

THE CONFESSIONS OF A BEACHCOMBER

The title page of E.J. Banfield's *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* bears this quotation from Thoreau:

If a man does not keep pace with his companions perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears.

We have it on the authority of the naturalist Charles Barrett¹ that this was Banfield's favourite quotation from the American writer. Indeed, the range and number of his quotations from Thoreau's books suggest that the lord of Dunk Isle had a deeply familiar admiration for the hermit of Concord. Two chapters of Banfield's second book, *My Tropic Isle* (1911),² for instance, carry epigraphs from Thoreau. Chapter V, "Silences," is headed, thus, by the quotation, "Who has not hearkened to her [Nature's] infinite din?" Chapter VI, devoted to "Fruits and Scents," establishes its theme through Thoreau's phrase, "The pot herb of the gods." There are more than specific echoes of Thoreau in Banfield's prose. The whole of the *Confessions* is structured on much the same lines as *Walden*: in each book, opening chapters which give some account of the background to and motives for the writer's retreat from society, are followed by descriptions, varying from the lyrical to the virtually statistical, of the surroundings where he makes his new life.

Such explicit borrowings and analogies of structure seem to invite a comparison between Banfield and Thoreau, between Dunk Island and Walden Pond (between Townsville and Concord even?) as a profitable way into something like an exact understanding of the Australian writer's achievement. If I resist that invitation at least in part it is both because the comparison is subject to some immediate limitations and because other sources present themselves in the long run more illuminating than Thoreau. A cursory glance at the affinities between the

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two men, however, is worthwhile, if only to establish the length of time spent withdrawn from society, their manner of comporting themselves, and their degree of isolation from humankind. Out of an inspection of their obvious affinities will grow an appreciation of their deeper dissimilarities.

There is, for instance, a distinctly exemplary purpose behind Thoreau's removal to Walden Pond which is absent from both Banfield's decision to go to Dunk Island and his motives in writing about it. Thoreau thus appended this quotation (from the second chapter of his book) to the title page of the early editions of *Walden*:

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbours up.

The cheery didacticism of Thoreau's last phrase cannot be mistaken. And the point of his lesson to his readers is, of course, summed up in the most famous ethical imperative of nineteenth century American letters: "Simplify, simplify!" Banfield lags far behind such vigorously educative intentions when he discusses the aim of his book in the Foreword to *The Confessions*: "My chief desire is to set down in plain language the sobrieties of everyday occurrences — the unpretentious homilies of an unpretentious man."³ I am not absolutely persuaded that Banfield's stated aims square with what follows in the ensuing pages, but there is in my mind little doubt that his writing is far less informed than Thoreau's by any deliberately exemplary goal. His original purpose in going to Dunk Island was, if we are to believe his repeated assertions, a matter of quite literal self-preservation. So debilitated was Banfield by the rigours of Townsville journalism that his weight was reduced to a pitiful 8 stone 4 lbs (*My Tropic Isle*, p. 54) and he believed himself within twelve months of the end of his life.

Within months of his official arrival on 28 September 1897, however, he had gained weight, recovered his health, and had every prospect of enjoying a long and vigorous life. He chose to enjoy it, nevertheless, not back in the fleshpots of Townsville but on the island which had preserved him — dying there, indeed, in 1923, some twenty-five years after taking up residence,

in his 71st year. Thoreau, by way of contrast, occupied his house at Walden Pond on Independence Day, 1845, and, having proved his point, left it some two years later. During those two years he seems to have lived a genuinely frugal, independent, but by no means isolated life. Dunk Island is, to be sure, a good deal further from Townsville than the mile and a half which separated Walden Pond from Concord. Nevertheless, throughout his quarter century stay in his offshore retreat Banfield does not appear to have lacked for company. Indeed, he took the precaution of taking with him his wife, several aboriginal friends and (a fact which is revealed in my edition of *The Confessions* only by a photograph) a faithful Irish servant called Essie. With the frequent passage of coastal steamers, and fairly regular visits to Townsville, he can scarcely be thought of as the compleat anchorite. Charles Barrett was right when he wrote of Banfield, his wife, and Essie, that "Their way of living was a compromise perhaps; not too simple and not too far from the comfort that middle class folk demand" (p. 171).

