

CHERYL FROST

BOB NORMAN, *BUSH PILOT*, Cairns, 1976. 294 pp. \$6.00.

This book was written to coincide with the Cairns centenary celebrations, of which the author is co-ordinator. He was one of the founders of Bush Pilots Airways, the idea for which he derived from observation of the Canadian Bush Pilots during the Second World War. The first half of the book is a chronological account of the author's life before the establishment of the (Australian) Bush Pilots in 1951. Most attention is given to his experiences with aeroplanes, with some also being allotted to his family and business life. The second half is given over to anecdotes about the early years of the Bush Pilots, until 1959. Most of these deal with the author's own experiences. They are not arranged in any perceptible order.

The blurb claims, "This is a book that will enthrall you to the last word." Whether this is true or not will depend on the reader's intelligence, but it must in any case be granted that *Bush Pilot* maintains a degree of narrative interest throughout. This is probably its chief virtue. The author's experiences as a pilot both during the war and afterwards were more various than might perhaps be expected. Nevertheless, some of the anecdotes, for example that of the "morose young pilot" who did not return from a bombing mission (pp.44-46), seem to have been told mainly to demonstrate the writer's superiority of judgment.

The book's second virtue is that it informs, both as to the geography of Queensland north of Townsville, and as to the life-style of the people there during the late 1940's and the 1950's. Readers with an interest in the region might therefore find it of use.

The author's interpretation of his experiences is one of the disturbing features of *Bush Pilot*. This aspect is not actually much emphasised, either because the author is not a naturally reflective person, or from deliberate policy. Sometimes the omission of comment is significant in itself. For example, in his account of his bombing missions, the author consistently reports on whether or not his bombs were on target, but does not reflect on their destructive force. His consciousness of having in all probability destroyed human life is not expressed until later, after an account of his part in a particularly hazardous mercy flight. Here he suggests that his courage in saving lives after the war may have been in part expiatory (p.100). Again, when the author tells how he went off to battle, there is no record of his questioning the justice of cause he was fighting in, nor, certainly, the justice of wars in general. Nor does it seem to have struck him as in any way incongruous that he was flying bombers in the Mediterranean, fifteen thousand kilometres from his native land.

The anecdote of Jack Emmett, who survived a hundred kilometre trek, west of Burketown, on an infected foot, contains an example of Mr Norman's unfortunate interpretative manner. The narrative concludes as follows:

He set out once again, crawling on his hands and knees until he finally arrived at the mission. I knew Jack Emmett. He's black, but he's a mighty man.

(p.210)

The implication, of course, is that black people are not usually to be rated as "mighty men", and is subtly racist.

It would be possible to expand considerably on my objections to Mr Norman's attitudes and morals, except that it would probably be too subjective a stance for a reviewer to take. If his attitudes are typical of the successful businessman in Australia, *Bush Pilot* must constitute an interesting comment on that social group.

There are numerous errors in style and production. The author is most at home with simple, factual statements. When he attempts metaphor, the results are sometimes puzzling, as, for example, in, "One after another we searched that maze of island gems" (p.214). Perhaps partly as a result of being printed in Hong Kong, *Bush Pilot* contains many misprints. There are also some spelling errors. The German word *sieben*, for example, appears frequently, always misspelled.

Although I should like all possible encouragement to be given to North Queensland authors, I believe that Mr Norman's friends were misguided when they urged him to write this book. His acts of courage and humanity should have been left to stand in their own right, without comment. If comment were considered indispensable, it would have come better from an independent observer, preferably one experienced in writing prose.