

**Barbara Ross**

## **DIFFERENT LEAVES FROM DUNK ISLAND: THE BANFIELDS, DOROTHY COTTRELL AND *THE SINGING GOLD***

Though she is scarcely remembered now, the Australian popular novelist and journalist Dorothy Cottrell had a large following among English-speaking readers between the late 1920s and the 1950s. Her first novel, the bestseller *The Singing Gold* (1928), was published in book form in the United States and London and serialised in the *Sydney Mail*, where it drew extravagant praise from Mary Gilmore.<sup>1</sup> For this novel about a young couple who go to live on an almost uninhabited island off the North Queensland coast, Dorothy drew extensively on her own experience in 1923 when she and her husband Walter did their "Bunk to Dunk," the island of the famous "Beachcomber," E.J. Banfield.

His interest no doubt aroused by *The Singing Gold*, Banfield's editor Alec Chisholm wrote in 1929 to the Beachcomber's widow, asking for details about Dorothy and Walter's stay.<sup>2</sup> However, Bertha Banfield's reply, which is now in the Mitchell Library,<sup>3</sup> is in many ways unreliable as a guide for Cottrell researchers. Whether or not the six years which had passed since the Cottrells' stay had affected her recall, there can be no doubt that Mrs Banfield interpreted events in the light of false information. Letters by Dorothy Cottrell's uncle, Ernest Fletcher, which are now at the A.N.U, show Mrs Banfield's letter to be seriously mistaken, and make it important that the facts of Dorothy and Walter Cottrell's marriage and subsequent flight to and from Dunk Island be put on record.

When the Cottrells arrived on Dunk in 1923, Walter was 23 years old and Dorothy was 20. He was fit and strong but she, who had been crippled by polio as a child, had either to be carried about or pushed in a wheelchair. She was, however, perfectly healthy and highly intelligent, could swim and was good at most things that could be done sitting down—including painting, sketching, rowing and shooting.

Walter and Dorothy had met in February 1920 when Walter started work as the bookkeeper at Ularunda, the large and remote grazing property in SW Queensland run by Dorothy's bachelor uncle Ernest. Her mother, Ernest's sister Ida Wilkinson, had been his housekeeper since 1908, when her personal misfortunes had included a miscarriage, a hysterectomy, a particularly bitter

marriage break-up and Dorothy's polio. Ida could not then face the fact that her only child would not walk again and so she left Dorothy to be cared for by her eldest sister Lavinia in Sydney while she retreated to Ularunda.

In Sydney, Lavinia sought treatments for Dorothy, who never attended school. She was, however, tutored part time by the sculptor Theo(dora) Cowan and subsequently attended the classes of Dattilo Rubbo at the Royal Art society. She naturally grew closer to Lavinia than Ida, so when at the age of 16 Dorothy finally went to live at Ularunda there was little affection between her and her mother. Considerable friction developed between them but, nevertheless, Ida slowly began to realise and to acknowledge that her daughter had become a delightful, intelligent and amusing companion.

At Ularunda Walter Cottrell was an "inside hand," which meant that although he slept in the outer partitioned part of the verandah he lived and ate in the house with the family. As the only young people in the household, Dorothy and Walter were constantly thrown together. The relationship took one substantial leap forward on the day that Dorothy nominated Walter, rather than Clyde Overall the station overseer, to carry her. Thereafter Walter spent most of his free time with Dorothy, as she went out in her chair or in the car, shooting, laying bait, organising the vegetable garden, and observing everything.

When in May 1922 Walter announced that he needed to visit the dentist, whose offices were in Brisbane, Dorothy and Aunt Lavinia decided to accompany him. In the city Walter took Dorothy out and about in her wheelchair as usual, until one day without warning they slipped into St Ann's Presbyterian Church and were married. They had not planned the marriage at Ularunda: the witnesses were a pair of tennis players brought in from a nearby court, and Walter had to buy five rings for the ceremony because he did not know the size of Dorothy's finger. He duly dropped them in the aisle, which inspired a scene in *The Singing Gold*. Back at the Gresham Hotel the couple could not bring themselves to tell Aunt Lavinia what they had done; nor could they do so with the family at Ularunda. "We thought they were pretty formidable and ferocious," Walter explained sixty years later.<sup>4</sup> So he worked in the office as normal and Dorothy organised the garden, painted and wrote an article which much impressed her uncle for the *Graziers' Review* in praise of Henry George and the Single Tax.<sup>5</sup> She also conducted clandestine correspondence with solicitors in Brisbane and with the Beachcomber of Dunk Island, whose *Confessions* had so caught her imagination as a child that her mother had once tried to arrange for Dorothy to visit the reef and to holiday on Banfield's island. The solicitors advised that the Cottrells' marriage was legal and could not be overturned, but added that she and Walter were both liable to

up to three years in prison for making false declarations about Dorothy's age. The seventy-year-old Banfield's response was more encouraging: he agreed to waive his usual ban on long-stay visitors and to allow her and Walter to live for six months in a three-roomed cottage he had spare. Dorothy and Walter somehow gained the impression that he intended to let them build a small house and live there permanently.