Barrett was also right, however, to insist (along with A.H. Chisholm) that the life Banfield led on Dunk Island was far from that of a lotus eater. Here is Barrett's testimony on the matter:

I must tell you that Banfield's energy kept me on the move. Readers of his books may imagine him as a leisurely man, happiest when lazing on the beach or sauntering among palms and his fruit trees. As I knew the Beachcomber, he was active and alert, even sometimes energetic in talking. (p. 170)

Chisholm also points to a hard working, physically active existence when he reminds us that "in the nature of his semi-isolated case the Beachcomber was faced with a wide range of workaday tasks—did he not confess to being a slave to his own wheelbarrow?" (*Confessions*, p. xiii).

In other words, it seems to me that, starting with the very choice of *nom de plume*, Banfield was constructing in *The Confessions* a literary personality a good deal further removed from the historical individual called Edward John Banfield than the speaker of *Walden* was from Henry David Thoreau. My chief interest in the rest of this paper will be to delineate the created

personality of *The Confessions*, to discover the attitudes and assumptions that went into its making. I can most usefully begin to do so by altering my point of reference from the American writer to the literary figure inevitably suggested by Banfield's title—Jean Jacques Rousseau. I do not know whether Banfield ever read the *Confessions* of Rousseau. Nevertheless, the identity of titles implies a common cultural tradition—of which Rousseau was an initiator and Banfield a late antipodean inheritor. I refer of course to Romanticism, a phenomenon at the height of its power in Europe in 1788, when British settlement began in Australia, and one of the chief repositories of cultural assumption and commitment transplanted from the northern to the southern continent. Transmitted vigorously, if with some variation from its northern source, through the nineteenth century, Australian Romanticism finds at least three characteristic modes of expression in *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* all directly descended from the doctrines developed by Rousseau or his European and English contemporaries. They relate to the self, society, and nature.

Rousseau's *Confessions* open with a celebrated hymn of praise to the actuality, force, and value, of the individual self:

Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple, et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur. Je veux montrer a mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi.

Moi seul. Je sens mon coeur et je connais les hommes. Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent. Si je ne vaudrais pas mieux, au moins je suis autre.

Banfield patently knew neither the unaffected egotism which animates these lines nor the raging talent which supported it. Within his own modest compass, indeed, he apparently felt so little confidence in the reality of his own self that he used his books to create one which the world might find of some interest. If that creation started with the choice of *nom de plume*, it continued through a whole range of imaginative extemporisations, appeals to some of the most respected cultural models of his generation. Most notable among them, of course, was that of his elected isolation—the adoption (at least for literary purposes) of

the role of anchorite. Now while English and European Romantic literature can offer some few examples of the hermit as hero, it seems by and large to have been a role which very few Romantic writers in the northern world were inclined literally to embrace. The literal enactment of the myth of the isolated self is a mode of Romantic behaviour which seems to have acquired a special prestige among creative artists in Australia. It is certainly true that from the end of the nineteenth century on, the decision to withdraw more or less from human society for greater or lesser periods of time has been if not endemic among Australian artists, at least widespread. Only two years after, thus, Banfield beat his retreat to Dunk Island, John le Gay Brereton walked out of Sydney on that excursion which found literary expression in *Landlopers* (1899). Further south, E.J. Brady made Malla-coota Inlet his headquarters and his home in the early years of this century; was visited there in 1910 by Henry Lawson on one of the several occasions during Lawson's declining years when his friends persuaded him, however temporarily, that a bucolic retreat might be a cure for his ills of body and mind.

Queensland in particular seems to have been conducive to behaviour of this kind. One thinks of McLaren's solitary years from 1911 to 1919 on his coconut plantation on Cape York Peninsula; of Vance and Netty Palmer at Caloundra between 1925 and 1929; more recently of Ian Fairweather on Fraser Island, Xavier Herbert's attachment to the Daintree River and later Redlynch; Thea Astley's setting up residence on the banks of the Barron River, remote even from the village of Kuranda. In his representation of the fate of the Australian artist through the career of Hurtle Duffield, White displayed a profound instinct for the truth when he sent his protagonist to a solitary shack on the edge of a gorge north of Sydney to undergo one of his great moments of self discovery.

