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LANDSCAPE IN EARLY NORTH QUEENSLAND WRITING

The aborigines' approach to landscape was unitive: both myth, in which they identified nature with dead or imaginary people, and totem, which associated real people with birds and animals, were ways of enhancing relationship with the land. As far as ideas were concerned, harmony was the aborigines' aim, though their practice in some respects, such as their periodic burning of the country, was divergent. The attitudes of the European settlers to the Australian landscape were more complex and, on the whole, more negative. Since, however, they were the inevitable expression of a culture geared to definition, individualism and conquest, a judgmental approach to them may be rather futile. It has in any case been pre-empted by such writers as Robin Boyd, Donald Horne and Judith Wright, each of whom deals with the question from a special vantage point.[1] Here I hope merely to document characteristic European responses to landscape soon after settlement in a particular Australian region, and to unravel some of the underlying complexities.

Though the basic response was the same as elsewhere in Australia, a few variables ensured some distinctiveness in the white settlers' attitudes to landscape in North Queensland. In the first place, the time-scale was different: the pioneering era in the north began later and continued longer than in the southern settlements. Secondly, North Queensland possesses an unusual variety of landscapes, eliciting a wider than average range of responses. Thirdly, what the Europeans saw as the main negative features of Australian landscape in the south—heat, drought, and isolation—tended to be heightened in North Queensland. This factor made the settlers' struggle with the land more intense, and so encouraged them to look on it as oppressor and as victim proportionately more often than people living further

This paper was read at the Seminar on North Queensland Writing held by the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies (Townsville), August 2-3. 1980.

south.

In view of their boredom, discomfort, diseases and danger, it is not surprising that the pioneers often looked on the land as oppressor. John Fenwick, part-owner of a station on the upper Burdekin, recorded in his diary a droving trip which he undertook in the area in 1863, less than four years after the Kennedy had been opened for settlement:

> the bush is solitary. There is no one to meet—no house to pass, not even in sight; generally you are perhaps twenty to forty miles from another human being (white): as to the Blacks one cannot tell how near they may be; an odd spear may at any unsuspecting moment be whizzed into one's vitals.[2]

This is a simple, heartfelt response to experience, but not all the early settlers in North Queensland responded simply. In 1871 George Carrington published a work entitled, somewhat ominously, *Colonial Adventures and Experiences by a University Man*[3]. Carrington had moved around North Queensland, trying his hand at shepherding, tutoring and gold-mining. In his book he remains always a remote commentator, judging the new region by the standards of his home country and class. The following passage sees the bush as oppressor, but otherwise is remarkable for its detachment:

> Travelling in the Bush in Queensland is usually excessively tame work. The roads (mere dray tracks winding among the trees) are dry and dusty; the scenery is the same for miles—no flowers, no fruit, very little life. Nothing but trees, trees, each with three branches and six leaves on each branch, throwing no shade except from their trunks; dry waving grass between the trunks, one exactly like the other which stands a few feet off from it; now and then a kangaroo to be seen, or an emu, or a flock of parrots; crossing creeks and rivers here and there by the simple process of going down one bank and up the other. In the middle of the day a halt; dinner, tea and pipes (this only when you are taking it easy.) Then on again: trees, grass, parrots, etc. repeated until the camping place is reached; horses then unloaded, and turned out to wander where they will till morning (if apt to abuse the privilege they are hobbled); tents, supper, pipes, yarns, and bed: tomorrow *da capo*.[4]

Robin Boyd sees the reluctance of the early colonists to accept Australian landscape and vegetation as the historical cause of

the pseudo-European suburbs which have been created in all cities. Carrington is by no means the only early chronicler of North Queensland to exemplify this reluctance. Another visitor before 1870 was Charles H. Allen, who records part of a lecture presented by the pastoralist, R.S. Archer, in Rockhampton (admittedly beyond our region) in 1868:

> He believed it was that want of a good tenure that they had to thank for the dreary aspect of the country presented to the Australian traveller. No one who travelled through the country could fail to be struck with the immense waste and unvaried sight that presented itself, of miles and miles of gum trees, without the sign of human habitation.[5]

Allen himself was an acute observer of the new country. He provides the following vivid description of a station homestead in the west:

> Go on to your verandah, and look out upon the dried and parched-up land, just as this blazing sun has climbed into the zenith. Almost everything in nature appears paralysed and dead. Through the hazy air the vertical sun looks down, casting no shadow on the ground. Your horse stands there bare and shadowless, like Peter Schemil in the tale; the trees or bushes only fling upon the earth the exact reflex of the crown of foliage that stands out around the straight tall stem—over the brown earth the great hawk, so common here, soars with languid wing, and as he flies, his form seems imaged on the ground beneath, following his every movement, skimming lightly over grass or rock or stone.[6]

The dismay at the solitude of the bush, implied or overtly expressed in each of these descriptions, can sometimes be found also in the early accounts of the towns. Here, for instance, is the record by the Danish settler, Thorvald Weitemeyer, of his first view of a North Queensland town, early in the 1870s:

> At last, one day after having sailed along the apparently uninhabited coast for eight or nine days, we suddenly rounded a cliff, sailed into a little bay, and dropped anchor. There lay Bowen in full sight of us, and this was Port Denison. How strange it seemed that these few scattered wooden cottages we saw lying there on the beach in appalling loneliness should be the spot that we, through storm and trouble, had all been trying to reach.[7]

Nevertheless, Robert Gray, who arrived in Bowen soon after the first buildings had been erected, described it as "a busy little

place,"[8] and Charles Eden, another early visitor, was impressed by its briskness and what he called its "go-aheadness."[9]

Another writer who failed to respond to the oppressiveness of the environment with straightforward dismay was Robert Thomas Wood, who spent a year on a station in the Bowen hinterland in about 1865, and wrote a novel about his experiences. It was never published, but the manuscript is extant. He jokes in his preface about the incompatibility of a high moral purpose with the Queensland climate, and devotes several pages to techniques of mosquito-slaying.[10] Complaints about insects were to constitute a minor tradition in writing about the region.[11] W.H. Corfield went one better perhaps in his reminiscence of a plague of rats which, he says, attacked Winton in 1880:

> The vermin would eat the buttons off one's coat when camping out. Cats and dogs were surfeited from killing them. I told a Chinaman cook of the hotel that I would give him a pound of tobacco if he caught a hundred rats. That night, as I was sleeping on a stretcher at the back of the store, I was several times awakened by what seemed to be a stamping of feet. In the morning I found that the Chinaman had obtained an ironbark wooden shutter, and rigged up a figure-four trap with bait underneath, and by this means had obtained a wheelbarrow full of dead rats.[12]

Examples of pioneers and visitors who looked on the North Queensland environment as oppressor could be multiplied almost indefinitely. A tendency to exaggeration is apparent in much early writing–natural enough in authors who for the most part were informing or entertaining readers distanced from the region or from the time or from both. By the 1890s, and even earlier, the exaggeration had contributed to the development of a body of fictional writing set in North Queensland. The process can be illustrated briefly from the work of Ernest Favenc, who came to North Queensland from England in 1864, and, like Carrington, tried many occupations, working as a miner, a stockman, a station manager, an explorer, and a freelance journalist. Unlike Carrington, however, Favenc became deeply committed to the North, especially to the inland and the Gulf area. Between April and September 1876 he contributed to *The Queenslander* a day-by-day account of a droving trip along the coast from the

Calliope River to Lake Elphinstone. The Fitzroy River was in flood, and Favenc was held up at Yamba. He described the scene in emphatic detail:

> For dismal, eerie-looking scenery I would back a Queensland river at half-flood at night-time against any place. The dark water slowly gliding amongst the mud-stained trunks of the weeping tea trees, the added gloom caused by the foliage overhead, the ragged strips of bark here and there flapping, all make one think of the dismal swamps of Canada.[13]

(As far as I know Favenc had never visited Canada.) Later he used a similar description in a fictional context:

> Perhaps no more desolate, depressing scenery can be found anywhere in the world than on the mangrove-flats of Northern Queensland. As you row slowly up some salt-water creek, nothing is visible on either side but low banks of oozy mud, awash at high tide, covered with writhing and distorted trees. Now and then a branch creek breaks the monotony of the scrub, for the shore is here a perfect labyrinth and network of watercourses, whilst the only living denizens visible are armies of hideous crabs, and an occasional evil-looking alligator, which glides noiselessly off the mud into deep water as your boat approaches.[14]

This is the opening paragraph of Favenc's grim but successful short story, "The Last of Six," published in 1893 by the Sydney *Bulletin*. Exaggeration about the landscape sets the mood from which the story gains much of its effectiveness.

The year before, Favenc had introduced his friend, Louis Becke, to the editor of the *Bulletin*, J.F. Archibald,[15] and so had furthered the career of one of the most prolific of the *Bulletin* writers. Probably the two men had become acquainted in North Queensland, since Becke had also lived there for some years, between 1875 and 1880.[16] Becke drew on his experience of the region soon after he began to write, and his second collection of stories, *The Ebbing of the Tide*, published in 1895, contains "Nell of Mulliner's Camp," which, like many of his tales. deals with a tragic passion between a coloured woman and a white man. (Out of coyness, perhaps, or sentiment, Becke does not state that Nell has aboriginal blood, though he romanticizes her dark beauty.) Isolation and the conditions of a mining camp play an important part in the story:

> Mulliner's Camp, on the Hodgkinson, was the most hopeless-looking spot in the most God-forsaken piece of country in North Queensland. . . .
>
> It was Saturday night, and the deadly melancholy of Mulliner's was, if possible, somewhat accentuated by the crash and rattle of the played-out old five-head battery, accompanied by the wheezings and groanings of its notoriously unreliable pumping-gear. Half a mile away from the decrepid old battery, and situated on the summit of an adder-infested ironstone ridge, the dozen or so of bark humpies that constituted Mulliner's Camp proper stood out clearly in the bright starlight in all their squat ugliness.[17]