Still the family knew nothing of the marriage. Ever the reckless romantic, Dorothy decided that the best thing to do was to elope, and Walter agreed to the plan. So they gathered their resources and on January 25th 1923 simply drove to Morven railway station and caught the train for Brisbane. They even persuaded a friend to come with them and drive the car back to Ularunda. From Brisbane they went by train to Rockhampton and by steamer to Townsville. They reached Dunk Island aboard the *Lass O'Gowrie* in early February.

Dorothy's uncle Ernest described their flight in several frank, open and consistent letters to friends and family. If Ernest had known of any charges against Walter he would undoubtedly have mentioned them, but he does not. This letter to his friend George Story<sup>6</sup>, for example, displays Ernest's low opinion of Walter's general abilities, but it offers no foundation whatsoever for Mrs Banfield's various claims to A.H. Chisholm that Walter was in debt, involved in crooked dealings or trying to avoid punishment. :

18 February 1923

Dear George

I found Ida much depressed at Dossie's departure and more so on account of the meaningless and unnecessary duplicity and falsehood in connection with it. It appears that they have for months been in communication with Mr Banfield "The Beachcomber" who lives on Dunk island off the northern coast of Queensland.

They had arranged with him to purchase 5 acres of his island and to live in his old abandoned cottage. Walter is to till the earth and upon the results of his efforts combined with fish which abound in the sea they are to live. The £190 which they are wasting now is Dossie's Savings Bank money. Walter drew it all out of the bank in Morven in notes—he tipped the Morven porter 10/- and the Toowoomba porter 5/- to water the dogs. So a beautiful funeral of Dossie's cash is going on. They told a hat full of lies for weeks before the flight. They evidently waited for me to go to Brisbane. They then sent a bogus telegram to themselves purporting to come from a very great friend of Walter's who was particularly anxious to see him as he was passing through Morven. On the strength of this wire they borrowed the station car, took Pat Fowler with them to drive the car back, cut the telephone wires both in the House and the Office. Walter even crawled under the House to cut the ground wire. Walter did not

say goodbye to Ida, nor has he spoken or written a word to either Ida or me. His particular province is apparently to spend Dossie's money with celerity and smoothness. They had packed up and sent ahead of them 15 petrol cases of Dossie's belongings. The luggage they paid for on the train was 12 cwt. They took Clyde's suit case and Frank McDermott's hand bag without so much as "by your leave" ... Ida of course thought they were only going to Morven. Dossie looked up smiling at her on the balcony and called from the car "Goodbye Mum," and so they left. Clyde had gone out saying that he would not be back till late that night; he altered his plans and came home just before 4 o'clock. He tried to ring up to ask if the car had reached Morven, and found the phone was out of order. He went into his room and found the wires cut at the back of the phone. He tried again and found it still wrong. He went under the house and found the earth wire cut, he joined that and got Morven. He asked if the station car had started out, and got the reply:—"The car is still at the railway station, the train has just gone and Walter Cottrell and Miss Wilkinson have gone in it. Ida bore up for a while and then wept. Later Pat Fowler brought a letter from Dossie to her Mother; in the circumstances about the strangest document that was ever penned, he also brought her marriage certificate, and a letter from Atthow & Atthow, a firm of Brisbane lawyers, telling them that their marriage was valid and could not be upset, and also that they were both liable to three years imprisonment; Dossie for making a false declaration and Walter for marrying her knowing it was false. "But" the letter added "surely the mother will not prosecute. We advise you to tell the Mother the whole truth at once, and to keep this knowledge to your selves and the Mother." That letter was written in May last. Had they carried out the advice there would not have been much harm done. Now, what do you make out of all that George? It flattens me out; it simply baffles the reasoning faculty. They evidently do not intend to come back unless cash considerations compel them to. Vinnie has written me to send them £20 on her account. I am attempting to dissuade her from this course. That Vinnie should supply money to keep a young strong man in idleness where he can view the beauties of the coral reefs is a trifle too absurd. Dossie has sent me a telegram and a letter both saying how she is enjoying herself, and imploring me not to upset her plans in any way. No word of contrition or regret. I have not written to her. I simply do not know how to. It is like the quality of Hutton's Ham "Don't argue; there's nothing to argue about." I need not ask you to keep this to yourself George. Though for that matter it does not make much difference. Ida seems sensitive about it. I am sorry you did not speak to Mr Fowler. He, of course, knows all about it. I do not blame Pat. Dossie made a joke of the whole affair to him, and he did not realise the serious side of it until he was coming home to meet Ida.<sup>7</sup>

