

## ELIZABETH LAWSON

### LUCY'S GOLD, THE POMMY COW, IN HERBERTLAND:

#### SARAH CAMPION'S *MO BURDEKIN* NOVELS

In 1938, after a long troubled gestation, Xavier Herbert produced his first novel *Capricornia*, a novel destined to win a prestigious prize, and pass, in the space of five decades, through many editions and reprints, and the hands and minds of thousands of readers; thus to become what is termed an Australian classic, safely canonised before the academies knew they needed a canon.

Between 1941 and 1944 the English novelist Sarah Campion, with seven rather rapturously reviewed novels to her credit, published her Australian trilogy of the Burdekin River, North Queensland. *Mo Burdekin*, *Bonanza* and *The Pommy Cow*, all published by Peter Davies in London in conformity with wartime economy standards, achieved between them no more than a couple of reprints in immediately subsequent years, and *Burdekin* can be found only here and there in our larger libraries, and then in odd copies, rarely the trilogy intact.

But *Burdekin* has not merely hung onto shelf space; two or three thin survey articles on Campion's work exist<sup>1</sup>, and the trilogy has received friendly notice in bibliographies and histories.<sup>2</sup> In the latest of these, Adrian Mitchell in Leonie Kramer's commonly maligned Oxford history, records not simply what is textually obvious, its close relationship in mood, setting, style and genre to Herbert's *Capricornia*, but also that Campion has a "sharper sense of humour" than Herbert, that she is "witty where he has an ingrained perverse conviction of irony" and that there is "more playfulness in her perception of the absurd".<sup>3</sup> These comparative distinctions notwithstanding, Mitchell accords Campion slightly less than two dozen lines to Herbert's several pages in the history. This paper, seeing the loss of the *Burdekin* trilogy as the loss of an essential term in a continuing fictional debate, hopes to restore interest in Campion, and anticipates the reprinting of *Burdekin* at least, as the most impressive of her dozen novels. (After all, we have to put up with *Soldier's Women* and *Poor Fellow, My Country*, which I would say is to put up with rather more than Herbert's "most impressive".)

But this article has more academic aims. Much recent feminist critical theory, seeing that all women write necessarily within a patriarchal linguistic (and literary) system, argues that their female experience can only achieve inscription within it by processes of disruption and subversion (irony, parody, Bakhtinian *carnivale*, double voicing, and so on). A woman's language is always a woman's *masculine language* and

always therefore, as Juliet Mitchell puts it, the discourse of the hysteric, hysteria meaning for Mitchell precisely a woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of her femininity, that fantastic construction of the patriarchal culture which proscribes her life.<sup>4</sup> Thus a woman must write either in total conformity with the world given her or she must, fascinated by what is more difficult than even Yeats knew, refuse or criticise that world from within its own powerfully defining, powerfully given terms.

Campion's rather joyful use of narrative, her irrepressible irony, widely inclusive quickness of observation, superbly controlled use of pathos, secure and valuable use of historical event, and exceptional capacity for the evocation of landscape, hardly suggest a writing one could describe as "hysterical" in the conventional derogatory sense. Moreover, Campion takes up the Herbertian mode, that whole caboodle of "masculine" bush life and attitudes that so evidently dominates *Capricornia*, with an overtly happy enthusiasm which parallels her amply confessed love affair with Queensland (at one point when "exiled" in Britain she lists her "occupation" as "storming Australia House for a passage home"). On the other hand, she also wrote more recently to me that "I think my arrival in Queensland brought out all my latent feminism". Such an openly confessed division in authorial passion suggests at least some correspondence between the contradictions of female experience in a grievously unbalanced Australian culture and the perennially contradictory nature of the relationship of women artists to language and literature.

My chief aim here, then, is to show that Campion's work is precisely what this theory — in Juliet Mitchell's formulation — suggests it must be: a paradoxically divided discourse, which both recreates and challenges the "bush nationalist" Herbertian world of *Capricornia*; which celebrates the Capricornian mode, while from within the same discourse, it creates an interventionist, critical commentary upon it. As a sequential term within an ongoing historical fictional debate, *Burdekin* offers, then, both the Herbertian thesis and anti-thesis, this coming about exactly through *Burdekin's* "hysteric" double narrative, its acceptance as well as rejection, of the culturally "given", *Capricornia*. Implicit in this argument is, of course, the view that in the gender-polarised culture to which we belong, reading is as gendered a process as writing, and that Campion's work, like that of many other women, "needed" the women's movement to get itself read.