If, in this regard, Banfield may appear to be the fountainhead of a local tradition, there can be little doubt that his own decision to stay on Dunk Island, once it had worked its initial therapy, was intimately connected with attitudes he had inherited (along with so many other Australians of his generation) from the English Romantic poets. These included the belief that

Nature was a more amenable environment for the discovery and definition of the self than human society, because less corrupt. *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* is full of assertions about, on the one hand, the corrupt and corrupting influence of civilisation; on the other, the restorative power of the natural world. In the section of his book which describes the "official landing" Banfield attributes his decision to live on Dunk Island to a desire to escape "the mauling paws of humanity" (p. 4). He maintains the image of a bestially destructive humanity a few pages later when he speaks of "the rude hoofs of civilisation" (p. 9). Elsewhere he makes his dislike of the "formal courtesies of the crowd" (p. ii) and "the cares of . . . town life" (p. 41) equally plain. In his own way, Banfield felt with Rousseau that all the evidence of civilisation pointed to the fact that social man, although born free, is everywhere in chains.

The complementary attitudes, the positive endorsements of nature, are derived just as clearly from the Romantic tradition, particularly that of the English Romantic poets. Banfield's language when describing natural phenomena characteristically draws upon the fund of images and metaphors bequeathed to the nineteenth century by Wordsworth. Banfield, for instance, tends to view Nature as feminine, nourishing, and protective, its beauty clothed in the physical features of the created world. On arriving at Dunk Island, as he writes at the opening of Chapter II of *The Confessions*, he was "eager to know how nature, not under the microscope, behaved; what were her maiden fancies, what the art with which she allures" (p. 34). The personification of Nature as a figure of female beauty is implicitly carried through in many descriptive paragraphs, of which these are representative examples:

lovely in its mantle of foliage, what better sphere for the exercise of benign autocracy could be desired? (p. 5)

Most of the range is heavily draped with jungle (p. 10)

the bingum arrays itself in the robes of royal red. (p. 11)

Coral gardens—gardens of the sea nymphs, wherein fancy feigns cool, shy, chaste faces and pliant forms half-revealed among gently swaying robes, (p. 40)

Faithful to the Romantic tradition, Banfield, furthermore, regularly adopted an attitude of worship towards this soft, femi-

nine spirit of Nature. From the very first morning spent on the island, his response to his surroundings takes on the tones of adoration:

Feebleness and dismay vanished with the first plunge into the still sleepy sea, and alertness and vigour returned, as the incense of the first morning's sacrifice went straight as a column to the sky. (p. 7)

The quasi-religious needs of his being were especially fulfilled on Dunk Island by the abundance of bird life, which he came to know in intimate and loving detail without ever losing the sense of birds' traditional significance as symbols of spiritual aspiration.

Banfield's emotional response to the natural world was by no means limited to rather genteel expressions of Romantic awe and rapture. At least as much of his emotional involvement in Nature is Keatsian as Wordsworthian. One does not need to track down the Keatsian quotations embedded in the text to realise that especially in his love of scents and fragrance Banfield is close in spirit to the poet of St Agnes Eve and the great Odes. Charles Barrett has reported, and Banfield's own books confirm, the intensity of his delight in the sweet odours of his island; while his unalloyed pleasure in handling, plucking, above all eating tropical fruit like papaw and mango bears comparison with Keats' ecstatic ingestion of an apricot: "it went down with all the delicious embonpoint of a beatified strawberry."