Ernest's other letters about "Dossie's" elopement are similarly frustrated and cross. To his brother Christopher he concluded by saying:

I had great hopes, and was very proud of her. I shall miss her much; she was always an optimistic and mentally stimulating companion; never down on her luck; always exceedingly interested in everything, and with an immense power to generate interest

in others. She could pick up a book on some abstruse subject — apparently skim through it — and put it down, with a grasp of its main principles, and a power to logically explain them, very rare indeed. That she should decide to bury herself with a mental weakling like Walter is puzzling and depressing.<sup>8</sup>

He wrote to Lavinia to plead with her not to send the couple any money, arguing that withholding cash was "the only means of bringing them to reason and of securing their return to us." He ends:

Walter I believe is billed to approach Dunk Island with an axe and an adze to build a house in which they are to live on \$50 a year. It only needed this to put a summit to the venture. Walter is far more likely to cut his foot off than build a house.<sup>9</sup>

Lavinia was not convinced. She replied:

For a long time she has asked me if she ever got her island would I give her £25 to help build her house on it, & I promised if I could afford it I would do so.—So Ernest for that amount I consider (if they really reach the stage of beginning their house,) I am bound.—With regard to other monies I will do nothing without consulting you.—The manner of going was even worse than I had thought, and they write nothing, unless you have heard or Ida.—But Ernest I think you are quite wrong in thinking Dorothy will soon return when the money runs out, she is not one who will give in. I do not think she will do so, and am afraid should her lot become quite unbearable, she may do away with herself before, she is not one who would find it easy to come back under ordinary circumstances, let alone to come begging because her money has run out.—I am sure she never will, I am sure this is a wrong course to take,—I am afraid of it—I will do nothing with regard to money without your consent after the £25 which I consider a promise—But if I can get her to write to me, I will have some idea of how she is faring.—It was a relief to me to hear Mr Banfield had allowed them to settle on his island, it seemed to me a sort of protection for her & at least something definite, and as Walter knows many people about Bowen, he may be leaving their belongings & Dorothy with some of them till he gets some sort of shelter put up.—If that Lawyer's letter was written in May, they were married before I went to Brisbane with Doss & Walter, that was in June about the end of June.—I feel as if a something had been chopped out of my life suddenly—however is it all going to end?—If they had any sort of decent house there it is just possible Doss might do something by writing, she might write better in seclusion, but how long will Walter be willing to do all he will have to—Poor little Woman how little she knows or realises all there will be to be faced.—Let me know at once should you hear anything of their movements.<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that Dorothy's first letter, from Townsville, "written as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened and brimming over with happiness and joy in all she is seeing," was sent to Lavinia.

Although the Fletcher correspondence suggests that Dorothy wrote more than once, just one letter survives from Dorothy's time on the island:

Dunk Island  
30-4-1923

Dear Danye,<sup>11</sup>

Your check has just arrived—many thanks for it dearest. We are getting on splendidly and are just starting our vegie garden, Mr and Mrs Banfield are the dearest, happiest, and most loverlike old couple in the world, and we both like them and the Island better every day. The giant green butterflies are just having their honeymoon flights and are lovely, so tame that you can get within a few feet of them. When the typewriter comes I will tell you all sorts of wonderful things.

In great haste—

Dossie<sup>12</sup>

As Mrs Banfield told Chisholm, Dorothy and Walter lived very sparingly on bananas, bread, fish and rice. In addition to her housework and gardening, Dorothy had many new flowers, trees, insects and birds to watch. She also enjoyed exploring the island's bays and coastline by boat,<sup>13</sup> studying the creatures of the reef. Walter did what he could to help Banfield with his domestic cattle and other tasks but, influenced as they were by Ida's accusatory letters, the Banfields did not seem to take to Walter. He did not know what he had done wrong, and put it down to the fact that his dogs chased the island birds, try as he might to stop them.

