Violet Bowring's portrait of A.B. "Banjo" Paterson (1864-1941)

BARBARA DOUGLAS

A TRIBUTE TO VIOLET BOWRING

And when they die –
Perish; – and no one asks
who or what they have been.

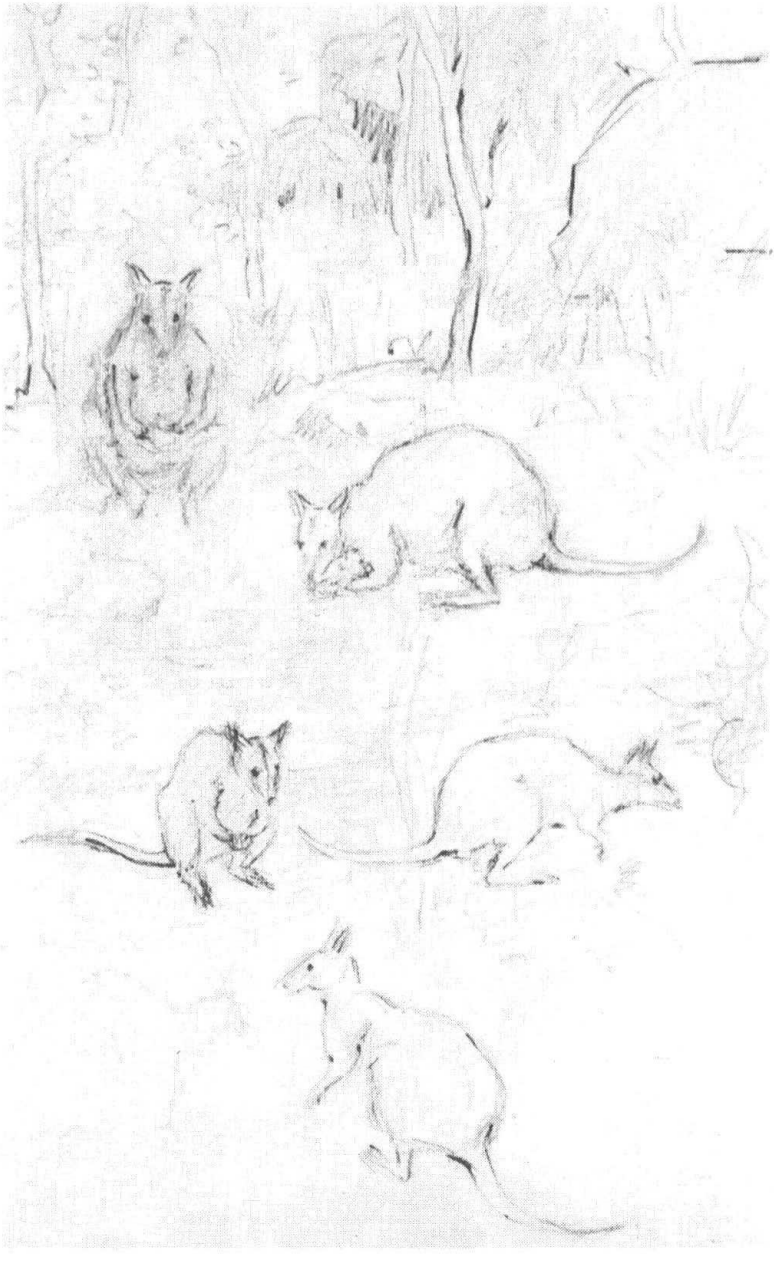
Matthew Arnold

A good number of Australians know of "Banjo" A.B. Paterson, writer of ballads, but few would know of Violet Bowring who in 1935 drew an excellent portrait of Paterson which reappears occasionally in print and is known only for its subject.