The Keatsian pleasure in pleasure could, on occasion, merge into the Keatsian pleasure in languorous idleness—a mode of behaviour sanctioned of course by a later nineteenth century poem, Tennyson's *Lotus-eaters*, to which the inevitable allusion finds its way into *The Confessions*. More interestingly, perhaps, Banfield's intense sensory awareness of nature led him to contest that view of the Australian world which had been promoted by Marcus Clarke's Introduction to Gordon's poetry. Throwing back Clarke's words in his face, Banfield defends at least the tropic north from the celebrated slurs on our flora and fauna:

the scent of the wattles, the eucalypts, the boronias, the hoyas, the gardenias, the lotus, etc., are among the sweetest and cleanest, most powerful and most varied in the world; . . . many of the birds of Australia have songs full of melody. . . (p. 47)

To adhere to Romantic notions about society and nature involved for nineteenth century Australians other difficulties than reconciling European natural mythology with antipodean fact. The doctrine, for instance, of the noble savage, the inherent superiority of the untutored tribesman over the man of sophisticated European experience, made for real and immediate difficulties for a colonial people who had semi-systematically destroyed the indigenous race. Banfield, on the evidence of his *Confessions*, participated in the general cultural dilemma—more intensely perhaps than many, since he, his wife, and Essie enjoyed the company of several aboriginal men and women at least during the early years of their life on Dunk Island. He seems to have been personally acquainted, furthermore, with a number of other North Queensland aboriginals and to have made a genuine effort to familiarise himself with the culture, artefacts and history of the local tribes. For all his goodwill, however, Banfield was no more able than most white Australians of his time to free himself of the sense of the inherent superiority of those of British descent to whatever darkskinned races the course of Empire made it their destiny to hold dominion over. The mixed quality of his sympathies and understanding is made clear in the very opening section of his book:

Why invoke these long-silent spectres, white as well as black, when all active boorishness is of the past? Civilisation has almost fulfilled its inexorable law; only four out of a considerable population remain, and they remember naught of the bad old times when the humanising processes, or rather the results of them, began to be felt. They must have been a fine race—fine for Australian aboriginals at least—judging by the stamp of two of those who survive; and perhaps that is why they resented interference, and consequently soon began to give way before the irresistible pressure of the whites. Possibly, had they been more docile and placid, the remnants would have been more numerous though less flattering representatives of the race.
(p. 4)

The whole of the second part of *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* is given over to what in a moment of unconscious self-revelation Banfield describes as “Stone Age Folks.” For whatever reason, the writing of Part Two is perceptibly duller than in

the first 150 pages. Its prevailing attitudes are summed up in two separate comments. In the chapter titled "Black Art" Banfield praises the drawings of the aboriginals in these terms:

here is the sheer beginning, the spontaneous germ of art. . . .
For these pictures are . . . the earliest and only efforts of an illiterate race, a race in intellectual infancy, towards the ideal—a forlorn but none the less sincere attempt to reach 'the light that quickens dreams to deeds.' (p. 175)

The unexamined and, it must be said, somewhat unattractive patronage displayed here is even more obvious in a remark almost at the end of the book:

I am convinced that this race, despised and rejected of men, can be as devoted to one another as truly as we who are so superior to them in many attributes. (p. 208)

Perhaps the only saving feature of the remark is the passing allusion to Isaiah 53:3 which, perhaps unintentionally, associates the aboriginals with Christ, and in so doing opens up a whole new perspective not only on Banfield's anthropological observations but on the quality of the entire book.

There are not many direct quotations from the Bible in *The Confessions of a Beachcomber*, but a great many from that poet from whom generations of Englishmen—and Australians—learned the Protestant version of Christian mythology. I refer of course to John Milton. That Banfield shared the general passion of nineteenth century Australian poets for Milton is attested by the wealth of direct and indirect citation not only in *The Confessions* but also in *My Tropic Isle*, which is headed by two Miltonic epigraphs:

What dost thou in this World, The Wilderness
For thee is fittest place.

 Taught to live

The easiest way, nor with perplexing thoughts
To interrupt sweet life.

The Confessions of a Beachcomber contains quotations from a range of Milton's poems. Two from *Lycidas* are important more for their tone of elegant allusion than for their thematic or illustrative force. In the chapter entitled "The Serpent Beguiled" Banfield provides a serio-comic account of the defeat of a marauding snake by the placing of a china egg in a nest. The

anecdote reaches its climax in a direct quotation from 1.75 of Milton's great elegy:

The snake submits to the temptation of the egg coyly resting on a bunch of grass, and having made it its own, cannot let go. Then comes the abhorred fate in the shape of a gleeful man with a long-handled shovel. (p. 123)

