

LITERATURE IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

THE LITERARY JOURNALS

For the past ten years or so, the cultural elite of North Queensland (of which the writer and any chance readers of this are inevitable members) has been wondering if there is any culture in North Queensland. Any indigenous culture, that is. In 1966 Mr. Ron Kenny wrote an essay asking, "Is there a North Queensland School of Painting?".¹ The answer he gave was, in effect, "no". In 1964² Mrs. Suzy Dickson, in presenting a survey of North Queensland writers, listed, in addition to E. J. Banfield, Henry Lamond, John Ashe, and Xavier Herbert, who both lived in and wrote about North Queensland, writers such as Clem Christesen and Val Vallis, who had merely been born here (or near here), and Vance Palmer and Ernestine Hill, who had done no more than visit. Even so, the list was not such as to inspire faith in the existence of a North Queensland regional literature. In 1968, Mr. John Heuzenroeder touched entertainingly on the same subject when he "discovered" the novelist Sarah Campion who, he said, "made a substantial, serious, and unique contribution to the literature of the region".³ The article which follows is the latest, and, it is probably to be hoped, the last, attempt to introvert on the literature of North Queensland. It deals, not with the independent Greats, but with the little magazines and their contributors. The time has now come when, if possible, cultural introversion in North Queensland should give place to production.

It is an unfortunate fact of literature that little magazines, particularly when they are at the teething stage, are more often expressive of the egos than they are of the talents of their contributors. This fact holds true for most of the magazines that have been produced in North Queensland in the past ten years. I must confess to having read them with a degree of fascination, but it was of the sort which a budgerigar feels for a taipan. What is bad is sometimes intriguing. In the case of the magazines, what is intriguing is the process of literary genesis which they somehow incorporate.

My intention here is to deal with five magazines which, it could be argued, have contributed, or have promised to contribute in the future, to the development of a North Queensland regional literature. They are Expression, Westlife, North, LINQ, and In Print.⁴

Of these five journals, Expression has been the most tenacious of life. It began, in August 1962, as a sequence of roneoed sheets, in Brisbane, under the auspices of the Writers' Guild of Queensland. Early in 1964, the roneoed sheets gave place to a simple printed format, appearing monthly. In March 1966, the editors, understandably, seem to have found monthly production

1 North, No. 5, 24-28.

2 North, No. 2, 3-6.

3 "Sarah Campion: An Enthusiast for the North," North, No. 6, 15-18.

4 I will not discuss Makar, the magazine of the English Department, University of Queensland, since its influence outside that institution has been minimal.

too much, and Expression became a quarterly. Its aim during the early years was to "DO ITS BIT FOR THE LITERATURE OF QUEENSLAND", but in the same issue which announced the change to quarterly production, attention was drawn to inter-state readers and contributors, and Expression was called a "National" for the first time. In August 1967, after it had fallen temporarily on hard times, the editorship was taken over by Mr. Peter Bladen, M.A. This anticipated a move to Quorn, South Australia, in July 1969. Although still the "Magazine of the Writers' Guild of Queensland", the bulk of its contributors now lived in other states (particularly South Australia) and its aim had broadened to that of "encouraging creative writing". The latest issue (September, 1972) has seen yet further changes: the editorship has been taken over by Mr. Alan Osterstock, with Mr. Bladen, M.A., remaining as poetry editor; production will now be bi-monthly instead of quarterly; the official connection with the Writers' Guild of Queensland has been severed; and the title has been changed to Expression Australasia. The effect of the last two changes, of course, has been to confirm the journal's responsibility to the nation at the expense of its regional connections. The latest issue contains seven contributions from Queensland, and twelve from other states, mainly South Australia.

Since most of the pre-1969 contributors to Expression have, as literary entities, vanished without trace, it is very difficult to determine how many of them had affiliations with North Queensland. Two, however, come to mind—E.M. England and C.F. Nolan, both very regular contributors of poems and prose pieces. Their work does not differ much in quality from that of other writers in Expression. While E.M. England's prose pieces are, at least, simple and unpretentious, her poems irritate because of their technical ineptitude and lack of content. The following is an example:

Raleigh's Last Sonnet

On that last night you dreamed of blue-robed kings!
waiting for you and losing count of days
along the horizon, where summer brings
blinding rain and swollen waterways.

