

# Bonita Frank

## REVIEW

### GOD'S OWN COUNTRY

Des Petersen and Stephen Torre (eds). *North of Capricorn: An Anthology of Prose*. Townsville: Foundation of Australian Studies, Department of English, James Cook University.

The continent of Australia reaches from a world of coral reefs and rainforest to territories of harsh cold. The humidity of the north, the dryness of the centre, the frigidity of the extreme south are increasingly reflected in the characters of the people who live in each part, and in the writing produced in these regional areas. The aim of *North of Capricorn: An Anthology of Prose*, which is particularly regional, is to show what it is to be a "North Queenslander."

"Maybe it's only a second-rate Eden...a kind of limbo" says the narrator of Thea Astley's story, "North: Some Compass Readings: Eden", but to live in North Queensland is to know God's own country and to be the 'Chosen Ones'. That is not to say life is perfect, without hardship, pain and anguish, but it is definitely the best of all possible worlds. And who can doubt it when the place is described as abounding in colour and richness and life.

Joan Colebeck's "A World of Water" describes that idyllic picture of beauty and the exotic which I, a 'foreigner', first had of North Queensland:

Beyond [Double Island] in a complex rhythmic pattern, spread the reef proper, two hundred or more cays and atolls formed by coral and detritus anchored by vegetation and enclosing in smooth crystal-clear lagoons thousands of forms of reef fish — anemones, starfish, and tiny darling coral fish of brilliant colors — as a garden might hold flowers.

Or moving inland, in Clem Christesen's "The Island":

the lagoon on the extensive common...teemed with brolgas, magpie-geese, pelicans, ibis and waterfowl of all kinds. The stately dance of hundreds of brolgas, wings outstretched and uttering raucous cries, was unforgettable.

Or again:

the gardens [are] filled with brilliant flowers and speckled crotons, with cascara and jacaranda trees showering petals onto the lawns.  
(Colebrook)

Literature gives us a feel for life – past and present-peculiar to this medium. Here then is an anthology which conveys the feeling of North Queensland, from its beginnings to the present day, showing the human spirit and adaptability which makes of it an earthly Paradise. In *North of Capricorn* the reader will find a range of material, from records of Aboriginal legends and the earliest fiction written in Australia, through autobiographical accounts from different periods, to contemporary prose fiction: here is something for everyone.

The editors claim that the variety of images of North Queensland life reveals the spirit of the region, in all its detail, over the past hundred years. They include vivid accounts of cyclones and shipwrecks, clashes between Aborigines and white settlers, court cases, accidental deaths, and murders. Various experiences of growing up in North Queensland are also presented. Thus we are offered excitement and adventure, a range of interesting characters and incidents, ideas and images to reflect on, and some marvellous descriptions of the natural world in all its moods – the Great Barrier Reef, the beaches, the rainforest, the mountains, the patchwork green of the canefields, and the brown of desert country.

Two aspects of this anthology are especially valuable. First, in providing an historical coverage it suggests answers to questions posed by the editors: "What was it like then?" "Who were the people who explored and settled the top part of Queensland?" "What hardships did they face?" "What were their values and attitudes?" "Who are we today, and how have we changed and adapted?" The insights are fascinating, but not always what

we would like: we are sometimes xenophobic, ethnocentric, racist, sexist and self-centred. But like nature, we are capable of adaptation and change.

Second, delightful examples of prose by or about North Queenslanders are presented which show writers' abilities to develop literary techniques and styles to suit our perceptions and experiences of this Paradise.

While there is a broad perspective reflected in the material chosen, there are also gaps in the story. Are these gaps the oversights and prejudices of the editors, or do they reflect some wider, more pervasive traits which lie at the heart of the culture itself? Des Petersen points out that the editors have made every effort to fill those gaps, but to no avail: material was not forthcoming. Inevitably perhaps, this selection of works by published writers reflects the dominant attitudes, perceptions and preoccupations of their time. Perhaps hidden away in Australians' drawers or old suitcases is material which would fill-in the gaps in North Queensland's literary history.

One such gap is the Chinese story. In "Black Peter", W.N. Scott evokes a concise image of another culture which shares this land – and of one (white) man's attitude: "Old Ah Kee, a piece of oriental flotsam from the Palmer diggings who had a little garden outside the town...came to town with his shoulder pole and twin baskets of vegetables to sell...with a trail of small boys following him chanting 'Ching chong Chinaman, chop chop chop.'" But for the "Chinaman" there is no 'right of reply', no redress – perhaps that is yet to come.

