

## LINDEL RYAN

### RESEARCHING NORTH QUEENSLAND LITERATURE

In an age when the literary content of newspapers has become largely confined to book reviews, interest in the very different function of newspapers in the nineteenth century and the first fifty years of this century is more than merely academic. Other forms of media, such as radio and television, have replaced the newspaper in the field of entertainment, and the widespread demise of the weekly newspaper is evidence of this. The *North Queensland Register* is one exception that comes to mind. In researching the northern newspapers for the purpose of compiling a bibliography of North Queensland literature, one becomes aware of the interaction and co-operation of the earlier writers and their audience, up until about the 1950s, which constitutes a unique northern culture worth experiencing and preserving. Such a culture still exists, but the newspapers no longer provide expression for it. I would like to initially support my argument for the value of North Queensland literature by quoting John K. Ewers from his article, "A Question of Standards." He claims that "It matters not one whit whether a novel, play or poem by an Australian lacks a world-wide audience. Its claim to value as a contribution to Australian literature lies in its literary merit plus its significance to Australian people."<sup>1</sup> Mr Ewers reiterates his idea of the two basic criteria of value, insisting that "any national literature . . . survives by similar dual standards. Literary merit is a first essential and significance to the people where such literature emerges follows not far behind it."<sup>2</sup>

In arguing such a case for North Queensland literature I am restricted to discussing material published in newspapers, as this is the field I have had experience in. I think my argument still has validity when applied to North Queensland writers because the majority of them began their literary careers by publishing their work in the newspapers. From my survey of the northern

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

newspapers, I think that it is inarguable that the material produced by North Queensland writers *was* significant to the people of their immediate geographical environment. For example, most of the northern newspapers published nature articles in series which ran for many years, a fact which suggests their popularity, and which almost always included correspondence from readers who offered their own observations, contradictions, and queries. Apart from the argument that people like to see themselves in print, this interaction of writer and readers confirms the importance of this particular aspect of North Queensland literature to North Queenslanders. This weekly correspondence was positive evidence that the work of these writers was being read and appreciated enough to inspire continued response to it. Examples of this are James Devaney's "Nature Notes" in the *North Queensland Register* and the *Queenslander*, and his "Ways of the Wild" in the *Brisbane Courier*, in the 1930s and '40s. Frank Reid and Arthur Groom both wrote nature articles for the *Queenslander* in the 1920s, and John Orrell, of Trinity Beach, wrote "Nature Notes" for the *Cairns Post* in the 1950s.

The immense popularity of the historical articles which northern writers published in the newspapers is another example of the importance of the material to those whose physical environment and people provided its subject. For example, Hugh A. Borland wrote many long-running historical series throughout the 1940s and 1950s, such as "Stars of Gold" (a history of the northern goldfields), "From Wilderness to Wealth" (a history of the Cairns district), and a special review of the district from 1848 to 1948, to celebrate the centenary of Kennedy's discoveries. These were all published in the *Cairns Post*. Nancy Francis wrote a series of articles which traced the history of the Anglican Church in North Queensland, and another which gave readers the history of the Bloomfield district. Mr Pattison, who wrote under the pen-name of "The Battler," wrote a series called "Early Rockhampton Pioneers" (such as the Jardines, James Morrill, and William Landsborough), for the *Artesian*, in the 1920s. He also wrote a series entitled "Men You Know," whose title gives a clue to the popularity of these articles about explor-

ers and pioneers, the element of vicarious participation of the reader through some extent of familiarity with the subject.