At times a dank drought seized your candle flame
and traced on walls your shadow bowed in thought,
while under Tower-Bridge, mourning this lame
ebbing of life the dark old river sought
the sea.

Out of despairs of fever, age,
and endless yearning for the robust past
you summed up life, close written on one page
pending the voyage that must be your last,
from final resignation shaping rhyme
into the saddest sonnet of all time. ⁵

The picture evoked is moving enough, and the emotion impressive and well sustained. But there is no real attempt to transcend the situation or to apply it either to the writer or to the reader. The irregular ending of the sestet can only be described as jarring.

C.F. Nolan specialised in nature poetry. Although she occasionally found a felicitous phrase, all of her poems are badly flawed. White Cockatoos succeeds momentarily, near the beginning, in conveying the action of the birds in tearing tree bark to pieces, but its ending is ruined by its old-fashioned language and metrical imperfections:

Begone! begone! begone you lethal birds,
Dangling deceptive beauty before my eyes,
Before pellets pierce your craws with fatal seed
And fleck with scarlet drops your unstained plumes.⁶

E.M. England made her last contribution in March 1971, and C.F. Nolan dropped out after the issue of December, 1970. As far as I have been able to determine, no new North Queensland writers have contributed to Expression since its move to South Australia.

Even as a national magazine, the literary quality of Expression has not been high. Very few established writers have contributed to it. Martin Haley has been the only consistent contributor of any note at all. There have also appeared, but much less frequently, works by Graham Rawlands, Charles Buckmaster, Frank Kellaway, Stefanie Bennett, and Ian Mudie.

Throughout its career, most of the writing in Expression has been inept, if not embarrassing. The editorial policy seems to have fostered, if not demanded, a narrow back-country regionalism, an extreme egocentricity which showed no interest in the ideas and aspirations of the wider world, and a backward-looking anxiety to maintain convention and the values of the middle-class establishment. While I can only wish Expression better health in the future, the point should be made that some of the statements of the new editor do not bode well:

I would like to introduce a page of news from writers' clubs throughout the country, so that other readers can hear of their activities.

...others tend to forget that some copies are read by children. Without becoming involved in morals - this is enough reason to 'keep it clean'.

The sun of the enlightenment has not yet risen.

Westlife, "the Quarterly Magazine from the Back Country", is a comparatively new venture - only three issues have so far appeared. Longreach is the home base, and the editors profess to be J.C. Patti, B.A., and J.A. Patti. Richard Magoffin, a school-teacher in Charters Towers, and author of Chops and Gravy and We Bushies: Modern Australian Ballads, seems to be acting in an advisory capacity.

6 Expression, 7, No. 2 (Winter 1968), 13.

The editors have placed their emphasis very strongly on non-fictional prose. They have published articles dealing with the history of the Australian countryside, for example, "Captain Starlight", "Pony Express", "Where is Leichhardt?", "Melba in Mackay"; bush anecdotes, such as "The Saddle", "A True Mackay Ghost Story"; reviews of books likely to be of interest to country readers; and some genuine literary criticism - "An Insight into "Banjo" Paterson" by Richard Magoffin and "An Insight into Brian James" by Gary Martin. No purely fictional short stories have yet appeared. The few poems belong mainly to the genre of bush ballad. They all have a regional theme:

O Mythic West
(Third Section)

O mythic west, guard you still
The turning sentinels,
The strong wealth.
Walking in the morning by the harbourside,
The many strangers, the sea a childhood thing,
The fishermen with lines cast into cloud,
And I estranged, all these implied
Their tragedy, a reason not to grieve.
I knew no heavens limit me nor task
And yet the gift of beauty asks
Wantonly the tribute of our love. 7

In quoting this poem as typical of Westlife, I am not doing justice to the obviously practical, hard-headed people who run it. In publishing mainly prose non-fiction, the editors are providing an outlet for what is probably the best work they receive. They are doing North Queensland readers a service by not encouraging, or by encouraging only minimally, ordinary people self-deluded into faith in their own creativity. Although Westlife suffers at least as much as Expression does from the narrowness of its interests and philosophy, it nevertheless possesses a modicum of the saving grace of objectivity.

