

THEA ASTLEY

WRITING IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

The title of my talk listed in the programme by Professor Heseltine is 'Writing in North Queensland.' Now I have not prepared an erudite or even non-erudite paper on writers like Herbert, Devaney, Naish – I leave that to the experts; actually when I first spoke to Professor Heseltine about coming, he suggested I talk about the way I went about gathering material for and writing *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*.

What I feel I should talk about is *not* writing in North Queensland. This is not a barbed remark addressed to other writers – it is a remark addressed to myself. I forget who it was who once said that one of the prerequisites for creativity is a sharp climate with frost. Steinbeck said, in *Travels with Charlie*, that he liked 'weather', not climate. And I think that is largely true. Over the last few weeks I have been trying to think of great music or writing or art that has come straight from the equatorial line. And I am not speaking of those who write or compose or paint after they have had their passionate affair with the tropics and moved safely back to a cottage in Kent, a brownstone walk-up in Manhattan or even a terrace house in Balmain or South Yarra. Apart from Gauguin I can think of no one. Perhaps the real reason that Rimbaud gave his genius away at twenty-two was not that the springs had dried up but that he was working as a trader in North Africa. True, Delius lived for some time in Florida – but that is not equatorial – and the fruits of that visit appeared later. There is in these Edenic latitudes a somnolence that is hard to conquer; an overpowering sense of what Mrs Aeneas Gunn called 'the land of plenty of time.' And the frightening aspect of postponement here is that the morrow brings a repetition of the idyll; there is no climatic change and the blue, yellow, green –

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

the heat, the fecundity – become part of an unalterable ballad in nature. The fecundity is all in nature and not in the mind. And that was part of what I was trying to describe in *Pineapple*.

Of course I am aware that at discussion time I will be bombarded with examples of genius at work in temperatures of 39 celcius and I can only say now that I am merely acting as devils's advocate – partly to stimulate a bit of discussion and partly to excuse my own literary torpor.

Usually for a work of fiction, be it short story or novel, unless there is background history involving research, 'gather' is not precisely the right word. Material wafts in from the air. It accrues. You brush it away like dandruff and it floats back in. It comes to you in isolated comments in staff common rooms, over cups of coffee, from fellow passengers in planes and buses and trains, from the sight of someone glimpsed briefly from a train window, from a story told by a friend of a friend. In a review that appeared in a Queensland paper the following words were written about *Pineapple*: Astley cannot resist telling tales out of school. The implication, of course, and not a kind or a pleasant one, was that everything I wrote was based in fact – which is quite different from fictional truth – and that I was exposing local people in perhaps scandalous situations. Now that is the kind of suggestion which could, I think, be legally actionable. At present in Sydney a reviewer friend of mine is being sued for a far less offensive statement. The small seed of whatever truth there is in a story is indeed only that – the seed. Round this seed grows the fatter flesh of the matter, matter which is made largely of the writer's own attitudes and contains large portions of the writer. The stories in *Pineapple* are an amalgam of yarns I heard from others, semi-characters from Sydney, the States, two parties made into one party where the central character, Brain, is three different men made into one man, one genuine old lady I saw briefly at Cooktown airport (the last story) and set down, not verbatim at all; a mere foible of a priest from over a thousand miles away who became Rassini – a priest I have never met and a Canon who is made up of at least two other Anglican pastors I have only heard about and who certainly do

not live in this state. That was in another country and besides . . .

The reaction of that reviewer was almost identical with that of a young woman who works in a local store where I live. When I was shopping for groceries shortly after the book came out, she said breathlessly: "Tell me who they are!" I wish I could. I wish I didn't have to confess, "After all, they are ninety percent ME." Some kind of gasping reputation must attach to what I write, for I recall a reviewer in *The Australian* writing of *The Acolyte*: 'Rumour has it that it is a *roman à clef*. I wanted to write to her and ask please to give me the bloody clef so I could join in the laughs. In fact that novel drew its inspiration from a Ken Russell documentary on Delius. I could, perhaps, have read Eric Fenby's biography, *My Last Years with Delius*. I did not. I was interested only in writing a novel from the viewpoint of the hanger-on of the great man. There had been a spate of publications about "great men", especially the artist, and perhaps, but not entirely, after I read *The Vivisector* I was even more impelled to write from the viewpoint of the acolyte. But my book, whether or not it was regarded as a reply to *The Vivisector*, would have been written anyway.