Existing commentary on the novels, demonstrably, has "read" only that narrative considered normative because patriarchally confirming, its "feminine" obverse (which I begin to "read" here today) remaining apparently invisible. Critical statements about *Burdekin*, concentrating

on its hero's career, are plain and unsurprising: *Burdekin*, "like *Capricornia*", is a "boisterous, anti-sentimental novel of the bush" (Adrian Mitchell); *Burdekin* is in the bush nationalist tradition with a pervasive sprinkling of witty satire"; it is the "rich, fruitful narration of the life of a man"; *Burdekin* tells the story of its hero's adventures in the North Queensland gold-fever days of last century" (John Mackellar); and so on. These are perfectly conventional literary descriptions which tell us that *Burdekin* presents us with more of an undifferentiated same, and tell us nothing at all of what is distinctive about Campion's authorship (if we believe in authors) nor about the trilogy's place in our literary-cultural history.

Leaving aside much tantalizingly splendid material, this article shows *Burdekin* as "answering" Herbert's *Capricornia* precisely through its character as a paradoxically divided narrative. First, it shows the worlds of *Capricornia* and *Burdekin* as shared and "masculine", but that of *Burdekin* as filling many suggestive silences of *Capricornia*. Second, seeing Mo Burdekin's story as the normative, "masculine" narrative of the trilogy, it extracts Mo's stories of Lucy, Rose and Kate and contrasts these with the narrationally muted "other" stories of Lucy, Rose, and Kate, those stories which make up part of the "hysteric" or "feminine" narrative of *Burdekin* and of which Mo shows little if any awareness.

*Capricornia* is usually read as a savagely satirical indictment of racism in the early twentieth century Northern Territory; it advocates the doctrine, contemporary with its writing, of assimilation, and its sympathies with its half-caste race are always textually evident, often moving, and strongly persuasive. *Burdekin*, based more precisely in particular history, deals with the gold-fever period of late nineteenth century Queensland and the coincident shearers' strike, and in *The Pommy Cow*, takes its hero and the reader to the Boer war in South Africa (the account of which should make compulsory reading for all historians of the period as well as all potential latter-day warriors and "heroes").

My article's title, without undue disrespect, and fairly, I hope, compounds the fictional qualities of Herbert's Northern Territory and Campion's Queensland in the shorthand term, "Herbertland". As readers of *Capricornia* know, "Herbertland" is dominated by male characters and male activities whose characteristics are those a notoriously "masculine", not to say misogynist, culture long accepted as humanly "natural". The relevant elements in both Herbert and Campion are many and familiar; sites of action are traditionally "masculine" sites, railways, hotels, stations, shearers' camps, mines, the battle-field; actions are noisy, farcical, violent; there is lusty sexual adventure or

misadventure presented from a male point of view; all characters consistently assume a sharp permanent division between the sexes as natural; women are relegated to the sidelines of the action and, in Herbert's novel, are foils to male action; the stuff of the dialogue is a garrulous celebration of mateship, cobberhood, or, revealingly, in *Burdekin*, women's complaint; there is a running "male" "comic" theme of escape from the clutches of women's life, this latter seen as "naturally" domestic and peripheral. In *Burdekin*, men frequently present themselves as domestic incompetents, as, a term I remember from the fifties, "mere males", and so on — (they don't, for instance, and this is important in both works, know what to do with babies). The "masculine" world of Herbertland, is then significantly celebrated in *Burdekin*.