To move from the wild west to the groves of academe is, in this instance at least, to move up, but not far. The now defunct Townsville branch of the English Association produced, between 1963 and 1968, six issues of a magazine called North, the aim of which, according to the foundation president, Mr. R.S. Smith, was to "encourage literary expression among the members of the English Association, and others who may be interested in its activities".

North varied quite a deal from issue to issue. Until 1965 it gave a home to essays of a regional interest, such as "Life in the Tropics" by Mrs. S. Dickson, and reports on the annual Drama Festival by Miss G. Pohlmeier; some short stories, of which M. Brandl's "Miss Joyce's Morning Walk" (1965) is probably the best; poetry by people not in North Queensland, such as Thomas Shapcott, Grace Perry, and Judith Green; and poetry by local people. Most of the local poetry is of the standard usual with amateurs, but a few

7 Poem by Stephen Thwaites, Westlife 1, No.3 (March 1972), 10.

works show unexpected promise. Sylvia Kelso, for example, placed the following poem in the issue of June, 1964:

Curiosity

What happens when a man dies?
I longed to ask my father that,
Knowing that his cattle-filled eyes
Had seen blood dribbling, not from broken horns
But from dropped bodies
Of men once taut and straight with laughter-life.
If he had ever been pity-torn
For the boy in a two-up game
Being mangled in a human juggernaut
A moment later. A mortar shell,
A steel-coned packet of blasting flame,
Screams, silence. Telegrams, tears,
Memories, love-bitter as well.
This I knew he must have seen;
Seen too the knitting-needle slaughter
Of the old woman Bren -
Chattering not over tea but over men.
But somehow, seeing now his mind
Swept clear of all war's wreck,
And all war's sheaves he'd had to bind -
I feared to ask, to bring it back.

In 1966 Mr. John Heuzenroeder accepted the editorship of North, and for the first time a literary magazine was produced in North Queensland which had some reference to the outside world, and which challenged, if it did not break, the curse of parochialism. The heuzenroeder issue of North is distinguished by articles dealing with subjects of more than North Queensland interest, by Julian Croft's "Study of the Australian Film Industry", Colin Roderick's "Was Lawson Born in a Tent?", D. Gallagher's "Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966): A Revaluation", and by R.S. Smith's "Love and Hate in the Poetry of Romeo and Juliet". The articles dealing with historical or contemporary regional concerns were continued with Ron Kenny's "Is There a North Queensland School of Painting?" and Elizabeth Foxford's "The Black Prince". The bias had become academic, but the result was a raising, not a lowering of standards.

The last (1968) edition of North was a faint echo of the edition of 1966. The academic contingent remained strong, and a poem and a short story of some merit came from Kay Brown.⁸

Although the six volumes of North are not of a standard to invite comparison with Australia's best literary journals, with Quadrant and Meanjin

8 Kay Brown contributed short stories to Expression, 9, No. 1 (March 1970); and 11, No. 1 (March 1972).

for example, one nevertheless feels that, particularly towards the end, the editors were beginning to work under a viable policy, that they were attempting to place both the magazine and the literature of the region within the wider context. But the sad truth is that editorial policy alone can never be the making of a magazine dealing in imaginative literature. For this you need genuinely talented and dedicated contributors.

In many ways, LiNQ is the successor of North, and, at least in the area of editorial policy, it seems to have profited from the experience of its predecessor. Its title, I presume, is intended to indicate its function of providing a connection between critics and writers in the deep North and their colleagues in the South. LiNQ has so far differed from North in drawing its contributions almost exclusively from academics and others connected with the James Cook university. Since the university has grown considerably since the days of North, LiNQ can be fairly sure of a supply of non-fictional prose of a suitable standard. Thus far, literary criticism has filled most of its pages. In the future, it is to be hoped that it will also attract articles of a wider intellectual interest. That would increase its ability to transcend the purely regional. The poems and short stories from local writers, have been, on the whole, much like the productions of local writers elsewhere - the poems are more skilled than those Westlife, but not as skilled as some in Expression. I liked Peter Bell's two poems in the latest issue.