Perhaps it is because I am a woman — and no reviewer, especially a male one, can believe for one split infinitive of a second that irony or a sense of comedy or the grotesque in a woman is activated by anything but the nutrients derived from 'backyard malice'. Assuming these particular qualities — sense of irony, the eye for the comic or the grotesque — are an indication of intelligence and believing *a priori* that no woman is intelligent, critics assign the evidence of humour, irony or comedy to darker forces at work; the Salem judgement comes into play and the lady writer most certainly is for burning.

It is hard to understand why else a writer of Stead's calibre could for so long be ignored in her own country.

Now I don't subscribe to Tennyson's view about Churton Collins that a critic is a louse in the locks of literature, but I do wish that some critics would take George Orwell's remark to heart. In "England your England" he said: "Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness."

I worked on *Pineapple* for over a year. Let me tell you something of its genesis. It lay behind my mind as shapeless as an unfertilised seed more or less from the time I came north in '69 and again in '70 as a lecturer for the Commonwealth Literature Fund. Round about that time we had a small beach shack at Ball Bay, a place near Mackay and for two years I was diverted by hunting up material for *A Kindness Cup* which was at least two years in the thinking and one in the writing. But glimpses of places and people and stories about those places still lay there and more and more I wanted to put bits of them together onto other bits from other places and set them – not because all the stories came from the north – in the Far North which I loved with its indefinable scents and colours. The setting round Cairns was intended as a tribute – not an exposé. I'm not really trying to be the Jane Austen of the rain forest. The setting is as much an emotional as a physical one and a gesture towards the long-standing love affair I have had with the geography of this state.

I needed a narrator. I decided after some time to use a character who had appeared in an earlier novel – *The Slow Natives*. This was Keith Levenson. Actually I have used other characters from this novel in subsequent books – but no critic has ever commented or spotted them. No I was not having a literary 'in' joke as Elizabeth Webby suggested in *Meanjin* (she says SHE was joking) and doing a pen portrait of Hal Porter who had once had an accident to his leg. Keith Levenson lost a limb at the end of *Slow Natives*. He was a rebellious and difficult young man – far more difficult than Martin Boyd's – and I had often wondered what had become of him. I decided to look in briefly. Here he is then, grown up, more or less, and as he says, "a middle-class failure" with an addiction to television cartoons because they so underscore the inanimacy of humans; they point up the limitations of humans and are given definition by simple and predictable behaviour patterns. They're nicer than humans, he decides, and in contrast to the antics of Crusader Rabbit, what passes for genuine human behaviour is looked at sharply by him – warts and all.

And one must remember, too, that no matter how hard a

writer might try to put down ONE character, he is doomed to failure. The writer is not God. Anything written must perforce be almost one hundred percent the creator of that fictional character. Well, let's say fifty, so that any writer hearing this will not be stricken by guilts and self-accusations and cry: But I am not Mrs Jolley, I am not Uriah Heep, I am not Boule de Suif or Richard Mahony or Sam Pollit or Judge Brack. If the characterisation becomes living, believable, and can walk off the page, then that writer-creator must have understood the faults and virtues of the one written about with such sensitivity that indeed he does contain some part of those characters, no matter how much he may claim to have been merely observing another.

