

JUNE TONNOIR

MAGNETIC HOUSE : OUR NORTHERN ADVOCATE

When Paul and I brought our small daughter to Townsville in 1960, we expected to stay for three months. Instead we began refitting a boat, a Fairmile moored in Ross Creek near Burns Philp Wharf, Flinders Street East, and in the following three years, whilst restoring and living on the boat, Flinders Street East and Townsville became our home. In November 1963, our boat was moved up the Creek, because of dredging operations in the Swing Basin, and we lost our safe mooring. On one night of high wind, the boat's bowline snapped, and she began to sink under the incoming tide. We managed to salvage and refloat her, but owing to stringent regulations, we were forced to fire her on the South Townsville bank of Ross Creek, on another night of high wind, when the red cyclone warning flag was fluttering at the Post Office. Since we had literally been 'up the creek' and 'burnt our boat' we felt that anything else that Townsville or the tropics had to offer would only be a mere metaphor!

After all, ours was a small drama compared with the many weighty ones Flinders Street East must have seen since its transformation from mangrove to road to street by John Melton Black and his mentor and partner, Captain Robert Towns, in November 1864. Black and Towns poured their energies, confidence and money into the little port of Cleveland Bay, growing up on the banks of the Ross. They bought six allotments in the first land sale in July 1865. By 1866 the population had grown to 400, and the little port was given an official name, Townsville. By 1885 Townsville had a population of 9000, swollen by the trade generated by gold discoveries at Cape River, Ravenswood and Charters Towers to the west.

An Englishman, C. D. Mackellar, visited Townsville in 1885 when 'there was talk of dividing Queensland into two colonies, and Townsville [had] made up her mind she [was] to be capital of the new colony "Alberta"', and he stated that 'the advertisements of the land sales are very high-flown' in the 'two newspapers.' He quoted from these advertisements and concluded that he 'liked this town and its go-ahead spirit.'¹

This confidence resulted in a building boom of 'substantial and handsome buildings' later described in *The Australian Handbook* of 1902.² The *Handbook* continued: 'There are agents of several insurance societies, and a branch of the Mutual Provident Society, the latter lodged in a fine brick edifice next to the Exchange Hotel.'² The AMP Society had purchased land from Towns and Black, and by 1888 their 'fine brick edifice', Magnetic House, was completed in Flinders Street East. The Society sited their office in the middle of the three premises fronting the street, and leased the premises on either side of them as shops. Upstairs was divided into three suites of two-room offices, opening on to a back balcony. Five strong rooms were built into the building, a necessary precaution in the busy days of a thriving port, when the eastern end of Flinders Street was the business heart of Townsville.

By 1978 this was no longer so. Townsville's business heart now beat strongly further up Flinders Street nearer the railway station. However, we now had the opportunity of becoming the new owners of Magnetic House, and there was nothing metaphorical about the way we examined this option, despite Magnetic House's proximity to Ross Creek, and its Flinders Street East address! As members of the National Trust of Queensland, we were aware of the historical significance of Magnetic House, and thought we could go some way towards restoring it. As members of cultural societies in Townsville, we knew how deficient Townsville was of buildings dedicated to the arts in the widest sense. We thought a restored Magnetic House might go some way to meeting this need. We examined the structural solidity of the building, imagined galleries and arts and crafts shops in the high ceilinged rooms, lit with natural light from the tall and generous windows, and decided to go ahead. There followed nine months of frantic activity, during which time the hall and staircase were restored, subdivisions were removed from the upstairs rooms and balcony, walls and ceilings were re-rendered, the balcony floor removed and replanked, its cast iron railings removed, sand-blasted and painted, and restored, and the building was re-roofed and painted. We were ready to go. Was our aim to make Magnetic House a small multi-cultural centre, hopefully to breathe back some life to flagging Flinders Street East, too high, too ambitious?

In 1978 we registered ourselves as a Fine Arts Gallery, calling ourselves *Tonnoirs*. Our decision to do this was based on several premises. Obviously, Magnetic House lent itself to Gallery use; there was no public gallery in Townsville; and no other private gallery in Townsville and district was operating in the fine arts area in the way we planned.