So when it was reproduced some thirty years later, in 1977, as frontispiece for Walter Stone's selection, *The Best of Banjo Paterson*, time had effectively obliterated all memory of Violet, and he was unable to acknowledge his debt to the artist. Nor did that reproduction awaken interest in her. In the thirties and forties it would have been difficult not to have known of her. Reviewers used to single out her portraits and clay sculptures for special attention, and it has been said of her that she was the most talked of woman artist of her day. During these twenty-five years in Sydney, Violet was fully and happily engaged in a wide range of creative activities and experimenting with the principles of photogravure in the printing of magazines. But in 1950, when she was sixty years of age, she left Sydney for Townsville–came on a visit to her friend Miss Jessie MacQueen–and stayed, and moved from a world of acclaim to one of oblivion. Happy though Violet was in her new world, it was largely indifferent to the arts, and she missed the stimulus of criticism and the company of young artists like Thea Proctor, Grace Crowley, Margaret Preston, Donald Friend, Drysdale, Dobell, Noel Counihan, and of the older generations of men like Julian Ashton (whom she spoke of) and George Bell. A contemporary of hers from the Wellington Technical School, Roland Wakelin, was also in Sydney and both were students of Dattilo Rubbo.

Portrait of Violet Bowring by her husband, Walter

Pastel portrait of Walter Bowring by Violet



Wallabies drawn from Violet's room at the Garden Settlement, Townsville

It was exciting in Sydney in those days, a time of controversies and burgeoning of new talents, with an intensity of feeling shared by writers and artists alike and such a focus on aesthetic theory that people had to examine their attitudes and make a stand. Many of the artists were members of the Society of Artists led by Julian Ashton, and then Sydney Ure Smith. It was accepted as the "avant-garde" society, while the Royal Art Society of N.S.W. continued to be the guardian of academic standards. It was an honour for artists to be accepted by either. Violet and her husband Walter were both actively engaged in the art movements of the time and both enjoyed considerable personal success, exhibiting regularly with both societies. Perhaps Violet saw in North Queensland a haven from the clamour. She was sixty years old. Walter had died in 1932. But I have the impression that she had found new energies and that she had thought that Townsville could absorb and nourish fresh talent like hers. Perhaps she thought she could change things, for she and Jessie were authors of a letter to the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* deploring the lack of an art gallery in that city. They would be pleased that that is now rectified, even if rather late. As things turned out for her, there were not the opportunities for teaching and exhibiting and her creative activities became more and more a private and lonely preoccupation.

Mrs Paterson had commissioned the portrait, whether with the intention of keeping it is not known. Whatever the facts, it was shown at an exhibition organized by the Women's Industrial Arts Society. A reviewer said it was "one of the outstanding works," and the Australian Club bought it for its own collection. "Banjo" was not the only Paterson to sit for Violet, for she also drew Rosamund Harvey, his young granddaughter, and, in 1939, his son, B. Paterson, Jnr.

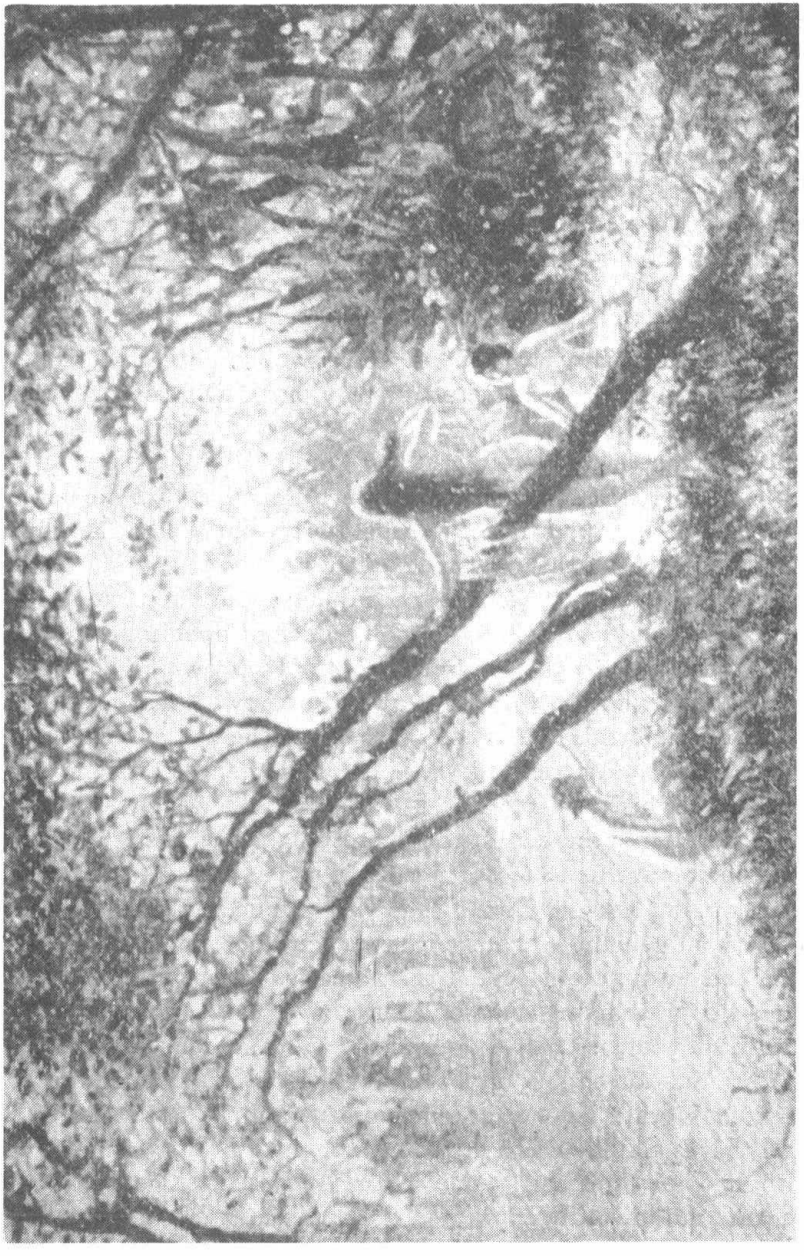
Violet received many commissions, but painted also because the subject attracted her. Pastel was a favourite medium. It can be used as a means of making swift notes and it is also ideal for building up into a more complex picture. All her life she drew easily, like writing a letter, as the tiny drawings of the small creatures here reproduced suggest. Every pastel painter is aware, too, that his medium is as ideal for interpreting young flesh