I am certain that you do not want me to go through these eight stories one by one and say "here I got this" or "there I found that." A young woman once did come up to me on a railway station and briefly expose her scarred wrists. She did indeed ask me if I had found Jesus. But it was a railway station in Sydney. Another town. It could have been this town. It could have been any town. The fact that I made the setting Cairns railway station proves nothing, says nothing about the suicidal religious impulses of Cairns dwellers. And when critics assume I am telling tales out of school, they reveal how little they understand the processes of putting a creative work together. All the tunnels are there on the line from Cairns to the Tableland but the kids no longer carry on on the rail motor. A school bus has swallowed them up. I believe they are now models of virtue. I have known several Belles Rives like Fixer who button-hole you with their terrible verse and once, in Mango, I did see, very briefly a purple caftan'd gentleman who had spread the word round town that he was a lecturer from a southern university. Perhaps he was. But he has long departed and only the memory of that stunning gall lingers with sufficient acidity to make me want to write about it, so that it is no longer the same man as the one who came up and spoke to us briefly when we were having dinner at the top pub. Even, I add sadly, the top pub has gone in its colonial form. Nostalgia changes the shapes of things. The putty is the same. The result-

ant figure different.

I could tell you that "Ladies Need Only Apply" was stimulated by those very words used in the Personal Column of a parish pump newspaper. They ravished me. I knew nothing else. How could I? But once, years ago, I wrote a story called "The Scenery Never Changes" in which I had a desperate woman school-teacher whose marital and sexual life was a disaster area. The story – for those critics who do not believe me – appeared in *Coast to Coast* in the sixties. In much the same way that I regained Keithy Levenson, so too did I pick up Sadie Klein from where I had left her rotting in a back country school in '66. I placed her on long service leave – she's older now – somewhere round Palm Cove. It could have been Ellis Beach, Port Douglas, Sarina. Who is sure? Not the author. I heard once, too, years ago, of a full concert Steinway grand perched on a point above the northern coast in a macrobiotic landscape. I have never seen it, played it; but the juxtaposition of that Steinway and the bananas was too good to miss. The man who went with the piano was someone once seen crossing an airport terminal and I had to half-invent characteristics for him that might complement Sadie's life cycle – which was inevitable, had you read the earlier story. Memories of my convent school days and those of my friends float in and out of "A Northern Belle." The Belle herself is a composite of someone I knew at twenty and another person I didn't quite know at forty. The two make a different someone. And the title story – and it is symbolic – received its impulse from a Brisbane cabbie who asked me once: "What's all them southerners coming up here for? They after a bit of free pineapple?" I've known many people like Georgie and the potter in "Petals from Blown Roses" who wanted very much to be creative and couldn't. And I'm in there too.

In "Petals from Blown Roses" (the title, of course, is from Tennyson's "The Lotus Eaters" – applicable I think for the tropic swoon) Levenson comments, parodying Wilfred Owen on war – "My subject is self-delusion and the pity of self-delusion." That comment is really the point of the whole book; in fact of all my books. Whether the delusion be that of being conformist or non-conformist, the end result is that such delusion does

create an outsider. I don't think in anything I have written is there a main character who does not suffer such delusion: either he/she thinks, believes he/she fits into the pattern established by the group he/she belongs to or wishes to belong to. In *Explorer*, Brewster saw himself as a flaneur Don Juan. He wasn't. Everyone else saw him as a selfish and impotently deluded egotist. Holberg in *The Acolyte* was not quite the genius he wished others to see him as. Tom Dorahy in *A Kindness Cup* believed he was a righteous man. But he failed to see the disaster that accompanies righteousness.

It is the same with this book. A friend commented that he found it hard to believe there were so many unpleasant or failed characters around. I don't see them this way at all. It is no failure to be human; and largely, when I am writing of these people, I am writing with sympathy for I am also writing of myself. "I've been there" as they say in the States. I understand.

I wish the critics did. There's a section in *The Acolyte* I'd like to read to you. It's about critics. But despite some truth in the matter it is intended for laughs.

Wednesday. Thursday. Friday.

"We don't need the plumber," Aunt Sadie croaked.

Neilsen shifted his weight and tried again.