Becke differed from Favenc in his ability to exploit, for the sake of romance, the beauty as well as the negative extremes of the North Queensland landscape. The following passage, from "A Quick Vengeance," which was printed in *The Pearl Divers of Roncador Reef* in 1908, is comparatively complex in feeling:

> Between Cape Flattery and Cape Tribulation on the coast of the far north of Queensland, there is a stretch of desolate beach some thirty miles in length. Above high-water mark the fine, soft sand is densely covered with a green carpet of the beautiful but poisonous vinca plant, the bright pink-and-white flowers of which give forth a strong, sickly odour; lower down on the beach and on the banks of the sluggish tidal streams which debouch through it to the Pacific, hideous alligators lie basking in the sun; eastward, across the ten miles of pale green water that intervenes is the curving, foam-capped line of the Great Barrier reef; westward the rugged, wild and fantastic shapes of the coastal range, the haunt of hordes of ferocious cannibal blacks, and the storehouse of as yet almost untouched millions of pounds worth of virgin gold.[18]

This luxuriant description contrasts strongly with Becke's dismissal of Townsville, in the title story of the collection, as "this new town of dust, drink, devilry and downright damnation"[19] and also with his view of Bowen, in "Sonny," published a year earlier, as "the dullest and hottest town in the far north of Queensland–barring Rockhampton."[20] Since "Sonny" deals with a man's recovery from brain damage caused by an attack by aborigines on some miners on the Gilbert River, it extends further the idea of the environment as oppressor which is inherent in all of these examples from Becke.

The settlers in North Queensland inevitably looked on the land as victim as often as they looked on it as oppressor. The journals of the explorers, notably Leichhardt,[21] abound in details which are a tribute to their authors' powers of observation, and to their grasp of botany, mathematics, and climatology. But from another viewpoint, the explorers' journals were guides for exploitation and conquest. Robert Gray, who with his cousin, Ernest Henry, took up Hughenden station in 1863, recalled many years later the squatters' way of viewing the country, which was really an extension of the explorers' method of scientific definition. These incidents occurred when Gray was still searching for suitable land:

> On the following afternoon we reached Hughenden, and the next day, having procured fresh horses and rations, accompanied by Morisset and a black boy I returned to Skeleton creek. We followed the creek down about as far as the present Lammermoor homestead. The country was of a mixed character, fine well-grassed plains back from the creek, but much grass seed on the frontage. We here met Little with a herd of cattle making his way out to the Gulf country, and as he told us that for miles it was of the same character, and as in those days people turned up their noses at everything except open downs country, we turned our backs upon it, and struck out towards Prairie creek, and so lost the opportunity of acquiring a very fine cattle run.[22]

Several of the early writers already mentioned, notably Carrington, Allen and Wood, intended their books as guides for immigrants. They therefore have a sharp eye for exploitable features of the land and climate, which complements their awareness of the land's power to subjugate its white inhabitants. The following passage is fairly typical of Allen, who wrote for the working and the middle classes:

> The construction of the "humpy" for a family will cost little but the labour. The same may be said of fencing, whilst from the teeming soil there may be obtained at a nominal expenditure, overflowing crops of endless variety. Around the cottage pine-apples, bananas and other tropical fruits will grow like weeds if once planted, and the land can be cultivated for maize, cotton, or whatever the owner may most desire. Under the ever-serene skies of Queensland the wants of a family are

few compared with those of a more rigorous climate, and comprise the smallest amount of clothing, with fuel for cooking purposes only, which can be obtained in any quantity for the cutting.[23]

The most interesting of the early writers for immigrants was Edward B. Kennedy, who strongly defended the land as suitable for exploitation, and, in *Four Years in Queensland* in 1870, made a spirited attack on its attackers:

> There are a certain class of men who do the colony an immense amount of harm by running it down everywhere, without having fairly judged it: they bring out a little money and a great many letters, receive a letter of introduction to a squatter in the north, rush up to the station, stay there two or three months, come back to Brisbane, and either get a Government "billet", or go home after having spent most of their money by living in town. I have seen many of these cases. I asked one man if he had seen or done anything in the Bush. "Oh yes, I did some 'foot rotting' " was the languid reply. They abuse everything, and tell everyone that the climate in the north is atrocious, and the mosquitoes fearful, and as everyone knows, it is not so much the *expressions* which are used in running down or praising anything as the *manner* in which it is done.[24]

More than twenty years later, Kennedy wrote two further books based on his life in North Queensland. *Blacks and Bushrangers*[25] is a boy's adventure novel, drawing on the experience of the castaway, James Morrill, whom Kennedy had met in Port Denison in 1863, soon after Morrill's return to white civilisation. It idealises the landscape around Cleveland bay and attributes English virtues to its aboriginal inhabitants. The second book, *The Black Police of Queensland,*[26] deals with Kennedy's experience as a sub-inspector in the force and with atrocities allegedly committed by wild blacks. The contrast between the two books suggests that Kennedy was cynically exploiting contemporary romantic interest in the pioneering era. His attitude to the region was similarly exploitative at base.