Violet Bowring, about 1918

tones as a weathered face. In the portrait of Paterson we can see how the artist, applying quick vibrant strokes, which trace the form, is relying partly on the rough surface of the paper to catch the rough surface of the face. The whole portrayal is objective, the artist organizing the likeness with the greatest possible directness so as to express the character of the subject, the ruggedness of feature and veiled direction of glance, while at the same time revealing her own response to that subject.

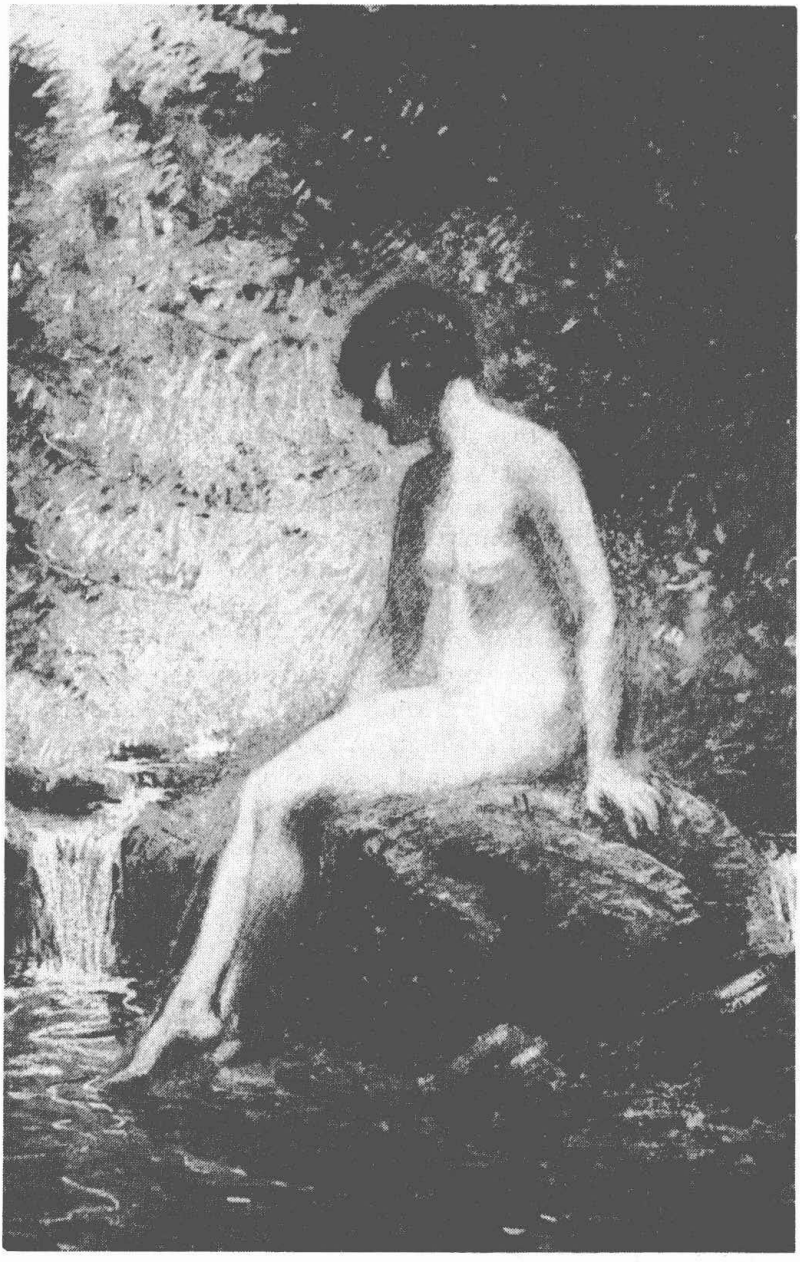
It seems useful to awaken interest in Violet Bowring as an artist by way of the Paterson portrait as it is one of her best, relatively well-known, and likely to remain so while the public wants to read Paterson's verse. But my purpose is to go beyond that and give a fuller picture of her. She was, after all, an unusual woman who before World War I embarked on a career as a professional artist—and all the evidence indicates that she made a success of it. And is it not unusual for a woman to be a political cartoonist, and this as far back as 1912?