At this point I would like to emphasize that the isolation of the north (especially in the nineteenth century and the early part of this century) increased the importance of the newspaper as a means of communicating with others. Most of the northern cities had both weekly and daily newspapers; in Rockhampton the *Artesian*, *Capricornian*, and *Central Queensland Herald* were published weekly, while the *Daily Record*, *Evening News*, and *Morning Bulletin* were published daily; the *Northern Herald* was published weekly and the *Cairns Post* daily, in Cairns, and in Townsville, the *North Queensland Register* and the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* were published weekly and daily, respectively. These weekly and daily newspapers could co-exist quite readily, and even co-operate and share some of their material (the *Cairns Post* and the *Northern Herald* did so, printing many of the same articles, and even publishing the same correspondence) because their functions were essentially different. The daily newspaper was a phenomenon which could be more closely identified with the city environment, where centralization of population and of available services (such as printing equipment and means of distribution) enabled the provision of up-to-date reports of current affairs. However, in North Queensland the sparsity of population and lack of such services made the daily newspaper unsuitable, except in the larger cities (Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, and Rockhampton), the areas of more concentrated population. The weekly newspaper was especially suited to the needs of the north; as newspapers could not be delivered daily to remote areas (in the nineteenth and early twentieth century) and therefore could not provide news quickly, the weekly had to be more than a vehicle for current affairs, although this feature was not entirely absent. The weekly had to publish material which did not date, and the writers of features such as naturalist and historical articles, of bush sketches, of verse, short stories and fictional serials, provided such material. The daily newspapers sometimes adapted to the isolation of part of their audience by making the Saturday issue similar in content to the weekly papers, by providing feature articles and other literary material

by local writers.

The flourishing freelance columns and the enthusiastic participation of their readers provide further evidence of the relevance of regional literature to the people of the district. The best examples of this were "Bill Bowyang's" column, "On the Track," which occupied one and a half pages of the *North Queensland Register* every week throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, and the freelance columns of the *Central Queensland Herald*, a Rockhampton based paper, in the 1930s. "Bill Bowyang" was the pen-name of Alexander Vennard of Bowen (he also used the pen-name "Frank Reid"), who was a prolific writer for many newspapers. He wrote articles and short stories for the *Queenslander*, under both pen-names, and for the Saturday issues of the *Daily Mail* and *Brisbane Courier*, as well as his column in the *North Queensland Register*. The column consisted of one or two poems each week, written by local contributors, and several sketches (mainly on bush subjects), and concluded with "Bowyang's" replies to correspondents and contributors. "Bowyang" himself wrote several sketches each week for the column. Contributors to this column included North Queensland writers such as the poets D.B. O'Connor, Dan Sheahan, and Louis Sigsworth; Ion Idriess wrote under the pen-name of "Gouger" in the early stages of his writing career, the early 1920s.

The Rockhampton-based paper, the *Central Queensland Herald*, offers an even richer insight into the literary activity of northern people, as a quite substantial proportion of the paper was given to freelance columns, which included "Nature Students," "Poet's Corner," and "Bush Philosophy," the latter of which became absorbed into a more literary freelance column, "The Book Club." "Bush Philosophy" had consisted of bush sketches and letters, and "The Book Club" became the most literary of the columns, as contributors tried their hand at short stories, sketches, literary criticism, book reviewing (for example, a debate between contributors raged for several months over K.S. Prichard's *Coonardoo*), and the organization of book lending and of literary competitions. Participation in this column became so enthusiastic that, at the continued suggestion of its

contributors, the editor of the *Herald* was eventually, in 1932, persuaded to hand over the column, more completely to the contributors and it became "Our Freelance Page." Its main contributors were L.A. Sigsworth, Roald Gresham, and Mary House, who wrote sketches and literary criticism for this page, as well as dominating "Poet's Corner." Once again the amount of correspondence in the column proved that these writers were being read and considered. For example, when Sigsworth published his poem, "When Your Heels Are Wearing Low," in 1933, public response was considerable. Readers wrote in to "Our Freelance Page" commenting on the poem for weeks afterward, identifying with or rejecting this poem of experience of what the Depression really was. Sigsworth also wrote in answer to praise and criticism of his work. An earlier poem, a long and ambitious work, "The Bagman's Carbine," also published in 1933, inspired a similar reaction, as many readers wrote in to express their appreciation of his work. Of course, the response was not always entirely favourable, and Sigsworth was once provoked into expressing his bitterness at criticism in his poem, "Tune in With the Shallow Jesting." The poem, "A Bagman's Carbine," was later published in "Bill Bowyang's" column, "On the Track." "Bill Bowyang" and Louis Sigsworth corresponded throughout the 1930s and their work appeared in each other's columns; they also supported each other by appreciative recommendations of the other's work.