Then, at the end of May 1923, the Cottrells' plans for a simple island life came to a sudden end. The Beachcomber was dead. Dorothy recounted what happened in a letter to her Aunt:

Dunk Island

Dear Dooney

You doubtless received our note about the Beachcomber. The whole thing most tragic. On the 29 May, three of the Bush Brothers arrived here on a motor boat, and they were very eager for me to go to see Mr Hickson [a noted faith healer]. I was very sceptical, but a few days before we got a letter from Walter's grandfather urging the same thing, we talked to Mr Banfield and he said that we ought to go to please Walter's grandfather, and that anyway we would have a lovely trip. So we went in Mr Lambton's launch.<sup>14</sup> We had no fears about leaving Mr and Mrs Banfield, for Frank

the Russian fisherman was here with his motor boat, and although he was going up to Innisfail with oysters he said that he would only be absent for one night. Also Mr and Mrs Hopkins were expected from Townsville on Monday at the latest. Well Frank went to Innisfail on Thursday, and bad weather and engine trouble kept him there. Mr Hopkins left Townsville and broke his propeller at Magnetic Island and had to be towed home. On Friday Mr Banfield said that he felt ill, but neither he nor Mrs Banfield were alarmed. But that night he was in frightful agony and all Saturday morning, at midday he seemed better and told Mrs Banfield that he would try to sleep. A few minutes later he was dead. Mrs Banfield was alone with him until Tuesday when she sighted the *Innisfail* going south. She waved to them but Captain Baberhan [sic] thought that it was only a friendly greeting and went past the sandspit, but happening to turn he saw that Mrs Banfield had fainted on the beach. So he came back and the whole crew (all of whom were friends of the Beachcomber's) attended his funeral. Mrs Banfield would not leave so one of the men stayed with her. No news reached us in Townsville until the *Innisfail* arrived then Mr Hopkins left at once and did the hundred and twenty miles in fifteen hours: Mrs Banfield was a little light headed at first, but is almost herself again now—brave little woman! The grief over the Beachcomber's death was astounding, he was beloved by all classes and conditions of men, and Mrs Banfield is being deluged by letters of sympathy from everywhere—stokers, newspapers editors, the blacks at the settlement—all want to do something for his memory. And without him—the very spirit of this sunny Isle—all things seem dreary. We had not come to any definite agreement with the dear old chap, and as Mr Hopkins (to whom the Island has passed) was too upset by the death of his friend to attempt to talk business, we don't know what agreement we will come to, so just hold my things for the present.

I was greatly impressed by Mr Hickson, he is a wonderful speaker—none of the press reports give any idea of what he has to say. After his address he goes round the various cases of sickness and lays hands on them and prays for their recovery, at the same time getting the whole congregation to concentrate their attention on the patient and will the same thing. And whether it is collective magnetism or what you will he certainly gets some wonderful results. Two cases that came under our own notice, were those of a blind child and an old man who had lost the use of his hands. The little boy was staying with the Church of England Sisters—where we were, and he could see a little out of one eye but if that was covered he would not take any notice of a candle shaken in his face and would walk straight into a wall. Before we left Townsville he could see perfectly out of both eyes, and one that had been badly crossed was straight. The old man had been working in the railway and had lost his job because his hands and arms were paralysed. After seeing Mr Hickson he recovered the use of them, and got a certificate to the effect that he was fit to go back to work. I am at a loss to account for it but so 'tis. There were many other reported cures, but these were the only ones that we saw both before and after. I am no better.

Much love, Dossie<sup>15</sup>

The main reason that the Banfields did not go to Townsville to supervise the installation of the new engine in their boat was they did not trust the Cottrells, specifically Walter, because of Ida Wilkinson's letters. Certainly the young couple were pushed into the trip to the faith healer; they themselves had no expectations of it, since over the years Dorothy had been subjected to and disappointed by every kind of alternative treatment. They would have been happy to stay on Dunk and look after the animals and other matters. Perhaps fortunately it seems never to have occurred to Bertha that, had she and her husband trusted the Cottrells, Ted Banfield would have been near medical attention when he needed it, and might have recovered.