Violet seems to have had no trouble responding to the force of her gift, and was able to enjoy intellectual freedom and freedom of movement—the symbolic "room of her own" which Virginia Woolf exhorted women to own. We know that she actively promoted women's role in the arts because she was a member of two Women's Societies—the Society of Women Artists and the Women's Industrial Arts Society, of which she was president in 1933. Neither of these exist today presumably because they outlived their purpose. Success in the arts today has less to do with being or not being a woman than with public attitudes towards the arts in general. For instance, women doctors, even women engineers, are more accepted than creative artists of either sex, but seventy years ago Violet would have had to contend with both disadvantages. After the war she was a student at the Chelsea Art School and London School of Art, in the London of Virginia Woolf. They were mad, crazy, happy days, she said. And that is all. She was a little like Virginia Woolf's women, but without their ineffable sadness, for she was intelligent, aware, elegant, and inwardly composed, with an intuitive understanding of things from politics to children and a heightened sense of beauty.



"Nymphs in Arcady." Like "Leaves Light and Water" (overleaf) shows the influence of the Impressionists, who were so able to capture luminosity and movement in a landscape.

She probably met Walter Armiger Bowring, also a New Zealander and artist, in England. They married in 1925 and came to live in Sydney. Walter died in 1932. They lived in a flat in Double Bay, which in those days had an open front verandah and a shady tree which spread in over the hand rails. The flat today is "improved." Scattered about the studio were the usual paraphenalia of paints and clay and smells, and draped over chairs and clay models and easels were beads. She had a secret formula for beads. She hand-rolled this magic substance. The beads were light and unbreakable and the colours went deep into the centre. Some were glazed, and others, which she intended to be worn with winter textures, remained unglazed. There is no evidence that she was drawn to paint the Australian bush, or that she was ever a "nationalist" painter either in New Zealand or in Australia. She seems not to have been tied by local geography in "culture," nor to the social realism of the thirties. She arrived in Sydney fresh from London influences, with nothing to follow except her own inclinations. Like others she liked to explore the theme of figures in a landscape. To paint the naked form is always a challenge and it became customary towards the end of the nineteenth century to place the naked (usually female) form in a landscape. In Australia the landscapes often looked like classical pagan bush. Sydney Long's paintings come to mind, and Norman Lindsay's. We find the theme of nymphs in arcady in the literature of poets such as Hugh McCrae and Kenneth Slessor. Draughtmanship was one of Violet's greatest gifts. All her early achievements indicate her talent for drawing and design, although as a student at college she distinguished herself in all her subjects. It is with the "winding line of beauty" that she most frequently expresses herself. At the start of her career she became political cartoonist for the *New Zealand Free Lance*, and a book illustrator. Later she returned to printing and the publishing industry (perhaps she never left it?), for there are two drawings which seem to have been significant for her, and for the colour printing industry. One is a pastel portrait of the daughter of Sir Hugh Denison, publishing tycoon. (But a biography of Sir Hugh mentions only three sons.) Violet wrote around it, "the first four colour print, reproduced on the cover



"Leaves, Light and Water." Illustrates how the artist can achieve the brightness of sunlight on her canvas. The figure is less the focal point than the area of shimmering sunlight.