Some few pages later, writing now "In Praise of the Papaw," Banfield again has recourse to *Lycidas* to furnish him with the slightly mocking tone he needs for his paean to his favourite fruit:

Ripened in ample light, with abundance of water, and in high temperature, the fruit must be torn from the tree 'with forced fingers rude,' lest the abbreviated stalk pulls out a jagged plug, leaving a hole for the untimely air to enter. (p. 129)

The richest source, however, for Banfield's Miltonic quotations is *Paradise Lost*, a poem which had obvious value for a writer celebrating the pristine delights of a garden he had created in his tiny tropic paradise. There is one particular passage in which Banfield represents Dunk Island as yet another variant on that obsessive nineteenth century Australian dream of a rediscovered Paradise, wherein he and Mrs Banfield presumably were cast in the role of our First Parents:

The scheme for the establishment of our island home comprehended several minor industries. This isle of dreams, of quietude and happiness; this fretless scene; this plot of the Garden of Eden was not to be left entirely in its primitive state. (p. 26)

Just as this barely suppressed equation of Dunk Island with a freshly created Paradise pervades the *Confessions*, so it is equally plain that Banfield saw himself and his wife filling the roles of Adam and Eve in a manner much more Miltonic than Rousseauistic. He aspired, that is to say, to be not a noble savage, but, like the inhabitants of Milton's garden, both cultivator and cultivated. If his days were given over to the practical tasks of maintaining life and health, his favourite evening occupation was reading, or conversation with Mrs Banfield or any transient guest.

Even the freedom he enjoyed in dress as compared to his London contemporaries, Banfield could refer to in serio-comic manner as the distinction between innocent and fallen Adam:

the conventionally dressed man is every moment "reminded that he has imposed on himself an extra to the universal penalties of Adam" (p. 113). Even in the haven of his offshore island, however, Banfield was forced to realise that he shared some of the conditions of a mortal world. All about him, in spite of the idyllic conditions of his life, there were evidences of Adam's fall. It is, in the first place, a trick of tone for Banfield to decline to call a snake a snake but to refer to it consistently as a serpent. But the trick of diction, derived, I am sure, from *Paradise Lost*, is more deeply symptomatic of Banfield's nagging recognition that even on Dunk Island he could not escape the contingencies of a post-lapsarian creation. His awareness of his participation in the common fate of man and nature often focusses in his observation of specific phenomena. The final observation of his account of the *beche-de-mer* is characteristic. The creature's defence mechanisms include protective camouflage, giving it the appearance of a snake.

'Under what charter of rights,' asks Banfield, 'does it slink among the coral and weed affrighting God-fearing man under the cloak of his first subtle enemy?' (p. 112)

On at least one occasion, early in his book, Banfield extends his sense of a fallen creation to a perception of the beachcomber's role in it—compares himself, in fact, with some comic shock, with Satan wallowing in the fiery lake: "even the hardened beachcomber walks on [the coral] with uneasy steps, reminding him of another outcast who used that oft-quoted staff as a support over the 'burning marl' " (p. 20).

I do not offer these Miltonic echoes and allusions in the *Confessions* as evidence of any thorough-going system of ideas or structural plan; rather as suggestive of a cast of mind which found ease and comfort, which recognised itself, in the familiar concepts and characters of the great poetic myth which shaped for generations the attitudes and assumptions of that class of Englishmen from which Banfield sprang. Only one genuinely important element in his book would, I suggest, have found its way into the book as a result of the conjunction of a mind fed on Milton with senses feasting on the rich diet of Dunk Island and its surrounding waters. From time to time, even as Banfield

relished the implicit analogy between his own situation and that of Adam in Paradise, the marvellous actualities of creation that he observed all around him forced him into questioning the received myths and assumptions about them. Looking on the garden of the world as it was laid out before him, that is to say, he repeatedly observed natural phenomena which undermined his whole framework of beliefs. The experience of living in Eden made Banfield doubt the wisdom and purposes of its creator. Behind the beauties of creation he had chilling glimpses of nature red in tooth and claw; and through those glimpses came to know doubt.