Also, we had growing confidence in Townsville and North Queensland. Townsville was becoming a city in its own right, no longer a branch town, but a place where incoming people chose to stay. The unique tropical environment of the area, from the beautiful bare bones of the dry tropics to the exuberant fertility of the wet tropics, was providing an exciting, dynamic landscape stimulus to a dynamic spirit-scape. The deep North was producing artists, sculptors, writers, poets, scholars, weavers and potters of quality, whose endeavours towards excellence were receiving national recognition. We hoped that our gallery could provide another dimension to that dynamism, by showing the works of such established artists, not only for the enjoyment of the public, but also to encourage other aspiring talents.

That Townsville and North Queensland were becoming culturally self-confident not only about the depth, but also about the height, width and breadth of its tropical inheritance was becoming evident in other developments. Results of social and scientific research carried out at the James Cook University, the CSIRO Davies Laboratory, the Australian Institute of Marine Science, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, are now being published world wide and are seen on national television. James Cook pursues a vigorous publications policy through its own press, and its reputation in this area is Australia wide. The Foundation for Australian Literary Studies also issues its publications from Townsville, and *LiNQ* is now one of Australia's established literary magazines. The Townsville College of TAFE attracts students from all over Australia to its Arts Diploma course, and the staff and students of its Cultural Studies department have given considerable depth to the artistic knowledge and perception of the community. Our city is also fortunate in the cultural input provided by the staff and students of the Performing Arts Department at James Cook.

Our confidence in the growth of regional culture has been partly vindicated by City Council action in establishing the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery and the Civic Theatre, and by the

actions of other Northern Councils in similar areas of cultural growth. Townsville now has its own semi-professional ballet company, and music enthusiasts are now discussing the possibility of a local music centre. Local theatre flourishes.

Part of the North's rich tropical inheritance lies in its past identification with its primary pastoral and mining industries, their attendant secondary industries, and the variety of peoples who worked these industries and were affected by them. Early writers, like Henning, Banfield, Becke, Favenc, Kennedy, McLaren and Bedford, recorded this side of the North's inheritance, and pioneered our literary self-consciousness. Early editions of their publications are now rare, as are any early published materials of a less literary nature. Fortunately, the library of the James Cook University has a policy of collecting and preserving 'all types of archival and printed materials relating to North Queensland' based on the Delamothe Collection.³ Paul and I also have a passion for North Australiana, and because of this, decided to share our enthusiasm by providing a rare book, map and print section in our gallery.

This has not been easy. Book collector, D. A. Spalding, asserted in 1981 "that Queensland does not have any antiquarian or second hand booksellers with even one respectable shelf of worthwhile Australiana. All other states and even Canberra is better served than is our third largest state so that Queenslanders in search of Australiana must go south."⁴ He re-asserted this in 1982.⁵ We can appreciate the practical reasons why Queensland has earned that dubious reputation. The first one is climatic. Old books do not respond kindly to being kept in cartons or tea-chests under high houses or on open verandahs in hot, humid conditions subject to floods and cyclones, or in hot dry conditions subject to fire. The second one is cultural. For many years Queensland was a 'branch' state, and the headquarters of many enterprises were in southern states or overseas. Home bases and wealth, either one of which helps to build up a personal library, were elsewhere. The third is geographic. Very few books were printed in Queensland, and paying freight on such heavy items was a consideration. (It still is!) And quality bookshops were either in Sydney or Melbourne, in the main. And booksellers, like James Tyrrell of Sydney who recorded in 1952 that 'when a rare item turns up, my mind immediately connects the volume with the book-lover most likely to want it, whether he is on the

phone or on a station in North Queensland⁶ did not exist in Queensland.

Another consideration relates to finance. It is necessary to build up a collection of references, authorities and catalogues to establish and maintain a high standard book stock. It is also necessary to travel, looking for the right books elsewhere in Australia and overseas. We now buy books in New Zealand, U.S.A. and Great Britain. We find the percentage of good books available locally is low. To some extent the reasons listed above still apply, but should diminish with the growing cultural maturity of North Queensland, and the development of preservation methods for books in the tropics.