Violet's Borzoi, Boris.

Violet photographed on the beach opposite her flat, The Strand, Townsville, about 1960.

of *Woman's Day*, 1941." The other is a water colour, somewhat in the style of Aubrey Beardsley's delicate line, and of this Violet wrote, "Winner of the best colour print of the year, with the seven colour process, from the *German Year Book*. V. Nelson. Before the war."

It was a hot day in October 1979 when I first met Violet. The object of my visit was to ask her something about herself as part of a survey into the history and development of the arts in the Townsville region. I had been told not to forget Violet Bowring. Yes, she was still alive. She lived at the Garden Settlement, a home for the aged, and had been seen shopping at David Jones the week before. The meeting took place in the infirmary of the home where, I believe, Violet had lived for four years or so, although the total number of years spent at the home was something like fifteen. This tribute to Violet is interspersed with epithets like "probably," and "I believe" (which expresses doubt not belief), indicating my uncertainty about dates and other matters. Violet was vague in her answers, and statements from friends and relatives contradict each other. One could easily dismiss her vagueness as forgetfulness because of her age but I would not discount my suspicion that it was less forgetfulness as withholding information from a stranger asking impertinent questions.

Violet enjoyed talking and had she lived longer I would doubtless have got to know much more about her, and there would not now be the great gaps in our knowledge of her which invite such speculation. We do not have precise dates, nor a definitive chronology, nor anything like a complete record of her creative output. Nevertheless we do have some knowledge. What I have written I have been told by Violet herself, or have read in her documents. Sometimes I have given my own impressions. You may say don't give me impressions, give me facts, but all the facts are no longer obtainable, and we can only speculate. She brought out from her locker her precious mementoes; a couple of cardboard cartons would hold them. These were newspaper cuttings, some exhibition catalogues, photographs, a few original drawings and *The Best of Banjo Paterson*. She opened this to the introduction and slapped it with the back of

Violet, about 1965.

her hand with a rhetorical gesture inviting me to notice the omission of her name. These documents have now been photographed and arranged in some order and can be seen in the Delamothe Collection at James Cook University.

I found Violet in the infirmary seated in a comfortable chair reading a book with large print. At that time she was sharing a room with another woman who was very sick, vomiting helplessly. I stayed for about two hours and our exchanges were interrupted by easing our way from one side of the curtain which divided the room into two parts to the other side to place not very cool cloths on the woman's forehead, and to bathe her face and wrists and hold her hand. How tightly she gripped our strength! Violet said she knew of a medicine which would cure the woman's nausea and "would I smuggle it in?" Failing this, we comforted her as best we could.

Violet was then ninety years old. She was fair, with pale smooth skin entirely unlined, and elegant features, her once fair hair now rinsed a pinkish golden colour. She was larger than average height, stately and straight; lively and shrewd and good-humoured. I have been told that when she was seventy-five or so she bought a motor scooter, and used to cruise slowly and silently around the Town Common, or dismount and step carefully through the knee-high scrub, and over the swamps, or through the variegated spiky aromatic undergrowth, observing with an artist's eye.

I knew that Violet was an artist, but I was not prepared for the sketches which she brought out: Pavlova's dancing partner, for instance; or for the marvellously executed drawing of her Borzoi, in which Violet's precisely fine strokes and mastery of form create an elegant and luxurious mood, like the beautiful dog itself. She had never had a large collection of works in Townsville, and what she had had gradually been whittled away, partly because of the necessity to own as little as possible, as her "room" diminished in size in Townsville, but also because much of what she would have kept was irreparably damaged in two separate disasters. The first was the fire which destroyed the bulk sugar terminal in South Townsville, when great billows of sulphurous smoke discoloured everything in her flat. The