His conventional belief in a beneficent God was, most frequently, brought to the test when, as in the case of the *beche-de-mer*, he inspected the beauties of the marine life which were all about him. The coral gardens that he knew and loved could offer frightening, unexpected suggestions of a creation in which all was not perhaps for the best, in which evil existed even if it was to Banfield inexplicable. The stone fish, repulsive and lethal in a world of loveliness, could not fail to arouse his anxious speculations:

has it not a gift which would have brought it to the stake a few score years ago, as a sinful, presumptuous and sacrificial witch—that of living for an hour or two out of its natural element? . . . if the poisonous qualities are in line with the hideousness, one can but ponder why and wherefore such a creature has existence in 'this best of all possible worlds.' (p. 91)

These observations of what in *My Tropic Isle* he calls the "primordial life" of the "tepid slime" produce comments which are almost Darwinian in their contemplation of a Nature whose primary principle is the law of survival. The sustained commentary on "The Garden of Coral" in Chapter IV of the *Confessions* is typical:

A coral reef is gorged with a population of varied elements viciously disposed towards each other. It is one of nature's most cruel battlefields, for it is the brood of the sea that 'plots mutual slaughter, hungering to love.' Molluscs are murdered and the most shameless of cannibals. . . .

All is strife—war to the death. If eternal vigilance is the price of liberty among men, what quality shall avert destruction

where insatiable cannibalism is the rule. . . .

With all its fantastic beauty a coral reef is cruel. (pp. 80-81)

To the best of my knowledge, Banfield nowhere quotes Darwin directly in the *Confessions*, and it would be a mistake to represent him as accepting the idea of evolution or capable, even sporadically, of Darwin's generalising powers. Banfield was, nevertheless, capable of recording natural data with real accuracy and thoroughness. Indeed, it is in this quality of mind that he is more immediately related to the development of late nineteenth century natural science than through any convincing or consistent espousal of Darwinian theory. Banfield was the inheritor of the tradition of natural observation which produced men such as John Burroughs in America and Henri Fabre in France.

Fabre, indeed, is the very type of the nineteenth century naturalist-field observer after whom Banfield seems to have quite deliberately patterned himself. Born in 1823, Fabre devoted his long life (he died in 1895) primarily to the study of the life history, habits and interests of insects. He developed a range of interests—wasps, coleoptera, orthoptera—and a method—direct field observation—that Banfield enthusiastically adopted. Apart from his central passion for birds, some of the Beachcomber's most impressive observations are of the insect world—butterflies, wasps, spiders—and they are recorded with meticulous accuracy and fullness. That there was a genuine scientific concern as well as romantic delight behind Banfield's scrutiny of nature is suggested by the tenacity with which he sought opinions from qualified scientists, often far removed from Dunk Island. He refers, thus, to sending specimens to Brisbane and Sydney; to corresponding with scientists in England. What Banfield himself would surely have regarded as the highest reward of his scientific life came when a species of mammalian rat he discovered was named *Uromys banfieldi*.

At least one quotation in *My Tropic Isle* indicates that Banfield had some acquaintance with the writings of John Burroughs. Burroughs, of course, would have particularly appealed to Banfield. Born in Delaware County, New York, in 1837, he was like Fabre a field naturalist and observer. But, rather more amateur, he allowed his feeling for his subject to show more immediately

through his prose. His especial passion was for birds, and he was widely recognised in his native land as having inherited the mantle of Thoreau. Indeed, like Thoreau (and like Banfield) he would from time to time retreat from human society to some haven in the woods where he could compose himself into a proper spirit for communing with Nature. Burroughs' "Slabsides" in the Hudson River Valley of New York State is in exactly the same tradition as Thoreau's hut at Walden Pond and Banfield's simple dwelling on Dunk Island.