The settlers' intense struggle with the North Queensland landscape left its mark on the generations which were to come. This at any rate is the view of two much later novelists, Brian Penton and Faith Bandler. Penton's novel, *Landtakers*, first published in 1934, is set mainly in Moreton Bay and on a remote

station to the north-west of the settlement. The young English newcomer, Derek Cabell, is driven by social pressure and ambition into a prolonged contention with the land. His fight with his scruples and sensitivity, with recalcitrant convicts, wild aborigines, floods and distance bring him to an embittered old age. Probably Cabell has more than his fair share of unpleasant experience, but at any rate Penton's main point about the ills of ruthless colonization is dramatically sustained. The novel finds space for other than the oppressor-victim response to landscape. Its portrayal of complexities in fact is essentially true to the early literature.

Faith Bandler's novel, *Wacvie*, published in 1977, is based on the experience of her father who was kidnapped from the New Hebrides in 1883 and forced to labour on cane farms near Mackay. From the kanaka's point of view, the white man governs both landscape and labourer:

> From where he sat at the end of the row, Wacvie could see the distant plantation house, white and dominating the whole scene. It stood on high stumps with thick creeping vines around the wide sweeping verandah. A line of coconut palms made a cool driveway, closely grown banana and paw paw trees forming a protective wall. When the soft mossy-like clouds floated behind the house, it was such a tranquil scene that the whole of Wacvie's body ached with homesickness.[27]

But the white man too, Bandler reveals later, "had to come to terms with the heat, the rain and the insects, as well as the blacks";[28] he too was a victim, if only of marital disharmony and pressure from the boss.

In *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* Judith Wright points out that, to its European inhabitants, Australia "has been the outer equivalent of an inner reality; first, and persistently, the reality of exile; second, though perhaps we now tend to forget this, the reality of newness and freedom."[29] I wish now to consider how this other major opposition, between exile and freedom, expressed itself in early writing about North Queensland.

Alexander Forbes came to Rockhampton from Scotland in 1862 and, once arrived, lamented his displacement in many a mediocre verse. He complains that he may no longer hear the murmur of bees, nor smell the fragrant heather; that there is no

"royal stag with antlered crest," nor "golden eagle," nor "whirring grouse."[30] On Christmas day,

> No hoar frost weaves fantastic shapes
> Upon the window panes,
> Nor clad in robes of glittering snow
> Are Queensland's sultry plains.[31]

Forbes worked as a shepherd on a remote part of a station, and so was doubly exiled, from Scotland and from company. He writes about this in "Night in the Bush," and especially about his inability to keep his passage money from the "shark" publican and from the "mantrap" – "perhaps a handsome cook." He is conscious of the heat, and intensely conscious of the isolation, but has no feeling for the special quality of the bush. His verse translates it entirely into European terms:

> 'Tis night – the fierce and glaring sun
> His daily pilgrimage has run.
> Phoebus, across the vault of heaven,
> His flaming chariot hath driven;
> And now fair Cynthia holds her reign,
> And doth a milder sway maintain.[32]

There is a similar striking translation in the reaction of Robert Wood to the town of Lowerton, probably Bowen. After remarking that, "it stands upon the shores of a bay almost as beautiful as that of Naples," he adds the proviso:

> Were but the villas and palaces of Naples erected along its shores it might surpass its European rival, but instead of marble palaces, there are only wooden houses with iron or shingle roofs, and these are never picturesque from any point of view except an exceedingly distant one.[33]

From the standpoint of a long-time resident in the region now, the comparison with Naples seems merely fanciful, but actually it represents the writer's radical refusal to see North Queensland in other than European terms.

The sense of exile or alienation was not always expressed only verbally. Weitemeyer recalls his first entrance into Bowen, at the head of a procession of four aborigines, carrying saleable bottles from the ship. His aim, and that of his fellow passengers, was favourably to impress the residents:

> Therefore I was faultlessly got up, in my own opinion, or at least as well as the circumstances of my wardrobe would per-

> mit. . . . I had on my black evening-dress suit, which so far would have been good enough to go to a ball in, but my white shirt, I know, was of a very doubtful colour, for I had been my own washer-woman, and it was neither starched nor ironed. Then my tall black hat, of which I was so proud when I got it, had suffered great damage on the voyage, and brush it as I would, any one might easily have seen that it had been used as a footstool. My big overcoat, I, according to the most approved fashion in Copenhagen, carried over my arm. In one hand I had my handkerchief, with which I had constantly to wipe the perspiration from my face, because it was very hot.[34]

Writing some years later, Weitemeyer is aware of having cut a comic figure. Such tenderfoot characters were to provide staple butts in later fiction set in the region, notably by Favenc and Becke.