Other aspects of North Queensland history are reflected in the fact that of twenty-eight writers, six are (white) female, and two are black, with four stories by or about black people. We read seven stories before one about a woman; we read thirteen before coming to the first female writer. (The first piece is, however, an Aboriginal legend.) The focus of the initial pieces on male courage and determination strongly suggests that we are reading the history of the white males. It also suggests, however, that the initial preoccupation was on survival itself: despite the many deaths related, there is not a single childbirth! Although later stories have a broadening effect, the initial impression of white male dominance is difficult to erase.

For its white settlers, North Queensland was a man's world for a long time and those women who entered it did so at their own risk. Yet the same qualities of heroism were required of the women. The male narrator of E.A. Daly's "One of Our Bush Girls" praises the girl's courage when she

fends off an attack by Aborigines, but also reflects the female stereotyping of the time, and his own attitudes to sex and race:

...all the care of the household devolved on her; and well she did her duty. Always up in time to get her father's breakfast, and from then till dinner she flew around with broom and duster, sweeping and cleaning, that which the careless gins, her only maids, had half-done, or neglected to do... 'Twas a pleasure to enter that bush home, everything was so clean and tidy...

He ends this story of courage and danger with a dream of "Nelly's arms around a fellow's neck, and those kisses—."

Kay Brown's story, "An All-Entrancing *She*", makes fun of male chauvinism: when the Matron requests brains for her patient's meals, the old man replies that they are unavailable because "we been killing only female cattle lately, see...and female creatures just don't have brains." Nevertheless, every reader can enjoy, for sheer excitement and tension, stories such as Randolph Bedford's "Fourteen Fathoms by Quetta Rock", about ship-wreck and diving, or R.S. Porteous's "Quite a Blow", about a young man's learning experience through the medium of a cyclone.

In later stories female sensibilities bring balance, to social and interpersonal perceptions, suggesting social maturity, a "coming of age". The earlier emphasis on action and the physical environment is replaced by explorations of the human environment – psychological and relational – in, for example, Elizabeth Perkins's "Decree Nisi" and "Take Five and the Rest", and Kay Brown's "An All-Entrancing *She*". The aesthetic temperament is represented in Bernard Smith's "The Other Family", in which a sensitive youth recognises the changes taking place to the environment through human intervention, and wants to become a painter, to paint "Pictures to stand when the forest was down and gone." Smith's story reminds us, incidentally, that people in North Queensland have been concerned for a long time with the issue of conservation.

If the central motif of the anthology is that of change, the central and unifying image is water. Whether the ocean bordering the Eastern coastline, or the tremendous downpours from cyclones and 'the wet', or the tinkling mountain streams – or even the absence of water in 'the dry' – water forms our consciousness and motivates our actions. It becomes an overriding image, contributing to this collection's unity and meaning. In

the final piece, the ocean provides the symbol of our own voyage through the collection. In "On Cleveland Bay", Noel Macainsh writes that there is a

need to train ourselves in preserving an easy upright poise on shifting and unstable sheens... The optimum, of course, would be a flow that let us simply stand, balancing, while travelling and taking in the natural vista on the way.

Reading snippets from this anthology will give a feel for its parts only. It must be read as a novel. Its main character is North Queensland, spoken in many voices. As with a Bildungsroman novel, we trace her development from 'birth' to 'maturity', with intimations of a fabulous future:

the prospect of such a walk, as of all our dealings with the elements, and the contemplation of the heights and distances our race has put behind, engenders faith, and that it is in faith that enterprise begins.

One must read to this very last sentence of Macainsh's poetic prose to appreciate the anthology's unity and aesthetic beauty, for it is not just a collection of disparate pieces but a 'work of art'. The editors may be justly proud of their achievement.

One thing only is missing from this publication – a map to chart our way through this geographic region, to all those places we found named while journeying, like Ellis Island, The Star, Tinaroo Creek, Japoonvale, Nelia. Such a map might have been provided. But there can be few maps to chart that other region, the region of the imagination. Welcome to a first-rate Eden.

*North of Capricorn: An Anthology of Prose* is available from the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, English Department, James Cook University: price \$14.95 (discount for multiple class copies available).