On the face of it, there is some contradiction (if not indeed confusion) between Banfield's chosen role as scientific observer of the natural wonders of the tropics and the attitudes towards nature which he appropriated with equal enthusiasm from the Miltonic and the Romantic traditions. That the contradiction runs deeper than the surface is suggested by the fact that, at the polar extremes of his responses to nature, there exist in *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* two quite opposite (even opposing, and independent) styles. On the one hand there is self-exciting and excited Romantic awe at the mysterious beauties of a quasi-divine Nature manifesting itself in the flashing beauty of a butterfly's wing or of some wonder of the coral gardens or forest:

The dark compactness of the jungle, the steadfast but disorderly array of the forest, the blotches of verdant grass, the fringe of yellow-flowered hibiscus and the sapful native cabbage, give way in turn to the greys and yellows of the sand in alternate bands. The slowly-heaving sea trailing the narrowest flounce of lace on the beach, the dainty form of Purtaboy and the varying tones of great Australia beyond combine to complete the scene, and to confirm the thought that love is the ideal spot, the freest spot, the spot where dreams may harden into realities, where unvexed peace may smile. (p. 12)

In the same book, it should perhaps come as a surprise to find the quivering sensibility so severely tamped down as to produce great tracts of a prose almost deliberately stultifying and dull, of which this is a fair sample:

Examining the specimens procured, it was found that they resembled lampreys in shape, olive green in colour, with pale lemon-coloured streaks and marks. Each of the gill cases terminated in a two-edged spur, transparent as glass, and keen as

only nature knows how to make her weapons of defence.
(p. 93)

It is nevertheless possible to read such disparate passages with equanimity, without a disabling sense of disappointment that the imagination behind them both was interested not at all in fusing them and the whole range of perceptions, assumptions, attitudes that make up *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* into a unified whole. For the character who emerges from the book is essentially a congeries of received feelings and opinions providing little scope for intellectual or imaginative synthesis. His simple purpose is not even self-display so much as self-revelation. If there is any psychological motive at all in Banfield's pages beyond the uncritical unfolding of a fictive identity, it is the need to authenticate that identity, the elected lifestyle, to both its creator and its audience.

The primary means of such authentication is through the most frequent set of allusions on *The Confessions*—allusions, of course, to the unavoidable cultural hero of nineteenth century writers in the English tradition, William Shakespeare. What I am persuaded is the most endemic of the Shakespearean allusions in Banfield's writing is his tendency to refer to his home as "the isle" rather than "the island." Outside his books Banfield seems to have preferred the native name "Coonanglebah." But once he advances beyond the "official landing," not only does he prefer the English "Dunk" but is also likely to insist on its status as an isle rather than an island. The ultimate source of this usage, I suspect, is twofold. The first is perhaps the most famous single speech in the whole of Shakespeare outside Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy. Certainly no nineteenth century middle class English reader would fail to recognise or be stirred by Gaunt's dying apostrophe, in *Richard II* to "this sceptred isle,/ this earth of majesty, this seat of Mars/this other Eden, demi-paradise."

In suggesting that, in one of the basic tropes of his book, Banfield was (consciously or unconsciously) appealing to a whole class of English bardolaters, I am also of course indicating that the hermit Banfield was writing with at least one eye on an audience. The paradox of an Australian recluse justifying himself

to an overseas public is intensified by other elements in *The Confessions of a Beachcomber*, particularly those gratuitous appeals to the sentimental patriotism by which imperial Britain maintained its hold on its far flung citizens. I quote only the most notable of several noteworthy instances.

The odour of the island may be specific, and therefore to be prized, yet it gladdens also because it awakens happy and all too fleeting reminiscences. English fields and hedges cannot be forgotten when one of our trees diffuses the scent of meadow-sweet, and one of the orchids that of hawthorn. (p. 15)

Whatever Banfield's motive in thus attempting to authenticate his tropical experiences to potential readers in England, he seems to have felt an equal need to authenticate them to himself. There is about *The Confessions* the air of a man who needs to proclaim to himself as much as to anyone else the enchantment of an existence asserted to be endlessly desirable. And herein, I suspect, lies the other source of Banfield's need habitually to refer to his "isle." If the tacit reference to John of Gaunt soothed his readers, the implicit allusion, through the same term, to *The Tempest*, authenticated his life to himself. Repeating to himself lines like "Cooling of the air with sighs, In an odd angle of the Isle," (p. 123), he could fancy himself a Prospero of his own enchanted island, weaving his spells into the books it made available to him. He could thus believe himself to be both a humble man speaking humble truths and (as he often put it) "lord of his Domain."