Sigsworth wrote several contributions to "Our Freelance Page" on the theme of the poet's livelihood. On March 2, 1933, he wrote, discussing literary competitions and sources of revenue for poets, and in the July 6 issue of the same year, he discussed the economic insecurity of writers and the effect this had on literature, with the lowering of standards which resulted from commercialization. In 1934, Sigsworth wrote, praising Roald Gresham's work, and pointing out the disadvantages of being a poet. Gresham took up his theme in the following week's issue, of the disadvantages of being a poet in modern society and blamed education for directing public attention to lesser literature. He used Henry Lawson as an example, claiming that his better work has been neglected, while that of a lower standard

has been praised, and taught in schools. Sigsworth continued to write on the subject of the amateur freelance columns and their contributors; in 1937 he discussed the newspapers' encouragement of poetry and this is a theme which "Bill Bowyang" discussed at some length in his column in 1935. He wrote:

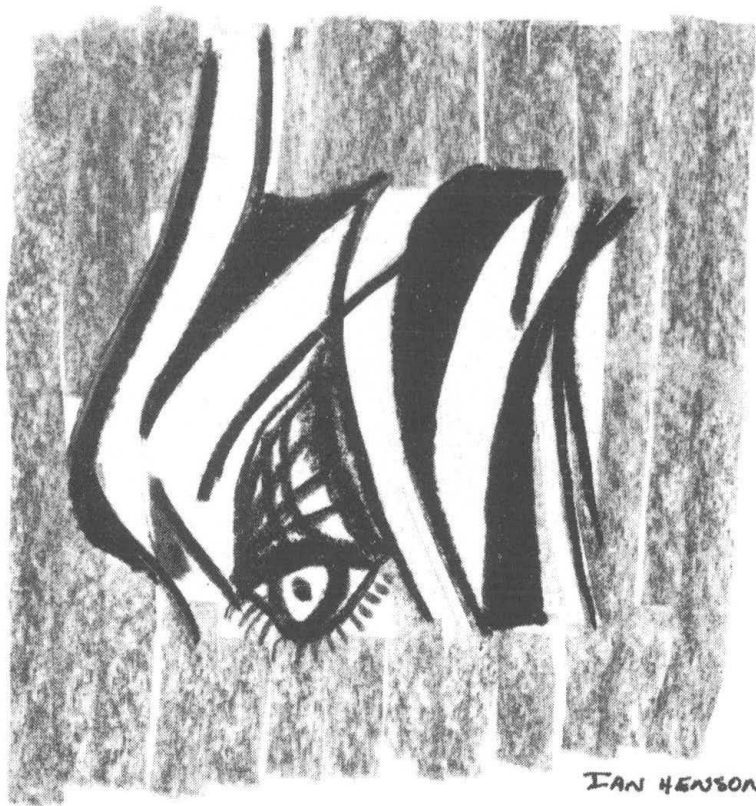
Some time back several freelance writers had a brief discussion in the columns of the *Sydney Bulletin* concerning papers that do not pay for contributions. Many well-known writers admitted that if certain papers that did not pay for contributions had not accepted their first attempts at presswork they would not have continued writing. . . . On several occasions the "Track" has stated that no payment is made for anything contributed, and although I am at all times pleased to receive letters concerning anything that has appeared, contributions are very often published to encourage budding writers. I think most of my contributors write on this understanding. When I first got it into my head that I was going to be a writer I contributed columns *gratis* to a certain little country newspaper, and seeing my feeble literary work in print gave me encouragement to go on with the "game." Several months back the now defunct *Aussie* admitted that the "Track" was a wonderful medium for helping youthful writers.

Both Sigsworth and "Bowyang" expressed something that all North Queensland writers were aware of, the vital role the newspapers played in the establishment of their literary careers. The most important step was to actually get work published and to establish an audience and a reputation, to become known and read. The newspapers provided an excellent medium of communication between writers and their audience, and I would like to conclude by claiming that scepticism about the value of research into North Queensland literature is unfounded, in the face of the literary activity and interaction which we have discovered in these regional newspapers.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John K. Ewers, "A Question of Standards," *Meanjin* 16, 4 (1957), p. 434.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*



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