Becke's late tale of "Julius Adolphus Jenkins's Christmas Alligator" is a relatively sophisticated example of this genre.[35] Julius Adolphus arrives in Townsville by the English mail steamer, to work as ledger-keeper in a local bank, and Becke presents both sides in his ensuing confrontation with the environment. On the one hand, Julius Adolphus writes home to his parents that,

> The people are the roughest and dirtiest imaginable. One half of them are diggers, who are swarming in from the interior on their way to the new gold fields on the Palmer River. They all have horses, use the most frightful language, and when not fighting or intoxicated, are lying asleep in the shade on public-house verandahs. . . . When I first entered the door of the disgraceful building called a Bank, I found therein two rough-looking young men clad in shirts, trousers, and boots (socks I presume they had). Round each man's waist was a coarse leather belt, on which was also a greasy leather watch pouch; neither had collar nor tie, and each was smoking a pipe! Imagine my disgust when I found that these two disreputable-looking roughs were respectively the Manager and Accountant![36]

But the environment too has a way of making its opinion known, as Julius finds out:

> Now Julius Adolphus . . ., although a terribly conceited young man, and an intense admirer of himself, had a certain amount of common sense, and when he found that his Picca-

> dilly costume attracted such widespread attention and amusement, he began to feel uncomfortable. It was not pleasant, for instance, when he showed himself in the street, to hear a lot of rough diggers make such remarks as "Oh, strike me, Dick, just look at it!" or for a great hulking bushman to deliberately stand in front of him open-mouthed, and then fall down in a pretended fit.[37]

Final victory nevertheless belongs to the newcomer. He captures an alligator, inadvertently and by an improbable technique; becomes a hero; and wins the hand of the belle of the town, in the face of stern competition from the local bushmen. The environment, then, has some surprises even for hardened North Queenslanders. Becke may be hinting that a rough coexistence with nature, covering over a fundamental alienation, is not the same as the achievement of harmony. In those circumstances, nature can take unexpected revenges.

Early visitors and settlers in North Queensland certainly projected onto the landscape "the inner reality of newness and freedom." Such projections are as common as any of the negative responses which I have dealt with so far. On the topic of freedom, it is worth recalling that Paterson did not compose (or discover) "Waltzing Matilda" in the civilised south, but on a station near Winton. A much later and more sophisticated writer, too—Patrick White—in no fewer than three novels has created a parallel between travels north and internal journeys of discovery and freedom.[38]

To return to our pioneers: even so conventional and limited a writer as Wood was aware of the possibilities for freedom in the North Queensland landscape: "Born in the murky air of London," he writes, "and having spent but a short time even in the house-dotted rural districts of England, there was something almost intoxicating in breathing an atmosphere so untainted and basking in a sunshine so generous."[39] The feeling which Wood expresses here—for once with some success—underlies many of the letters which Rachel Henning was writing home to England from Exmoor station, west of Bowen, at about the same time. Rachel is seldom explicit about her feelings, but her letters are full of such vital energy, such delighted interest in events and surroundings, that there can be little doubt that her

trip to the region was the occasion of a great psychological freeing. Her description of her first camp in the bush contrasts strikingly with Carrington's sparse, dull observations on travel:

> When it got dusk we all drew round the fire, and I wished I could send you a picture of the camp then. Annie and I had a very comfortable sort of sofa made of a railway rug and the packs off the horses to lean against. Biddulph was sitting on a log in his shirt sleeves reading the *Home News* by the firelight, Mr Hedgeland kneeling on the grass manufacturing a damper for next day's consumption, and Mr Stewart intent on boiling some more tea for the refreshment of the establishment before going to bed. There was a tremendous fire, and it looked so pretty against the background of dark bush. We could hear the horse-bells as they were feeding round us, and the frogs croaking in the creek, else you may fancy it was quiet enough.[40]

Rachel Henning is the most significant of the early writers who responded to the northern landscape with spontaneous affection. Twenty years later, Gilbert White, a young clergyman who had been driven out of England by ill-health and at the cost, one suspects, of some cherished ambitions,[41] felt nevertheless a comparable enthusiasm for his new environment:

> On September 25 of the year 1885 I awoke for the first time on Australian soil, having landed at Townsville late the night before. My ears were full of the sound of the rattle and clash of the palm-trees by which the house was surrounded. I opened my eyes and was astonished at the brilliancy of the light. Through the open door of my room I saw, framed by the fronds of a great palm, the dazzling blue of Trinity (*sic*) Bay, and the wooded slopes of Magnetic Island bathed in a flood of sunlight of whose intensity we in England have no conception at all. Below was a high fence covered with brick-red bougainvillia, and on one side the billowy curve of a huge spreading poinciana, one entire mass of scarlet blossom. I came to the conclusion that, whatever else North Queensland might lack, it was not going to lack vividness of colour or startlingness of contrast, and I have never seen reason to change my mind.[42]