"But I'm not the plumber."

"You look like the plumber."

"My dear lady, I am a music critic for two major papers, syndicated in five. I travel regularly with visiting celebrities. I make and break artists, my word is feared in five States."

"Jesus," said Sadie. "Maybe you'd better have a look at the washing machine then."

All of us generally work hard at finding acceptance—even critics like Neilsen—but how frequently being INSIDE acceptance means being outside of *living*. Could I put it simply? — It's unacceptable to drink too much—but again it's often unacceptable not to drink at all. The same applies to gambling, working (workaholic is a term of abuse); even to being successful. Not to like sport is unacceptable—in this country it's the one thing you can like to excess. Discussing the quantum theory or the French symbolists is most unacceptable. This country—and most countries—finds super physical activity acceptable but not mental

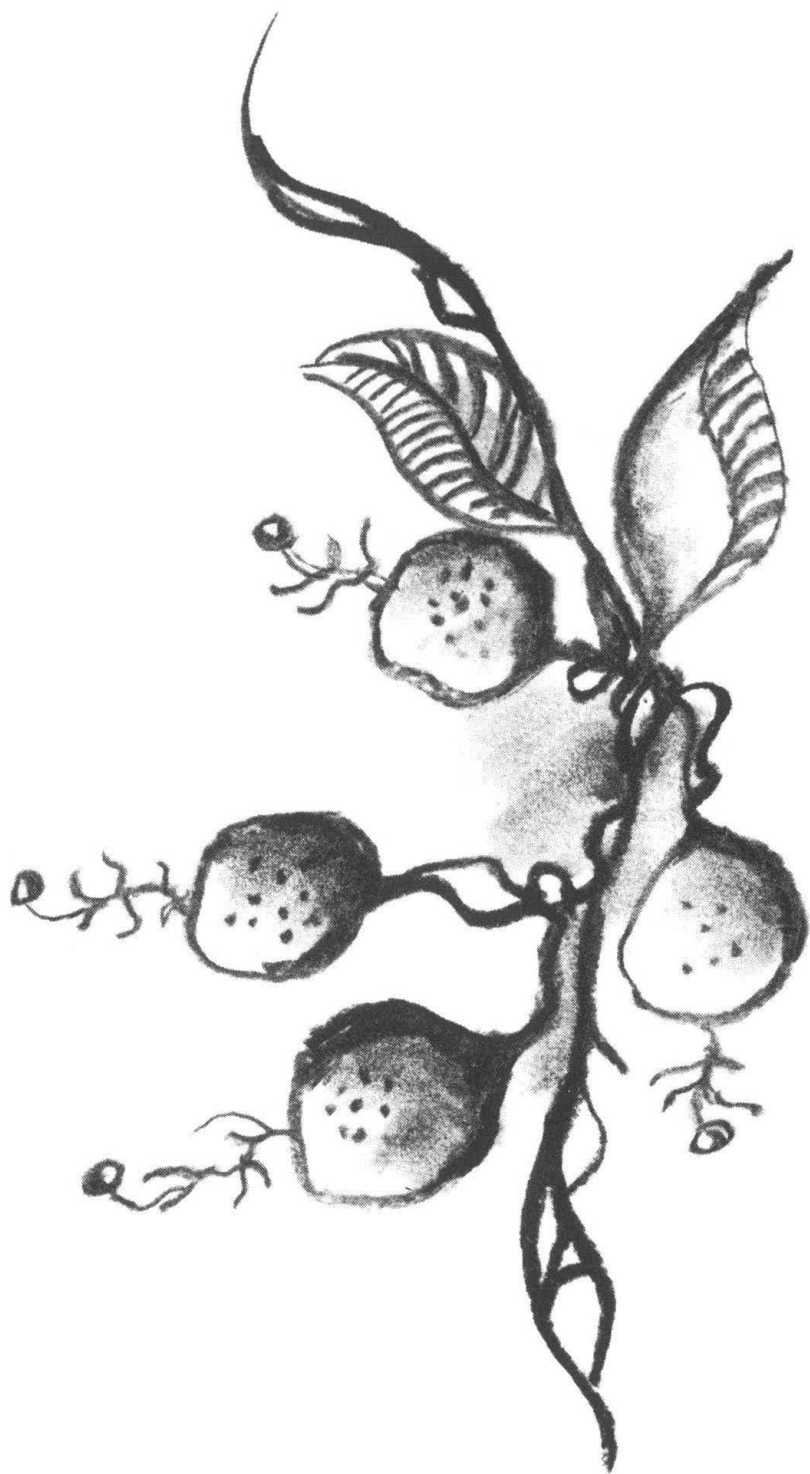
activity. Let's take it more simply: if you bake superb lamingtons, a dozen batches a year are acceptable. A dozen a week becomes excessive. But to make a dozen batches a day simply because moulding sponge, chocolate and coconut is your art form makes you a ratbag. Of course if you sell them, that's different, and once again, especially if you make a lot of money, you become super acceptable. If only Mary Mahony had known this at Buddlecombe.