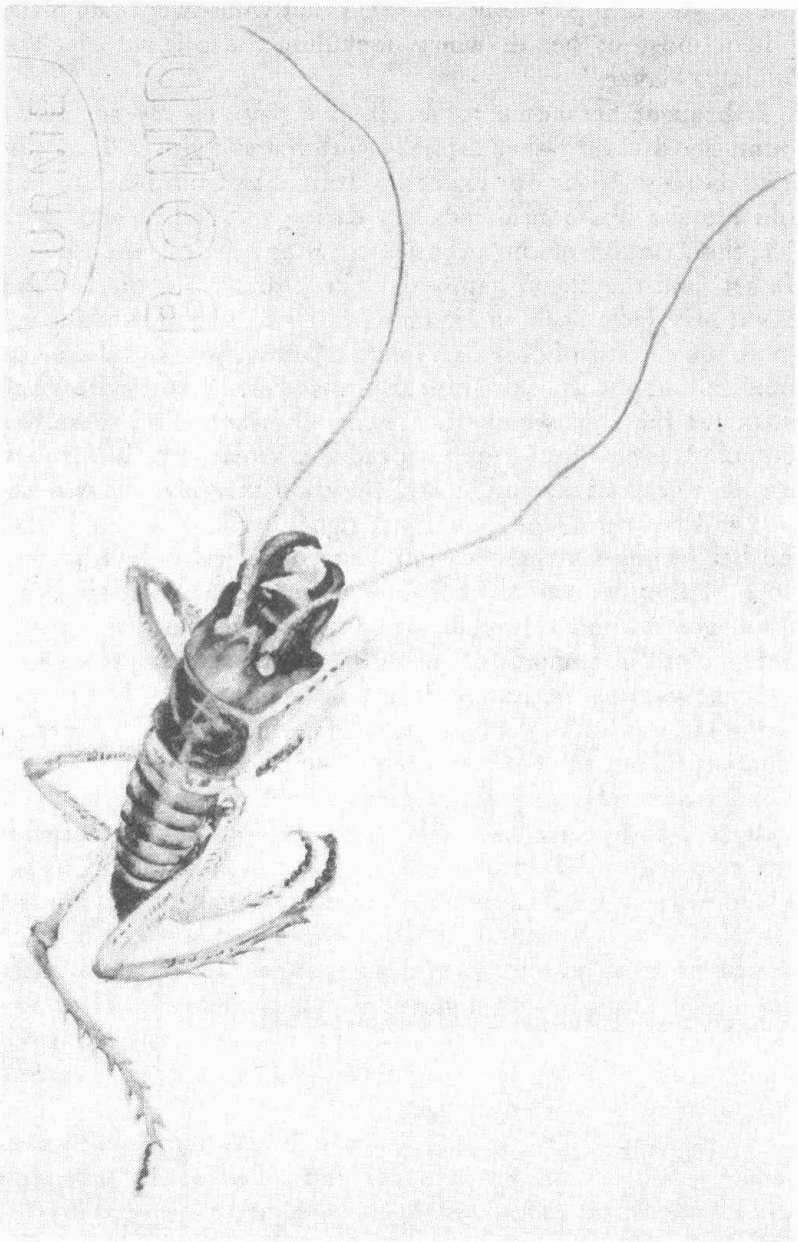
"Burlakoff, the Balalaika Player." (Burlakoff was a dancing partner of Pavlova's.)

This drawing and that of the boy on p. 79 show that with remarkable simplicity an artist is able to suggest character. Whereas in the landscape painting on pp. 60 and 62 space has been abandoned as a structural device, and the figures are purely decorative, here line and space are everything and characterization is the aim.

second was during cyclone Althea, when wind-swept rain made sodden most of her drawings, including the original of "The Balalaika Player."