White worked in Herberton from 1887 to 1891 and in Charters Towers from 1898 to 1900. The intervening years were spent in Townsville. Finally, in 1900, he was elected bishop of the newly-established Anglican diocese of Carpentaria. The bishop's house and cathedral-church were on Thursday Island, and White remained there until 1915, when he was appointed to the diocese

of Willochra in South Australia. Throughout his ministry in North Queensland he was a great traveller, and his knowledge of the far north and the Torres Strait islands must have been unparalleled for his time. That he was a keen observer of nature and of people is apparent from his poetry—he published half a dozen slim volumes[43]—and his travel books, *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia* and *Round About the Torres Straits.*[44] In some respects, White's thinking was merely a reflection of his rank and society. He accepted the superiority of European over aboriginal culture, and had little respect for native fauna: on his journey to found the Mitchell River Mission, for instance, he took a pot-shot at an unoffending alligator.[45] He had nevertheless thought for himself about the settlement of North Queensland, and presented a paper on the subject to the Victorian branch of the Royal Geographical Society, after he had lived in the region for twenty-two years.[46] The climate, he says, prevents white men from doing heavy physical labour, and destroys the health of white women. Therefore the north is not likely to be voluntarily settled, but must nevertheless be settled "artificially" for strategic reasons:

> In fact we must be like a man who has a fine house of his own, but feels impelled to buy an inferior one next door, and pay heavy rates and taxes on it, lest it should fall into the hands of undesirable neighbours. He has also probably in mind the undefined hope that the bargain may one day turn out better than he expected.[47]

I wonder if White believed in this analogy, or if he was merely, like many a northerner before and since, asserting a spurious solidarity with a southern point of view? He goes on to solve the labour problem by advocating the employment of indentured coloured workers. On the credit side, however, near the end of his pamphlet, he recognizes that the seizure of aboriginal land by Europeans in North Queensland was unjust. He must have been one of the earliest Europeans seriously to entertain this thought.

What makes White's simile of the householder of doubtful sincerity is the obvious interest in the region, even in its superficially unprepossessing parts, which is apparent in his more

creative writing. His description of the country some three hundred kilometres west of Townsville demonstrates this, and, as well, his rather self-conscious prose style:

> That night we had to say our office alone, by the banks of the tank where we were camped, the only water for long miles over the dreary rolling downs, that swelled mile after mile, like the endless roll of a giant yellow ocean, with here and there a distant tree like a sail half hidden behind the crest. A thorny acacia, with a small yellow blossom, gave shade from the setting sun, which shone warmly where the great embankment of the dam gave a shelter from the bitter wind, which swept howling over the bare downs, with a long-drawn whistling sigh. A solitary 'plain turkey' stalked about in the grass across the water, looking at us with his long neck raised, and his foolish gooselike head, till he rose and flapped his heavy way to a place of greater safety.[49]

White's verse, which generally is less successful than his prose, often tries to establish an emotional harmony with the environment: the hush of the tropical night after a busy day is equated with a diver emerging from the tumult of the ocean into "some cool and darkened cave";[50] or the stages in the cyclone of 1896 keep pace with the poet's thoughts, just as the storm of sin and trouble will give place to the resurrection;[51] or, finally, the resurgence of nature which attends the breaking of the drought on Gairloch station parallels a resurgence of vitality in the human inhabitants.[52] Metaphysical interests are rare among North Queensland writers, and White is one of the few to endow the landscape with a spiritual significance. He records an experience in which the waters of a deserted bay, from appearing merely barren, with their ceaseless wash to and fro, are suddenly transfigured:

> Each wave on the sand felt the thrill of the land
> And called to the wave behind,
> And the wave far away as it sprang into spray,
> Felt the send of the Ocean's mind.
>
> For the sea had a life, and a joy in its strife,
> As it worked for its Master's behest,
> And the wind ran along, swift, purposeful, strong,
> On a vast and tireless quest.

And the palm, as it swayed, cried aloud and prayed
For strength to blossom and bear,
And the blue sky shed, like gossamer thread,
A thousand cords through the air.[53]

I am not, of course, claiming that this is great poetry, but perhaps it is valid to read it as an Anglo-Saxon approximation to the aborigines' search for harmony with the landscape through myth, which I outlined at the beginning. No doubt White's attempt is less successful as art, but both he and the aborigines see something in the landscape, beyond the physical, which enhances relationship with it. Elsewhere the expression of White's spiritual responses mainly serves to strengthen the reader's perception of incongruity between the primeval landscape and early twentieth-century Christianity, as in the following passages:

> How wonderfully real the Psalms seem when read out in the Australian bush, 'the bullock that hath horns and hoofs,' 'the cattle upon a thousand hills,' 'the noise of the water floods,' . . . 'the rivers that run in dry places,' 'the gasping of a thirsty land,' . . . 'the rain that maketh the wilderness a standing water and watersprings of a dry ground.'[54]

> Sunday, May 14. At 7.15 a.m. celebrated the Holy Communion in the open air. With the just-risen sun shining in his morning beauty behind the little temporary altar one appreciated the force of the words, 'Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.'[55]