There is no doubt that Dorothy's mother did write letters which contained some damning fabrications which irrevocably influenced the Banfields' attitudes to Dorothy and Walter. Although we do not know exactly when the couple learnt of Ida's letters, Dorothy's last letter to Lavinia makes it clear that they knew of them before they left the island. The letters themselves have not survived—Bertha Banfield probably burnt them in the bonfire she lit on the beach before she finally left the island—but it is possible that their arrival is noted in Banfield's diaries, which survive in private hands and are not presently available to researchers.<sup>16</sup>

Ida may have been motivated to write those letters in part by concern for Dorothy's wellbeing, but she was probably as much impelled by her own need for control. She was a woman who used to seek to manipulate family disputes; as if symbolically, she carried a myriad keys and was obsessive about locking things up; it was said that she provisioned Ularunda as if for a siege. The fact that Dorothy escaped into a life of her own without her mother's suspecting anything no doubt provoked Ida into desperate measures.

Dorothy's last letter from Dunk was written eight days after Banfield's death and seventeen days before the Cottrells left. Already the magic has gone. On the island Dorothy had kept up her drawing and painting, and it is clear that she is now thinking of a career as an artist, perhaps in America. She wrote to Lavinia:<sup>17</sup>

Dunk Island  
10.7.23

Dear Danyie,

We have not yet seen Mr Hopkins but strictly between you me and the garden gate I don't at all care for him and doubt if we will be able to arrive at any satisfactory arrangement with him. By-the-way he is the image of our old landlord,

Mr Jensen. Poor old Mrs Banfield is still on the Island, but I doubt if she stays long, though quite what she will do is a mystery as she has practically no money—the way Mr Beachcomer was swindled by his publishers is a disgrace, out of all the sales of his books in England and America he hardly made a penny. I may be judging harshly, but considering how immensely rich he is I should think that Mr Hopkins could have done more for the dear old couple than he did, still I suppose it is hard to help proud people.

The drawings that I told you about were very well criticised and Mr J says that I could make a really good living as a commercial artist if I am so minded, and that there is a great opening in America for anyone trained to the work. So in the event of our failing to come to terms with Mr H[opkins] I think that we will go to Sydney, for about a year, and if I have got on well with Smith and Julius or any of the big houses we may have a shot at America. Still all this is in the future, at present I would like you to say nothing about it.

As to Mum and Uncle Erndy, if they choose to make a tragedy out of a naughty prank I am not responsible. Had I meant to make a permanent break with them, then my action would have been cruel, but I meant to see a great deal of them, indeed spend a large part of my time at Ularunda and that being the case I think that the fuss they are making savours more of wounded pride than love. And whatever our faults they evened the score by the slanderous and despicable mean letters they wrote about us to Mr Banfield, saying that we would probably dishonour our debts and live on his charity.

Re the registration slip which you sent for me to sign—I don't think I received the article or letter to which it refers. Walter has written to the George Street West P.O. to get particulars as soon as these come to hand, we will know what to do with it. I am glad to hear that the money from "Aussie" was placed to the credit of my account, but I would be still better pleased if for the future Clyde would desist from opening my private letters, or if he feels impelled to do so I trust that he will have the grace to inform me of their contents.

The camera was in *perfect* order when I saw it last, and cameras do not destroy themselves—

I have written for my interest from Granny's Estate, and I hope you will see that they send it.

I am so glad that you enjoyed the fruit, and that your knee is on the mend.

Good-bye dear little Aunt.

Dossie.<sup>18</sup>

On 27 July 1923, after breakfast with Mrs Banfield, Walter carried Dorothy along the beach to the fisherman's hut on the sand spit to wait for the *Lass O'Gowrie*. They waited for almost two days, until in the early hours of July 29 Dorothy was put in a bull sling and hauled aboard. They went to Bowen, where they stayed with Mr McKenzie the Shire Clerk, Walter's grandfather, who like

most of the people who met Dorothy Cottrell was captivated, and urged the young couple to stay. In later years Walter confessed that he would indeed have been happy to live in Bowen, but Dorothy knew Sydney well enough to realise that it was the best market for the commercial art, posters and cartoons she hoped to develop.

The Cottrells' first Sydney address was the People's Palace, a detail they kept from Dorothy's family, but when Walter secured a job in real estate they moved into a small apartment. Both of these addresses also figure in *The Singing Gold*. There was no quick reconciliation with Ida and Ernest, but the pair always remained on good terms with Aunt Lavinia. Although no financial help came from Ularunda, Ernest slowly recognised that poverty was not going to drive the lovers back. Finally it was the older generation's pleas for their return which drew them home, and they drove north in easy stages in a sort of converted greengrocer's truck, another in their long string of unconventional homes. Before their first meal at Ularunda, in the large comfortable dining room with its impressively starched table linen and monogrammed silverware, Ernest poured them a drink and announced "Welcome back, dear children. All is forgiven." Given his old job, Walter saved his salary and built a cottage near the homestead. Dorothy gave up art and, "in a seizure of inspiration," began writing novels.