Patrick White said to me after he had read *The Well Dressed Explorer* "The trouble is you didn't make Brewster a monumental shit." He's a bastard but not a monumental one—and for the sake of fiction use of the over-sketch is not only permissible but often necessary. Now I don't think that this rule is always obligatory but nevertheless the point is taken. You will recall there is a scene in *Voss* where Voss creeps out early one morning at the party's camp and furtively cuts off the young blades of cress which have just appeared. As the party of explorers was at this stage desperate for food, especially fresh food, being marooned by the Wet, that action, that scene, seems to me far more horrific than the description of the gas chambers in *Riders*. Some of humanity's crimes—like Dachau or Auchwitz—are so monstrous, so huge, that one feels like an ant which cannot quite see the boot that is about to crush it. They are so enormous as to be incomprehensible. Most of our lives are made up of accretions of venial sins—and the meanness of the tiny crimes committed against others is what often stirs writers. I have a feeling that since I left Macquarie, some of my former colleagues fear an academic novel. But what would I write about? Perfection is so boring.

It is very difficult for this writer to write about what has been written. After it is all over—the finished product, I mean—I don't reread. Perhaps too much effort has gone into the making, for even during the third draft or the fourth, ideas—summer-y ideas—float in and demand to be added. A phrase of poetry read here, a remark overheard in a bus—anything that lends itself to insertion demands attention. This could be a never-ending process and I believe that the creation of anything at all is just that, much as Levenson at the end of *Pineapple* describes living: "Liv-

ing," he says, "is serial, an unending accretion of alternatives." Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," rather implies a finality in choice. That is not altogether right. And this is what makes writing so difficult or the creation of music, sculpture, pictures—that temptation to add the word here, the dab of yellow, a different chord, to chip once more at the rhythm of a carving. Perfection comes with knowing when to stop—and probably not even then. *L'heure exquise* is not so much Verlaine's twilight hour of scents but the point of unrolling the paper from the typer.

At the moment I am wrestling with a second draft of a novel. It began in first person, switched to third and is now treading a first person narration line again. I am scrapping without a care. Perhaps that, too, is a result of the climate. Perhaps one really doesn't want to write in North Queensland. As I said once before in an article I wrote for *Southerly*, this is the place where the tall yarn happens; and when one is cast straight into an unending summer of tall story, oddball, the origins of rumour, it is hard to stand aside for that artist's discerning eye that Judith Wright talks about in her poem, 'Request to a Year,' to take over. Of course, she wrote the poem in retrospect. It's Wordsworth's passion recollected in tranquility all over again. Perhaps the Foundation for Literary Studies will have seriously to contemplate giving writers fellowships to be taken out at Tristan da Cunha where, with their fingers blue from cold but their minds racing like dynamos, they can richly and fully reassess the lotus land of their origins.



IAN HENSON.