We have seen that Louis Becke exploited the landscape-as-oppressor for purposes of romance and that he made the difficulty of European adjustment to North Queensland the subject of comedy. Like Rachel Henning and Gilbert White, he nevertheless seems personally to have come to terms with the environment, and this is indicated in two autobiographical stories. " 'Five-Head' Creek," published in 1901, narrates how Becke fulfilled a six-month contract to fence an isolated, drought-stricken station, forty kilometres from Townsville. At first, he was appalled by his surroundings:

> Great gaping fissures—'sun cracks' we called them—traversed and zigzagged the hot, parching ground, on which not a blade of grass was to be seen. Here and there, amid the grey-barked ghostly gums, were oases of green—thickets of stunted sandalwood whose evergreen leaves defied alike the torrid summer

> heat and the black frosts of winter months; but underneath them lay the shrivelled carcasses and whitening bones of hundreds of cattle which had perished of starvation—too weak even to totter down to die—bogged in the banks of the creek.[56]

But adjustment quickly followed, and Becke began, paradoxically, to take pleasure both in observing the wild creatures of the bush, and in shooting them. The drought broke, and he spent a night smoking, and listening to the rain on the verandah roof, and enjoying the companionship of his horse. Finally he stripped off and went out and, he says, "let the rain wash off the dust and dirt of a day's journey under a fierce, baking sun."[57] This reads very like a symbolic reconciliation. The second story tells of Becke's stay with a party of other miners on a tributary of the Upper Burdekin,[58] and focuses on their success in outwitting a mob of noisy and predatory dingoes. Again, Becke's attitude at the end implies acceptance:

> During July we got a little gold fifteen miles from the head of the creek, but not enough to pay us for our time and labour. However, it was a fine, healthy occupation, and our little bark hut in the lonely ranges was a very comfortable home, especially during wet weather and on cold nights.[59]

Acceptance of the landscape is not always arduously attained in Becke's fiction. Spontaneous approval, for instance, seems to underlie the description which opens "The Pearl Divers of Roncador Reef":

> One bright but exceedingly boisterous afternoon in June three men were seated on the verandah of the "Queen's Hotel," in the newly-founded city of Townsville, situated on the shore of Cleveland Bay, in North Queensland. Eight miles across the bay, and directly facing the scattered line of buildings which stood mostly on the open, wind-swept beach, was Magnetic Island (which Cook discovered and surveyed in the *Endeavour*), its lofty green hills and snowy white beaches glinting in the bright afternoon sun. For some days past a south-easterly half-gale had been blowing, and the waters of Cleveland Bay were heaving tumultuously under its influence, and every now and then an extra strong and erratic puff would sweep along the sandy, dusty street, which ran parallel with the beach in front of the hotel, and send clouds of dust swirling high in the air, and then out to sea.[60]

Such passages may constitute a qualification to the negative

view of early European attitudes to landscape with which I began this talk. The dominant attitudes were certainly ones of conquest, struggle and alienation, and they have had important consequences for later inhabitants of the region, as writers like Brian Penton and Faith Bandler have shown. On the other hand, from the very beginning of settlement some writers responded favourably to the freedom and new experiences which North Queensland seemed to offer, while others struggled to harmonize their European expectations with actual conditions, and more or less succeeded. Like its negative counterpart, the tradition of positive response can be traced in the literature down to the present day.[6 1]

NOTES

[1] Robin Boyd. *The Australian Ugliness.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963 (first published 1960), pp. 91-99; Donald Horne. *The Lucky Country.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964, pp. 63-64; Judith Wright. *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. xi-xxii.

[2] *Diary of John Fenwick*, 22nd November, 1863, typescript held Oxley Library. Quoted by Anne Allingham. *"Taming the Wilderness": The First Decade of Pastoral Settlement in the Kennedy District.* Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1977, p. 53.

[3] London: Bell and Daldy.

[4] *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

[5] *A Visit to Queensland and Her Goldfields.* London: Chapman and Hall, 1870.

[6] *ibid.*, p. 79.

[7] *Missing Friends: Being the Adventures of a Danish Emigrant in Queensland (1871-1880).* London. T. Fisher Unwin, 1892, p. 50.

[8] *Reminiscences of India and North Queensland, 1857-1912.* London: Constable, 1913, p. 54.

[9] *My Wife and I in Queensland.* London: Longmans, Green, 1872, p. 27.

[10] *Bush and Town or Twelve Months in Northern Queensland*, MS. pp. 34-36.

[11] Cf. Ernest Favenc's poem, "An Unpublished Melody of Moore's," which appeared in *The Queenslander*, 11th November, 1871, p. 6.

[12] *Reminiscences of Queensland, 1862-1899*. Brisbane: A.H. Frater, 1921, p. 81.

[13] "A Drover's Diary III," *Queenslander*, 20th May, 1876, p. 13.

[14] *The Last of Six: Tales of the Austral Tropics. Bulletin* Series 3. Sydney: Bulletin Newspaper Company, 1893, p. 1.

[15] A. Grove Day. *Louis Becke*. Melbourne: Hill of Content, 1967, pp. 39-40.