Dorothy and Ida's relationship continued to be difficult. Contrary to what she must have been told, Ida persisted in believing that Dorothy and Walter had been allowed on Dunk Island only so that Walter could be assistant to Mr Banfield, and so that they could both be companions to the elderly couple. Bertha Banfield's letter to Chisholm, however, makes it clear that the Cottrells were visitors on the island, not workers or employees. Neither Mrs Wilkinson nor the Banfields, who were astonished at the amount of gear the Cottrells brought with them, understood that the young couple had every intention of staying and of forging their own self-sufficient lifestyle. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, Dorothy's mother blamed the fact that Mrs Banfield was alone when her husband took ill and died on Dorothy's and Walter's irresponsibility. It seems never to have entered Ida's head that her letters persuaded the Banfields against the Cottrells in the first place, and thus ensured that the Banfields were left alone.

Like her letter to Alec Chisholm, Mrs Banfield's attitude to *The Singing Gold* sets obstacles for researchers. She seems never to have understood that the novel is fiction, that it does not claim to give an accurate account of Dorothy's life on Dunk Island. True, Dorothy was inspired by her time on Dunk, as she was by most of the events in her young life, and her descriptions of climate, landscape and wildlife are always accurate and effective, but they are woven into stories,

characterisations and relationships which she invented for her own artistic purposes. Given the way the Beachcomber had worked, such a way of using experience was quite foreign to Mrs Banfield, and after his death she seems to have developed a somewhat proprietorial attitude to Dunk Island as a literary theme, as if Banfield had taken out a copyright on the island. She probably felt that no-one should write about it unless they respected the style and manner of the Beachcomber. So vocal was she at times about Dorothy's poetic licence that she managed to create the impression that Dorothy had lifted something to which she had no right. Even as late as 1988 I was told by someone who had as a child known Mrs Banfield, and had seen the Cottrells during their Dunk Island stay, that there was some unpleasantness about material Dorothy filched. The informant, however, knew nothing about the detail.<sup>19</sup> He thought that he had gained his impression from listening to Mrs Banfield after her husband's death, because it was unlikely that there was any mention of it in the Banfield diaries.<sup>20</sup> He concluded that it was probably related to the publication of *The Singing Gold*.

Mrs Banfield's and Mrs Wilkinson's misunderstandings, and their emotive, deliberately deceptive outbursts, combined to spread a cloud of suspicion which can still mislead researchers. It must therefore be made absolutely clear that the Cottrells took no material object from Dunk Island; not even Bertha Banfield made that accusation against them. Nor is there anything in *The Singing Gold* which Banfield could have written: Dorothy Cottrell's style was so much her own that the possibility could not seriously be entertained.

In all, Dorothy used a setting of a North Queensland island or the Great Barrier Reef five times in her fiction: in Part Three of *The Singing Gold*, the unpublished novel "Nika Lurgin" (both of which were written at Ularunda between 1925 and 1927), and in three short stories written much later and published between 1947 and 1951: "The Reef," "Shark Bait" and "The Pit in the Jungle."<sup>21</sup>

"Nika Lurgin" is an extraordinary fantasy of a relationship between a fragile typist from Sydney and a Danish ex-opera singer on a barely disguised Dunk in the 1920s. It contains romantic love, marital rape, cyclones, tidal waves, shark attacks, shipwrecks, a suicide attempt, a smallpox epidemic, a cross-dressing heroine and a plot which to a modern reader mixes *As You Like It*, *Jane Eyre* and *Indiana Jones*. A muted element of sado-masochism suggests that Dorothy here was discarding some emotional or psychological "baggage" from her early days, as does the fact that the typescript was never submitted to a publisher, and probably never seen by anyone but Dorothy herself. When it was uncovered in the Copyright Office in 1988 it gave every appearance of having remained unopened for 61 years,<sup>22</sup> and when he at last read it Walter Cottrell observed that Dorothy would never have published it under her own name.

The typescript bears the pseudonym "Olga Raff." Interestingly, Dorothy refers in the text of "Nika Lurgin" to the sun as "His Majesty," which was one of Banfield's usages: considering Bertha's response to *The Singing Gold*, it is perhaps as well that she never saw "Nika Lurgin."