Lest these speculations appear too fanciful, I must now turn back to the unquestionable fact of Banfield's habit of Shakespearean quotation. In addition to *Richard II* and *The Tempest*, *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* offers citations from or allusions to at least these plays: *Richard III*, *Othello*, *Henry V*, *As You Like It*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. We know from A.H. Chisholm that a love of Shakespeare was instilled into Banfield in his boyhood. But in "placing" it in his adult writing, we are doing more than extending that range of nineteenth century cultural pieties that the quotations from Milton, Wordsworth, Keats reveal. We are moving closer than we have so far to the essence of the idiosyncratic personality made manifest in and

through the pages of *The Confessions of a Beachcomber*. For Banfield's extraordinarily prolific habit of allusion and quotation suggests more than conventional gestures of obeisance to the pieties of late Victorian England. It is part of the very fabric of his imagined self. Beyond the quotations from Shakespeare, Milton and the Romantics, the most cursory examination of *The Confessions* and *My Tropic Isle* yields citations from Dickens, Addison, Carlyle, Wagner, Kingsley, The Vicar of Wakefield. Out of those endless appeals to artistic idols he constructed his own unique literary personality. The final paradox of his paradoxically public solitude was that the kind of self that nature's simple priest imagined into being was essentially bookish and cultivated. If the unceasing evocation of names from the literary past suggests any exact analogue it is, oddly enough, from a century to which, outside Shakespeare, Banfield alludes hardly at all—the seventeenth.

In making this suggestion I have in mind more than Banfield's deliberate archaisms, his quirky humour. His reports from this tropic island are in effect filtered through a finely interlocking cultural mesh just as say, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is sustained on a foundation of almost every branch of esoteric Renaissance learning, or Sir Thomas Browne's investigation of vulgar errors grows in a matrix of the most miscellaneous information. All the inconsistencies, contradictions, conventionalities of the revealed mind of the Beachcomber are in the end reconciled in a sensibility which resembles, perhaps more than anything else, that of one of those antiquarian projectors who give the English seventeenth century its particular flavour. "These chronicles are toned from first to last," Banfield asserts in *The Confessions*, "by perceptions which came to the Beachcomber" (p. 40). He amplifies the assertion in a sentence which echoes the late Renaissance sonorities of a Browne or a Thomas Traherne:

perceptions which lead, maybe, to a subdued and sober estimate of the purpose and bearing of the pilgrimage of life. Doubts become exalted and glorified, hopes all rapture, when long serene days are spent alone in the contemplation of the splendours of sea and sky, and the enchantment of tropic shores. (p. 40)

With the same capacity for naive wonder that underlies Sir Thomas Browne's most ornate periods, Banfield was able to incorporate virtually everything that came under his survey into a personally satisfying scheme of things. He was, as he phrases it in *My Tropic Isle*, a "man of many avocations" (p. 45). His ready acceptance of the conventional and traditional wisdoms of his age enabled him to give these avocations full play in an invented personality of oddly unrepeatable charm, in a book still unique in our literary history. It is not, I think, a great book. Indeed, the supreme creative act of his life was located in the very removal to Dunk Island rather than in any of the books he composed there. Of his own powers as a writer he had a very exact appreciation when he wrote as the epigraph to Chapter II of *The Confessions*, "For the Beachcomber, when not a mere ruffian, is the poor relation of the artist." A ruffian he most certainly was not: yet he was not so much the poor relation of the artist as an artist of limited powers and in a minor mode. There is a kind of daring as well as modesty in his own gloss on his book: "So these my vocations drift into the gentle and devious stream of inconsequence" (p. 32).

NOTES

- ¹ Charles Barrett, *Koonwarra: A Naturalist's Adventures in Australia* (Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 168. All future page references to *Koonwarra* are from this edition, and are incorporated in the text.
- ² E.J. Banfield, *My Tropic Isle* (London: Unwin, 1911). All page references to *My Tropic Isle* are from this edition, and are incorporated in the text.
- ³ E.J. Banfield, *The Confessions of a Beachcomber*, with an Introduction by Alec H. Chisholm, rev. Australian edition (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1968). All future page references to *The Confessions* are from this edition, and are incorporated in the text.