If, however, as I am to show, Campion's *Burdekin* is a divided or "hysterical" text, refusing while it recreates that world, then Herbert's, though homogenous or "seamless", has its own contradiction, a contradiction I describe in a forthcoming article in *Westerly* as an "anxiety" of intriguing "blanks and silences". *Capricornia*, I argue there, defines its half-caste hero's quest as the recognition and acceptance of his dual racial origin. Narrationally, this involves Norman's search for his white father; logically, you would expect it to involve an equal search for his aboriginal mother, but here is a textual blank: by "killing off" Norman's mother on page forty, Herbert cancels a term essential to his quest-narrative. The whole narrative process is "anxious", because, in its "masculine" hurly-burly, "mother" figures persistently "haunt", as I put it in a rather complicated argument, precisely those textual sites where their existence has been first maligned, then cancelled. A text whose first proposition is human equality thus fails at the literal level to realize the humanity of its female characters. The death, as the result of Norman's negligence, of Tocky and her daughter at the close of *Capricornia*, becomes mutely expressive of a wider narrational negligence, of emptinesses and silences throughout the text which have gone unrecognised by conventional criticism.

Campion, creating her own "Herbertland" in *Burdekin*, makes for *Capricornia* a book of answers, by filling in these silences. First, by her provision of that "feminine" narrative of the "second sex". Second, by her insistent presentation, despite the dominant "masculine" quality of her Herbertland, of a full human landscape — I mean that everywhere she brings women (and children) "naturally" into her narrative and, more tellingly, repeatedly and sardonically interrupts the dominant "masculine" narrative (all that raging around the country after gold or whatever, all that romantic bush pastoral), with aspects of what the men of the novel see as "women's world".

The second of these techniques is discernible immediately in the Prologue to *Mo Burdekin*; this Prologue, perhaps the most brilliantly tempestuous *tour de force* in Australian bush writing, is usually read as proclaiming the remorseless power of the tropical wet season over human existence. However, in its sharply focussed presentation of a hapless fossicker and his family overtaken by the Burdekin in flood, the Prologue challenges Mo's Irish father's fossicking daydream with the insistent terrible presence of his dead wife and the unobserved moral rebuke of his small courageous daughter vainly trying to snatch his brood of children from the flood. Later, similarly, Reuben Abraham's staid bachelor life is blown dramatically open with the arrival on the Burdekin flood of the infant, Moses, and, later still, in the second novel, *Bonanza*, Mo's own bush adventures are suddenly disrupted with the physically problematic presence of his own suckling infant son, Ben. Similarly again, and perhaps most dramatically, Mo's experience of the Boer War is suddenly interrupted and challenged by his early vision of and later perplexed awareness of the tutelary presence of the "Pommy Cow" (Kate), whose conversations with Mo during the course of that disillusioning war tartly deconstruct its imperialist rhetoric and precipitate his sole morally motivated action in the course of the trilogy, conscientious desertion.

More important to my argument than these narrative interpolations is Champion's provision of the "second" or "feminine" narrative. As I have implied throughout, Mo's personal "masculine" narrative dominates the trilogy, thus controlling reader perspective: it is therefore the "first" narrative, the "feminine" narrative being "second" in that it details material we merely glimpse "after the event" or often belatedly "find out" as if by accident. (This structure of course mocks the reality of women's lives in the kind of world presented.) The contrasts between the two narratives are crucial to my reading of the trilogy and my sense of its paradoxical (in this context, "hysteric") interest.

The first narrative, Mo's, is complacently sure of its accounts of his world and of Lucy, Rose and Kate in particular. For Mo (and thus for us as we read first), Lucy is nothing more than Mo's childhood "cobber" whose adult life is to betray his bush dream. All Mo sees and presents is her early treacherous disappearance to an inexplicable marriage from Lucy's Gold, the settlement of their childhood playtime. Lucy's later second marriage Mo sees similarly as a rejection of himself and of their dreamtime estate — childhood, the bush, his eternal hunt for gold. The details of the second narrative, seeing all this otherwise, only gradually accrue to the reader. Lucy, as the township name, "Lucy's Gold", implies, is a potential fictional goldmine: she is lively, acerbic, succinct, disillusioned, cynical beyond her years; she is also significantly divided,

torn apart by the culture confronting her. Unlike Mo's generously enthusiastic vision of that world, her vision is, as her one green eye, one blue, rather alarmingly indicate, devastatingly subversive, and as her first ever mindless toddler's action (in teasing her family and neighbours for all of fifteen years or so with false hope of "fool's gold") also mockingly declares.