We have also endeavoured to supply examples of items from other cultures, in other times. There are rugs from Persia, icons from Russia, porcelain from China, and old clocks and watches from Great Britain and the U.S.A.

Since we began our gallery in 1978 it has been growing apace. This is overwhelmingly due to the positive response we have had from a wide range of people of all ages from all over the North. Our belief that the North now has a definable cultural quality and identity has been reinforced again and again. We have had the good fortune to introduce a rare or beautiful item to a surprised and delighted new owner. Finding a special book for a book-lover is a pleasurable and educational experience. However, there is one sort of negative response from a certain sort of supercilious and ignorant visitor which goes something like this. "I did not expect to find a gallery like this in *Townsville*. I suppose you were born in the south? Surely, you must be catering for the tourist trade? Nobody *here* would buy this sort of thing, would they?" It is a source of immense satisfaction to be able to tell the pseudo-sophisticate that indeed our customers are in the main, local people whose love of the beautiful, and whose sense of discrimination and quality blossom happily amongst us, contributing to a richly diverse cultural environment. But when an evident newcomer, or visitor, shares with us a new-found enjoyment in "discovering North Queensland; it's like another country", it is difficult not to compliment him on his good taste.

The underlying implication to be drawn from those two sets of observations I have quoted, is that both visitors had a lot to learn. Many visitors to *Townsville* travel by road or rail, some

by air, still fewer by sea. They make rapid assessments from what they can see, such as Flinders Mall, Magnetic Island and perhaps the Harbour. Maps of the city centre are printed in the usual tourist guides, and tourists are not explicitly told that Flinders Mall is not in the middle of Townsville, but is on the sea-edge of it. The historical and geographical reasons explaining how Townsville has grown in the way that it has, are not given. A detailed map of Townsville is available, but is not always evident and is expensive. Perhaps the 'fault . . . is . . . in ourselves.' Townsville has not provided a cultural map of itself. The Visitors' Bureau has gone some way towards helping the visitor by placing their Information behind glass on information boards in the Mall, and directing visitors to the Bureau. There is a magnificent colour photograph of Townsville taken from the air, showing Castle Hill and the city to the sea. There are detailed maps of the coastline of the Townsville region, and there is information about Charters Towers and Bowen, among others. The Visitors' Bureau distributes a brochure, which the four businesses in Magnetic House (Mary Who? Bookshop, Inspired Fibres, Alkira Bazaar and Tonnoirs) with the two businesses in early brick shops next door (Higgins' Restaurant and The Australian Collection) have combined to produce, and this gives a history of our buildings and their location. The local branch of the National Trust has produced a Walk & Drive of Townsville, but copies of that are not endless, for economic reasons. Our experience is that most visitors appreciate these small publications, as they answer some of their questions about the origin and subsequent character of Townsville. But there is no one publication which outlines Townsville's history, charts its growth, and maps the present multi-faceted cultural and educational face of our city. Our experience in Magnetic House is that there is a desperate need for such a cultural over-view of Townsville, not only for visitors, but also for our own citizens. It would be excellent if all cultural and educational organizations in Townsville could combine to produce such a publication. It would be a mark of vigorous cultural self-confidence and maturity. We now benefit from Townsville's unique cultural assets, which we should acknowledge and build on, to enable inevitable future growth to occur. By so doing, we would be tacitly recognising the growth and development of Townsville's distinctive personality.

References

- ¹C. D. Mackellar, *Scented Isles and Coral Gardens. Torres Straits, German New Guinea, and the Dutch East Indies.* (London, 1912), pp. 5-6.
- ²*The Australian Handbook of 1902.* (London, 1901) pp. 539-540.
- ³*The Delamothe Collection of North Queensland History and Literature.* (James Cook University of North Queensland, 1978) p. 1.
- ⁴D. A. Spalding, *Collecting Australian Books – Notes for Beginners.* (Canberra, the Author, 1981) p. 66.
- ⁵D. A. Spalding, *Collecting Australian Books. Notes for Beginners.* Second Edition, enlarged with corrections and amendments. (Mawson, A.C.T., the Author, 1982) p. 74.
- ⁶James R. Tyrell, *Old Books, Old Friends, Old Sydney.* (Sydney, 1952) p. 2.