The later stories "The Reef," "Shark Bait" and "The Pit in the Jungle" are totally different from the early works. Clearly the work of an experienced professional writing after the War, they concern human bravery and survival in the face of natural obstacles and dangers. In the 1980s Walter Cottrell recalled that on Dunk Island Dorothy used to have long conversations with Mr Banfield in which they would delight in capping one another's quotations or literary references. For her age, Dorothy was exceptionally well read, partly due to the tutoring of Theo Cowan and partly to dinner-table conversations at Ularunda. She was familiar with Banfield's own writings, and these may later have provoked a few distant resonances. She acknowledged that Banfield told her about the locale of "The Pit in the Jungle," which presumably he had once uncovered on Dunk. In Cottrell's story, a captain and a seaman from a post-World War II survey ship exploring an island fall through a false jungle floor woven by roots, vines and undisturbed leaf-fall. With the help of a torch

they saw the nature of the place into which they had fallen. To the west, toward the mountain, was a sheer rock wall; to north and east were also rocks, but with an overhang toward the top. To the south, a dark fissure stretched away. Everywhere water dripped and glistened. "Get around a hundred and thirty inches of rain a year," the Old Man had said. "Suppose something damp has to happen." Some twenty feet above them was the underside of the roof of rotted leaves and webbed roots. From this roof to the floor of more ancient leaf mould extended roots—stringy roots of trees, transparent pink roots of succulents, wiry roots of long-buried ferns, the remains of old liana ropes. But between these identifiable underpinnings of the forest were incalculable, pallid and unidentifiable roots like inverted and draped seaweeds; ivory, ghost white, faintly pink, rust brown, flattened, feathered and patterned as seaweeds, forming a vast drapery of living stalactites wherever the torch beam turned.<sup>23</sup>

The story describes the men's attempts to get out of the pit. It was entirely Dorothy's own, as are her descriptions of the area as a whole. "The Reef" and "Shark Bait" are set in tropical waters, on sandspits and reefs. Although it is obvious that Dorothy's knowledge of reef and marine life was broadened by her stay on Dunk Island—as it was by her subsequent life in Florida and the Caribbean—these stories have no specific connection with Banfield.

Nor did Dorothy Cottrell's later life. In October 1928, five years and ten months after their "elopement" to Dunk Island, the Cottrells set sail for California. In

the intervening period Dorothy had written four novels<sup>24</sup> and made a considerable amount of money from one of them, bought a car, learnt to drive and explored the country from Ularunda to Burke Town in the Northern Territory and across the Galathera Plain to Sydney. She seemed all set for a successful career as a popular writer in Australia, but as Ernest explained in one of his letters to George Story, the Cottrells' plans were changed by Dorothy's American success:

If from her books and film rights Dossie should make £10,000 in America while living here Federal and state tax will plunder her of about £7000. This seems incredible but I am afraid it is true. The idea is to keep capital in the country by taxing it heavily if it makes a profit by going out; but the effect is to force the capitalist out of the country. The only way for Dossie to escape being plundered by her fellow Australians is to become an American subject and to live away from the country in which she was born and which she loves and which is the source of her inspiration.<sup>25</sup>

When all was arranged and the Cottrells were about to leave Ularunda for the last time, Ernest took Walter aside and said that on his recommendation the AML&F Co. would finance him, Walter, to take over John Fletcher's nearby property, Aqua Downs. For Walter it was a moment of total acceptance, and a confirmation of his true abilities. But it was too late. He and Dorothy were determined to go to the United States.

They left Sydney on October 21, 1929—this time with their own suitcase and bag. Though Dorothy in the years ahead was to see many tropical islands and exotic locations, she would never again see the island where she had begun her adult life, and which had inspired her literary career. The Cottrells took out American citizenship in 1939 and, although they returned to Ularunda in 1954, Dorothy was living in Florida when she died, in 1957, aged 55.

## Note

1. Dorothy Cottrell, *The Singing Gold*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1928; Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1929. Serialized American *Ladies' Home Journal* 1927 and *Sydney Mail* October 1928–February 1929. For reviews see *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Pictorial* 19 June 1927, *Smith's Weekly* 28 July 1927, *Sydney Mail* 7 November 1928.
2. For A.H. Chisholm's relationship with Mr & Mrs Banfield see M. Noonan *A Different Drummer*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1983, reprint 1994. Chisholm edited E.J. Banfield's *Last Leaves from Dunk Island*, published by Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1925.