I brought her home for lunch one day. To my surprise I found her dressed rather formally with hat and gloves. I say surprise, because I was not expecting formality from her. She had told me she was considered very daring and had recalled with glee the London of the twenties, St John's Wood, the Chelsea art set, and the crazy, happy days in Sydney. But the hat and gloves may have been an expression of her love of dressing up. There are several photos of Violet in fancy dress, and there was some talk about the sensation she caused at the fancy dress ball on board the ship which took her to England. And there was someone's clear impression of a radiant Violet in yellow smock over soft grey slacks and jersey. Now, on this day, she was elegant and beautiful, the gloves just right, her hair freshly curled and her feeling for the occasion going hand in hand with a wry sense of humour and the capacity to see herself honestly. She rummaged around in her drawer and offered me some bright orange cloth, a remnant of furnishing fabric, enough to cover a cushion; wanting me to have it, asking silently that I like it, and daring me not to. Violet had a way of seeing all possibilities in a situation. There was the same silent interplay of reaction when I asked, tentatively, why she had come to Townsville. She found it cheaper to live here, she said. It was not an entirely satisfactory response and I understood that she did not wish me to ask her to expand on this. What I was really getting at, of course, was "had she deliberately left the Sydney art scene?" But the interesting thing was that she did not expect me to find it satisfactory. She said it with a glance which challenged me—or so I thought—to accept the reply, make of it what I would, but not to necessarily believe it was the truthful or only answer. She was mischievous when ambiguous like this.

I am sorry I did not get to know her better. Some weeks went by. When next I visited her and asked at the reception desk—made a statement, really, for it seemed she would live for ever—"Was Mrs Bowring in her usual-room," I was told that she had died the day before.

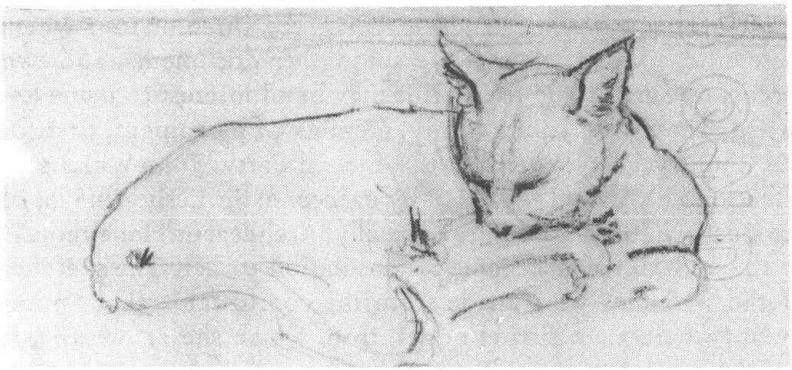


Precise and accurate, but illustrating the "winding line of beauty."

John Wilkinson of Townsville, about 1960.

John Murray, formerly of Townsville, manager of the Orient Station, outside Ingham, and M.P. Portrait about 1960.

Violet Bowring had a totally professional but uncomplicated attitude towards her art, was drawn to the beautiful as she saw it, and was able to recreate it, sometimes with marvellous economy of line, at other times using her pastels as others use their paints, and "drawing" in a painterly manner, fully responsive to the building up of tonal values. She could create images true to a physical likeness and to the spirit behind it. The Paterson portrait is the finest work we have at present. Perhaps one day more will come to light, in New Zealand, her birthplace, or in England, or in North Queensland, and, most particularly, in Sydney. It is premature to make an assessment of her art because we have seen too little of it but I believe we can stand by the general statements made here on the evidence we have. And perhaps one day someone will refer to the portrait of A.B. Paterson as the "Violet Bowring portrait."