Lucy, fooled by little, certainly not by the false hopes of the wayside settlement, and though she takes dramatic action to save herself, cannot in this Queensland world, get her life right. At the tender age of fifteen, using the 1880's equivalent of the Singles Columns, she organizes her escape-by-marriage from Lucy's Gold, landing unfortunately in the bed and clutches of an archetypal representative of the Holy Writ of Patriarchy and God the Father Himself. What is almost theatrically impressive here (apart from the stupendous bad luck) is the total cynicism of Lucy's youthful action, its derisory abuse of the institution of marriage and clear-sightedly bitter parody of a girl's conformist destiny. Such bitterness seems paralleled in the modern fiction I know only by that episode in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* where a young male negro turns to selling dancing Sambo dolls on Harlem's streets. Chained to a farcical, caricatured life of prayer and cleanliness, Lucy eventually escapes her husband tormentor to return days later with a healthfully developed Intent to Murder, a fate from which Campion mercifully releases her at the last possible minute.

Lucy's story ends disappointingly for the reader however; she goes on to marry a merely amiable young man, Tom, who has one foot in the Queensland Herbertian rural dream and one in the Law. This second marriage, with Lucy acquiescent and "tamed" (Mo's word), reasserts the patriarchal, or "masculine" narrative, and Lucy, sadly, is left behind, only, I think, to reappear in the third book of the trilogy in the figure of Kate, the Pommy Cow. Lucy "loves" Tom, the Lawyer; she "accepts" the fiction Campion provides for her, and it is exactly to my point that our only glimpse of her continuing rebellious spirit comes indirectly through Mo's narrative of confident contempt: Mo thinks Lucy "stupid" because she cannot distinguish between lawyers and the novel's maligned policemen. The unspoken "feminine" narrative hardly shares Mo's view.

Rose, of the trilogy's second volume, *Bonanza*, is of less interest than either Lucy or Kate, but for one especially disturbing detail. Mo's primary narrative sees her, stereotypically, as the mysterious, perfect "rose" of adolescent seduction and traditional romance, who, after their elopement, withers all too quickly into the tedious, clinging vine of weeping despair, a life's burden that threatens to strangle Mo's young freedom. So indeed are we largely persuaded by his straightforward

narrative. It is only considerably later, however, that we discover through largely underplayed details (details made the mere by-play of a lurid, threatening episode of the primary narrative) that at the exact point of elopement with Mo, Rose has actually murdered her publican husband. Retrospectively then, Rose's insistence on prolonging the frantic flight of their elopement, her clinging and weeping in the love nest of the bush, and perhaps most tellingly of all, her apparently idiotic, repetitious descents through sex into dumb unconsciousness, come to signify a wholly reasonable mortal and moral terror. Rose's immediate murderous past swings into a newly revealing perspective, moreover, against our recent memory of Lucy's thwarted attempt to murder her first husband. What, we might ask, worse than barmaiding, has Rose's husband imposed upon her? Mo clearly prefers not to know and the reader's thoughts are also deflected. Rose is a nuisance well left behind and Mo turns with un-selfcritical relief back to his gold-fevered world.

Kate, the "Pommy Cow" of the third title, resumes some of the fictional possibilities abandoned earlier with Lucy. Here the second narrative is less easily distinguished from Mo's dominant story in which he loves, uses, but never comprehends Kate. For instance, while it is Kate's thinking that catapults Mo out of the disastrous Australian involvement in the Boer War, he cannot later understand why in London he finds her chained to a London railing protesting the suffrage issue. It is to Mo's further incomprehension, that Kate, proving her feminist dynamism, then accepts Mo as lover-companion on the condition that she will not, (and does not, at least till a later blackmail) marry him. In the trilogy's muted but sustained "feminine" narrative, there is a clear forward movement: not for Kate the mistakes of the juvenile Lucy, and the novel proves her right about marriage. At the novel's close, despite their successful love affair, it is clear that Mo's unflagging masculine "Herbertland" interests have exhausted Kate's patience. Becoming voluntarily what Mo's understanding sees as a "gold-widow", Kate despairingly encourages him to abscond once more to the gold-fields. Here is "her" narrative account of their last dialogue: — it shortly precedes Mo's abrupt death in a Burdekin mud-flood:

"Nonsense!" he said, catching her bare ankle between both his hands and holding it caressingly, as one holds a bird.  
"You couldn't do without me."