- 3 Sydney Mitchell Library, Chisholm Collection MSS 3540.
- 4 I made the acquaintance of Walter Cottrell in 1979 and maintained a correspondence with him in which he reminisced and gave much information, until his death in 1991. The National Library of Australia Oral History Section also has a tape of his reminiscences at TRC 986. I also have, as well as his letters, further tapes.
5. Dorothy Wilkinson, "Land Law Reform. Plea for reconsidering policies. Case for the Single Tax," *The Graziers' Review, official organ of the United Graziers' Association of Queensland*, 16 April 1922, 36-38. For a further economic controversy in which she engaged see *ibid.* 16 January 1925, 1192-5 & 16 February 1925, 1442-4. Ernest Fletcher had an extended version of Dorothy's essay published as *The Socialistic Menace*, William Brooks & Co., Valley Brisbane, undated. This pamphlet is very rare but one copy is in the Boyer Papers at the National Library, Ms 7776.
6. George William Bennett Story (1849-1931) was married to a cousin of Ernest's, Ellen Lavinia Fletcher. He had been a station manager, a stock and station agent, a manager of Cobb & Co., and of Sturmfels Ltd, Brisbane. He was M.L.A. for Balonne from 1896 to 1904, and is believed to have been Warrego the Balladeer, who wrote "The Aged Unionist" and "The return of the Aged Unionist." See *Australian Pastoralist, Grazing Farmers' and Selectors' Gazette* 10 July 1921. Ularunda and Ernest Fletcher are mentioned in the latter ballad:

"I travelled up the Nebine	They say the Boss was very sweet
But I think I made a blunder	on Labor years ago
I called at "Boatman," "Thirsty downs"	His chickens have come home to roost
But not at Ularunda	They always do, you know.
7. Noel Butlin Archive Centre, ANU Canberra, Ularunda Collection 14/3/12, 18 February 1923.
8. NBAC, ANU, Ularunda Coll. 14/3/13 f.62.
9. NBAC, ANU, Ularunda Coll. 14/3/13 f.110, 111.
10. NBAC, ANU, Ularunda Coll. 14/3/13 f.119, 120, 121.
11. Lavinia. As is evident below, Dorothy had many pet names for her aunt.
12. National Library of Australia, Canberra, Cottrell Collection, MS 6085. I have corrected all Dorothy's spelling in her letters transcribed here since it is so idiosyncratic that it holds up the reading process. As this weakness cannot be ascribed to a lack of education it is possible that she had some mild form of dyslexia.
- 13 Dorothy and her aunt had always had a rowing boat in Sydney. In her first surviving letter (to her cousin Jack Wilkinson) dated 10 June 1919 she wrote "I have been giving the boat a coat of paint and it is looking so nice now. We went for a lovely row on Sunday all round Rose Bay and Shark Island."
14. National Library of Australia. Cottrell Coll. MS 6085.
15. According to Walter the boat was an eighteen foot sloop. It called at the Island with the Revd. Lambton, another priest and a lay brother on board and took Walter and Dorothy on board. Walter and Father Lambton were the only ones who could sail and they took turns sailing the boat direct to Townsville. They stopped overnight on the sand banks of Hinchinbrook Island. There the mosquitos were so persistent they

followed them even into the smoke of the fire and in the morning they saw crocodile tracks near where they had been sleeping. Taped interview 1988.

16. See Michael Noonan, *op.cit*, 1994 reprint, 242. "Lillie Hopkins ... helped Bertha burn some old letters on the beach. Valuable records undoubtedly went up in smoke, there on the Beachcomber's promenade his favourite strip of the Tropics." Lillian Hopkins (Mrs George Webb) was Spenser Hopkins' younger sister.
17. An oil painting by Dorothy Cottrell of a portion of Dunk Island and the view to the mainland from Banfield's house is in the Library of the University of the Northern Territory, Darwin, donated by Colin Roderick in his collection of Banfield material and perhaps acquired by him from Walter Cottrell, who donated other work by Dorothy to the National Library of Australia (Pictorial Section).
18. National Library of Australia, Cottrell Collection, MS 6085.
19. Letter from the late Mr J. Hopkins to B. Ross, 6 April 1988.
20. Mrs Banfield continued her husband's diaries until she left the island, Michael Noonan, *op.cit*, 241.
21. "The Reef," *Argosy*, July 1947; "Shark Bait," *The Australian Journal*, August 1951 (also *Argosy* 1950); "The Pit in the Jungle," *Saturday Evening Post*, 18 August 1951.
22. Australian Archives (Canberra) CRS A 1336/1 item 16328.
23. *Saturday Evening Post* 18 August 1951, pp.24, 83-88.
24. For these novels see B. Ross "Drawn by Dossie," *Voices*, v.1, no. 4, 1991/92.
25. NBAC, ANU, Ularunda Coll. 14/3/12, 4 December 1927.