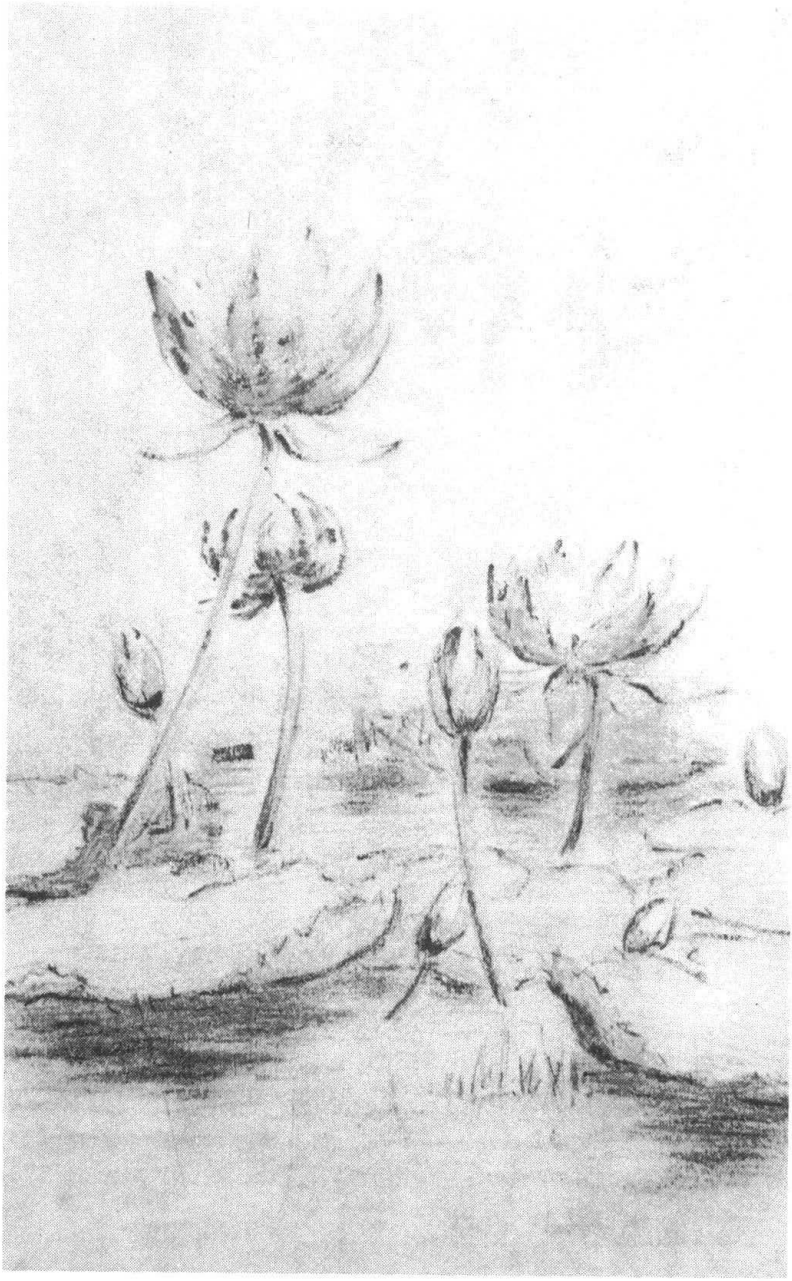


Violet's movement from acclaim to oblivion during her years in Townsville was a gradual one. At first she supervised art classes at the Adult Education Centre in Wickham Street, and she may have had private pupils. In those days there were no art galleries, private or public, no centre for the arts, nowhere to exhibit, unless you count the fabulous shade under the "Tree of Knowledge." Older Townsvilleans will remember this tree, opposite the Post Office, and will have regretted it when it was taken out, about ten years ago, so as to widen the street on the corner where it had grown for nearly a century. It was a *Terminalia*, one of the few deciduous trees to grow in the tropics. It is especially remembered for the political rallies, state, federal and municipal, which took place under its branches;* but occasionally artists would hold a one-day exhibition in its shade. Violet probably did not exhibit there, but she was given the opportunity once to show some pastel portraits of well-known Townsvilleans in a shop in Flinders Street. However, no sooner were they up, so she told me, than they were removed to the back to make way for a consignment of *factory-made* pottery. She was so indignant that afterwards she tore in half every one, the only ones to escape this destruction being the three or four which were sold. Two of these were among her documents, and two more have since come to light. It may be of interest to name her sitters. They were John Murray, member of parliament, first for the Country Party, then for the Liberal Party; John Wilkinson, affectionately called "Wilkie" by everyone; Sir Leslie Wilson, of the Bush Children's Home; and finally, Archdeacon Hohenhouse. In the end, drawing became a consolation to her. The sketches of the wallabies were made from the comfortable chair in her room "where I am sitting now," from which she could see out to the boundaries of the Town Common.

*See Diane Menghetti's account of the meeting in 1939 of the Women's Progress Club at the Tree of Knowledge, in her article in this issue. —Ed.

Rocks, near the Town Common, Townsville.

Sydney. Drawing of Violet's cat.



Waterlilies, Town Common.

Pastel of child.

Pastel drawing, young man.

Water colour, about 1914, winner of colour print award recorded in a *German Year Book*.

"Incense and Pearls," 1918.

Violet Bowring, about 1920.

Portrait of Violet by Walter Bowring, about 1930.