[16] In the introduction to his first collection of short stories, *By Reef and Palm*, the following account is given of Becke's life in North Queensland:

> But at this time the Palmer River gold rush had just broken out in North Queensland, and a brother who was a bank manager on the celebrated Charters Towers goldfields, invited him to come up, as every one seemed to be making his fortune. He wandered between the rushes for two years, not making a fortune, but acquiring much useful experience, learning amongst other things the art of a blacksmith, and becoming a crack shot with a rifle.

His later fiction, some of which is discussed in the text above, shows that Becke was also employed in North Queensland in the banking and cattle industries. In *A Journalist's Memories* (Brisbane: Read Press, 1927), Spencer Browne gives a somewhat less romantic account of Becke's life in the region:

> Louis Becke, of the Australian Joint Stock Bank, and Tom Kelleway were my special pals. Louis had two banker brothers in the North—Cecil and Alfred, both very proper young men, and rather doubtful about the brother, who as a lad had been supercargo with the notorious Billy Hayes in the South Seas. Louis was a caged eagle. He had an impediment in his speech, but was a wag. Once he complained that his conversational brilliance was spoiled by "his d- stutter." He went on to say: "I start with a deucedly clever thing, but before I can get it out everyone has seen the point, and the epigram is like a sodden damper." In those days I heard much which afterwards went to make up *By Reef and Palm*, and other books." (p. 4)

Browne nevertheless prints a photo (p. 5), dated 1878, of the three pals, each with a rifle, so Becke's boast of his prowess in shooting may have been true. His residence between 1875 and 1880 was not Becke's last experience of the region.

[17] London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895, p. 185.

[18] London: James Clark, 1908, p. 279.

[19] *ibid.*, p. 22.

[20] *The Settlers of Karossa Creek.* London: Religious Tract Society, 1907, p. 211.

[21] *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, During the Years 1844-1845.* London: Boone, 1847.

[22] *op cit.*, pp. 75-76.

[23] *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.

[24] London: Edward Stanford, p. 7.

[25] London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1892.

[26] London: John Murray, 1902.

[27] p. 25 in Rigby's edition.

[28] *ibid.*, p. 72.

[29] *ed. cit.*, p. xi.

[30] "The Twelfth of August," in *Voices from the Bush*, Rockhampton: *Northern Argus* Office, 1869, pp. 6-8.

[31] "Christmas Day," *ibid.*, p. 13.

[32] "Night in the Bush," *ibid.*, p. 10.

[33] *op. cit.*, pp. 112-13.

[34] *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

[35] *'Neath Austral Skies.* London: John Milne, 1909, pp. 105-22.

[36] *ibid.*, p. 100.

[37] *ibid.*, p. 109.

[38] The novels are *Voss, The Eye of the Storm* and *Fringe of Leaves.*

[39] *op. cit.*, p. 61.

[40] David Adams, ed. *The Letters of Rachel Henning* (Foreword and Pen-drawings by Norman Lindsay). Sydney: Angus and Robertson (Sirius Books), 1963, pp. 93-94.

[41] Cf. J.W.C. Wand, Bishop of London. *White of Carpentaria.* London: Sheffington and Son, n.d., pp. 17-18.

[42] *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia.* London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1918, p. 1.

[43] *Melchiar and Other Verses.* Gateshead: Howe Brothers, 1893; *Night and Other Verses.* Townsville: D.W. Hastings, 1897; *The World's Tragedy and Other Poems.* Thursday Island: A. Corran, 1910; *Australia. A Poem.* Thursday Island: A. Corran, (1913); *The Poems of Gilbert White.* London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919; *The Later Poems of Gilbert White.* Morpeth: St John's College Press, 1930; *Selected Poems of Gilbert White.* London and Aylesbury: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1932.

[44] First edition, London: S.P.C.K., 1917; second edition, London: S.P.C.K., 1925.

[45] "Mitchell River Aboriginal Mission." Thursday Island: A. Corran, 1905, p. 13.

[46] "Some Problems of Northern Australia," presented 13th September, 1907.

[47] *ibid.*, p. 11-12.

[48] His biographer insists (pp. 107-8) that the branch of literature in which White excelled was the homiletical – "His sermons deserve to rank as classics."

[49] *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia. ed. cit.*, p. 28.

[50] "Night," in *Night and Other Verses*, p. 4.

[51] "The Storm," *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

[52] "Gairloch," in *The World's Tragedy and Other Poems*, pp. 11-14.

[53] "The Vision," *ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

[54] *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia*, p. 29.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[56] *Yorke the Adventurer and Other Stories.* Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1925, p. 182.

[57] *ibid.*, p. 186.

[58] "A Prospecting Party in North Queensland," in *The Pearl Divers of Roncador Reef*, pp. 269-75.

[59] *ibid.*, pp. 274-75.

[60] p. 9.

[61] I wish to express my thanks to the librarians of James Cook University, who provided me with favourable working conditions, and patiently answered questions about the material dealt with in this paper.


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