If LiNQ, then, is to establish a worthwhile reputation as a regional magazine, it must base it either on egghead non-fictional works or on the high quality of its poems and short stories. Examination and comparison of Expression, Westlife, and North lead inexorably to the conclusion that LiNQ is more likely to succeed by pursuing the former course than by pursuing the latter. This is not because more people want to read non-fiction, but because of the dearth of local poets and prose-writers of sufficient merit.

Although it is such a recent enterprise, LiNQ is not the latest attempt to provide a journal for North Queensland writers. In September, 1972, In Print, "The Magazine of The Townsville Writers' Group", appeared in the newsagencies for the first time. The Townsville Writers' Group was formed under the auspices of the Board of Adult Education earlier this year.

In Print is a grisly reminder of what can happen when a North Queensland editor is forced to rely solely on "imaginative" writing to make up a publication. Some of the contributors may have sufficient talent and determination to allow them to improve in the future, but, with one or two bare exceptions,⁹ they should not have inflicted their work on the public at this stage. Even the most abstruse academic non-fiction would have been preferable.

Thus, the picture which I have been painting of the literary journals of North Queensland is not a happy one. It is crowded with dark grays and blacks - sombre tonings. Perhaps it is a truth that should be recognized that, however determined and intelligent an editor may be, literary magazines can-

9 Stefanie Bennett and Anne-Marie Bennett.

not of themselves engender literary creation. They can only watch and pray, and present opportunities to the talented writer when, and if, he appears. Literary production is a matter for individuals, and literature in North Queensland, such as it is, has so far owed its existence to individual writers who have been completely unaided by the local literary magazines.

Cheryl Frost

GARGOYLE POETS 1 & 2

(Graham Rowlands. Stares and Statues; Alan Weame. Public Relations. Both published by Makar. 1972. \$0.50 ea.)

Congratulations to Makar for producing something with the avowed aim 'to foster new poetry, by providing a modest, inexpensive format with the assurance of a reasonably wide circulation'. Such an aim re-affirms one's faith in the 'little magazines' of Australia, but one is left wondering initially at the title of the series:- the title may well be startlingly original yet the actual word is too much.

Brisbane-born Graham Rowlands is an exceptionally competent young poet, even at times brilliant. Nevertheless his poetry is patchy - some of the stuff in Stares and Statues would have been better unpublished (e.g. 'Elusive') but the collection taken as a whole is good value at fifty cents, and damn good value when one considers such poems as 'Prickles' (Shakespeare himself would have loved the pun) and 'A Birth', or the too-satiric political 'humour' of 'Zarathustra in a Jet' and 'Loyalty'. Mr. Rowlands may not be cutting society to the quick with his poetry, but he speaks in a voice we can all understand, and in part, agree with. One point well worth noting and all-too-easily overlooked in a reading - despite a certain amount of technical experimentation, not one technical fault to be found. This is all the more appreciated with the spacious and accurate layout the edition affords. Bouquets to Makar for a job well done.

With all due apologies to those concerned with the impressive list of newspapers and journals to whom acknowledgments have been made, and with some deep questioning of both my sensitivity and intelligence - what the Hell is Alan Weame up to? Somewhere in all that esoteric imagery and technical flim-flam there must be some poetry lurking, there must be something I'm just failing to see. But it's not for lack of looking. There is not one striking image, not one unique technical action that displays a justification for the attempts at novelty. Neither the words nor the punctuation are working for the poet, and, as far as I'm concerned, that rules the writer out as a poet. The good layout is entirely wasted. Brickbats to Makar, for a bad choice.

One can but with bated breath await Gargoyle No 3.

DAVID FOOTT.