And he smiled up at her again: that warm, amorous, leering smile she had come faintly to dread.

Conventional "masculine" tragic readings of Mo's death gloss over the suggestion of the "second" narrative that is caught in this passage: Mo's death must prove a merciful release for Kate who feels, after all, that she has been tricked into marriage. Kate, with Mo gone, is presum-

ably left free to pursue a sane life in the "Promised Land" Mo's gold-fever version of bush romanticism has both travestied and negatively defined.

The lusty satiric vigour of *Mo Burdekin's* North Queensland Herbertland in one way out-Herberts Herbert. One of its central staples is a conventional depiction of feminine and masculine qualities as traditionally dichotomous, as posing a binary opposition which, immutable and real, prescribes and proscribes fictional lives. However, attention to the lives of *Campion's* female characters, on their own as distinct from Mo's narrationally privileged terms, reveals that baffling contradiction of living which both accepts and refuses a given state. (This is most clear in *Kate's* circumvented refusal to marry.) Behind that contradiction lies a persistent questioning of that gender issue, as the repeated arrival of suckling infants in the laps of busy male heroes comically declares. The worlds of masculine and feminine in *Mo Burdekin* are poles apart: that, as a premise for living and for the creation of a "promised" as distinct from a new Herbertland is a first crux of the trilogy's subversively critical cultural analysis.

The male romantic idyll of the *Burdekin* trilogy ends as does Mo himself in the suffocation of the annually flooding Burdekin River, a literal victim of his own sleepy unawareness. The implied utopia of the feminine narrative of the trilogy, dispensing with "fool's gold" and unequal marriage, would also dissolve the masculine-feminine binary opposition in a normality of living above the green breathing earth. Caught, however, in Herbertland, Lucy and Kate draw close to despair and murder, their author making of their stories the site of her own contradictory struggle with fictional form and her world.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See John McKellar, "Sarah Champion", *Southerly*, No. 2, 1950, 70-81. This article is reprinted in John McKellar, *Digging at Roots*, (1951), pp. 1-29. Also R. Store, "North Queensland's Literature Part 1", *The Islands Review*, 1, No. 3, (December 1968), 9-13.

<sup>2</sup>*Campion's* work is first noticed in H.M. Green's *History of Australian Literature*, Vol. II, 1923-1950 (1961), p. 1108. This citation is, I believe, the source of continuing errors with *Campion's* names. Green gives "Colton" for "Coulton" (*Campion's* paternal surname) and "Alders" for "Alpers" (her married name). In her revised edition of Green's *History* (1985), Dorothy Green corrects the latter of these but retains "Colton" (p. 1193). Frederick T. Macartney provides a useful descriptive account of *Campion* (repeating "Alders") and her Australian novels in his Extended Edition of E. Morris Miller's *Australian Literature. A Bibliography*, (1956, 1940), pp. 99-100. *Campion's* work receives further notice in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, eds. William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton, Barry Andrews (1985), p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>*The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. Leonie Kramer (1981), p. 126.

<sup>4</sup>"Feminity, narrative and psychoanalysis: some comments", *Not the Whole Story, tellings and tailings from the ASPACLS Conference on "Narrative"*, eds. Ian Reid and Sneja Gunew, (1984), 83-88.

## SYLVIA KELSO

### SUMMA THEOLOGICA

Seven hundred years from the soul's quick vision  
Aquinas' redes lie on the printed page.  
Nothing's left of quill or parchment  
Hand on the pen or eyes in the head controlling  
Strokes like straws as the mind arranges  
God's wide kingdom of bestial lolling  
Wild in the tangled soul —

Till the garden was ranged in order,  
Till Aquinas ordered the world for the Word in a word.  
What was the room, the view from the window,  
Blue sky or grey, lintel of wood or stone?  
Veins in the cold or sweat in haytime marking  
The hand that channelled a vision beyond all mirrors  
Into a mirror's map behind the bone?

Aquinas died, in a smell of desired herrings  
Discarding for the leaves of heaven  
"So much straw."  
Throw stalks to read the pattern in a wind  
But who can read the patterns in the straw?