shot almost out of sight before a single branch broke their stately straightness. Kauri pine, walnut, silkwood, buttressed-rooted penda trees, maple, red tulip oak and many other varieties of timber, raced skywards, their perpendicular boles ornamented with stag-horns, orchids, elkhorns, and ferns....



A photograph of a dense tropical jungle. The scene is filled with tall, slender tree trunks and a thick canopy of green leaves and ferns. The lighting is dappled, suggesting sunlight filtering through the dense foliage. The overall atmosphere is one of a wild, untamed natural space.

## *Jungle Night*

Over this maze of beauty there brooded a gigantic, a colossal peace—a peace which had no connection with gentleness or things spiritual. It was wholly of earth: wild, savage, primeval. It was a peace which could not be disturbed or rifted; it was indomitable, indestructible, and it was everywhere. (pp. 28-29)

# *Jungle Night*



©2009 mongabay.com

Before entering the gigantic cavity she put her ear to a crack in the wood and listened to the sound that proceeded from within the tree. It was a music curious and weird. She knew it was caused by the hum of numerous insects and various notes of birds all blending together in wonderful harmony and producing an extraordinary unearthly symphony. It was like music played by wind and sea, by flowers and moonshine and stars, strains which could not be drawn from the strings of instruments invented by man....

# *Jungle Night*



The enormous cavity was dark, though not wholly black, for there were rents and small openings in the bark, letting in streaks of sunshine, which partly lit the gloom and made it possible for the girl to see the huge dome-like ceiling arching above her. However, the most extraordinary thing about this natural cathedral was that at the farther end of the vaulted formation there hung a huge cross. It was formed by thick branches and gleamed oddly white in the dimness. (p. 192)

# Reasons for Celebrating the Tropical Flower Writing Tradition

1. They speak for tropical Queensland and for the women of the region.
2. Their accounts affirm a region too often belittled or conversely oversold as a tourist destination.
3. They associate the region with women's freedom.
4. They seek to inspire and uplift women readers.
5. They are advocates for the natural environment.
6. They are open to different spiritualities.
7. They express support and affection for Aboriginal people.

