

CAROLE FERRIER

JEAN DEVANNY'S QUEENSLAND NOVELS

Jean Devanny published *Sugar Heaven* in 1936 and subsequently wrote several more novels set in North Queensland to which she had moved following an eight-month visit in 1934. All her work has been out of print for many years and her autobiography, which she completed in 1954, has never been published.¹ The reasons for the lack of recognition and knowledge of Devanny's work are complex, but central is her relationship to, and activity and problems within, the Communist Party of Australia, which had a decisive impact on her work and its reception that will be discussed in more detail later. The fact that Devanny's first seven novels had New Zealand settings – since she spent the earlier part of her life there – also militated to a degree, against her recognition as a writer in Australia.

Devanny had arrived in Sydney in 1929, and based her first novel set in Australia, *Out of Such Fires* (1934), on her experiences as a general on a remote sheep station in New South Wales, where she worked for several months. Her earlier work had shown a strong predilection for presenting the problems faced by women under patriarchal capitalism.² Devanny had been interested in socialist theory while still in New Zealand; soon after her arrival in Australia she became seriously involved in politics and, after being arrested in a demonstration and spending four days in jail,³ joined the Communist Party of Australia. Through the 30's, she rapidly moved into a prominent and public role in the Party, becoming one of their most popular public speakers and being described by one hearer as "the best agitational speaker I ever heard, including a number with international reputations."⁴ She was also prominent in the formation of various writers' groups in the 1930's and the Women's Progress Clubs in North Queensland.⁵

This activist role was to be a source of considerable conflict for Devanny in terms of finding time for her writing. She had a strong sense of competitiveness with Katharine Susannah Prich-

ard, but saw Prichard as having devoted more time to developing her craft, recording this remark in her autobiography: "You know, Kath, the time and energy you have given to writing, I have given to politics and platform work." Her later conclusion in a demoralised letter in 1953 to Miles Franklin was:

Oh Miles, how I have wasted my life. I'm done for now and yet I feel I had it in me to do good work . . . I realise now that I have not exploited the small measure of ability for writing that I possess one whit. I have never really got down to it and THOUGHT. Thought was reserved for politics.⁶

By this time she was entirely out of political work⁷ and wanted to devote herself to writing. But no more of her novels were to be published before her death in 1962.

Writers who were members of the CPA at this period had a difficult time. In *Roll Back The Night* (1945), we find a debate between the central character, who is a novelist, and her friend on the political importance of writing:

"Helen, you raise again my own individual problem . . . Should not people like me, powerful and dynamic, put writing and everything else aside and plunge into the actual struggles of the people?"

"No, no! You are participating in the actual struggles of the people by writing . . . Marx was a writer, Engels, Lenin, Stalin all writers. Writers are the leaders of the people. A writer must be on one side of the people's struggles or the other" (pp. 184-5)

Devanny herself wrote a number of political speeches and tracts including an unpublished piece on women's oppression. But to be a novelist was viewed with some suspicion by elements within the Party; Devanny, Prichard, Waten and Hardy all encountered problems in this regard. Devanny wrote to Lance Starkey in 1959:

I conferred with Hardy again after seeing you and Comrade Dixon and he told me he was going down to sell papers in the street! I was shocked. I had thought that that sort of thing went out with my era, the era in which writing was considered a weakness on the part of comrades.⁸

She goes on to discuss the importance of a writer having personal experience of their material and also to argue for the importance of breaks from routine party work:

My own experience assures me that manual labour, *experience* of the worker's life, is essential to the unity of art and politics; without this experience, the writer cannot write with the ardour and passion that inspires workers to fight for Socialism. It is good therefore to engage in manual labour *between* books. I myself worked as housemaid-waitress, party maid, cleaner and as a cook on a far-western sheep station . . . --
 Attending the branch, writers like Hardy and myself, good platform workers and intensely interested in all aspects of Party work, become torn all ways, exhausted physically and mentally. Whereas if left alone to torture out conclusions from experience already garnered; when the job is done, one can return to routine Party work, to manual labour, to joy in a good job well done, and prepared to wrestle out new ideas from renewed contact with workers in the mass.

The shift in Devanny's novel writing from a sometimes melodramatic naturalism towards a socialist realism most evident in *Sugar Heaven*, can be seen to be a direct result of the influence of the theories of Zhdanov as articulated at the Congress of Realist Writers in 1934. Zhdanov asserted that, following the revolution, Soviet writers became "architects of the human soul" engaged in a process of portraying the new revolutionary working class in a spirit of "revolutionary romanticism." *Sugar Heaven* is the first of Devanny's novels to be written according to the precepts of the socialist realist school, and she herself described it as "the first really proletarian novel in Australia."⁹ It deals with the 1935 strike on the canefields over Weil's disease. One of the main threads in the story is the development of the character Dulcie from someone who scabbed on a strike in Sydney to someone who is in full support of the strike and trying to organise the wives. Devanny's own continuing interest in the development of women is shown in the novel: Dulcie recognises that her support for the strike has grown from contact with "the other men, not Hefty [her husband]." In presenting this, Devanny recognises that women's privatised situation within the home, isolated from contact with workmates, militates against their developing beyond conservative positions. She shows how Dulcie and her sister-in-law, Eileen, once they become involved in actively supporting the strike, increase in confidence, and Eileen applies to join the Communist Party. However, because

she is conducting an extra-marital affair, she is told that she cannot join the Party because "women must be above suspicion to get in." Her affair is with an Italian, and thus represents a further attack on double standards and racist attitudes, fairly widespread at this period not only outside, but also within the Party.¹⁰ Devanny took her support for non-Anglo-Saxon migrants further, making the hero of her next work, *Paradise Flow* (1938), a Yugoslav, and commenting in a letter, "I like the character of the Slav best of all the characters I have created."¹¹

Devanny's statement is a little surprising, for Big Anton is presented as an almost entirely 'natural' character; living a life in close physical touch with the land and periodically defusing the buildup of an immense sexual energy by 'taking his satisfaction' in the brothels of Innisfail. Dusha delineates his character as "He live only for the love and the fight." (p. 94) Workers' solidarity is less relevant than close physical relationships with others and with the land; as is the case in the novels of Prichard's middle period such as *Working Bullocks*. Anton's relationship with Laurel, the wife of his boss whom she has not slept with for twelve years, gradually develops: Laurel is liberated into physical life in a mild mediation of the Lawrencean philosophy, while Anton comes to have a more complex understanding of human feeling. Initially, Devanny suggests, Anton's predatory approach to his contact with women has led to his being primarily a destructive force; under the influence of Laurel and in his friendship with her son, Val, he is changed:

Many things he learned about the mother from the son; things which sometimes set him frowning and drove the spirit of calculating evil from his heart for fleeting moments. (p. 60)

Devanny's presentation of Laurel's liberation from the patriarchal forces of sexual repression is interesting in psychological terms. Her own alienation from her husband becomes increasingly clear to her through the dislike of him that her son, Dirk, expresses:

Frustration combined with dismay at his expressed dislike of his father reduced Laurel to silence. She felt responsible for it; felt some obscure, inexplicable connection between it and her own separate life. (p. 40)

Laurel moves towards Anton via a symbolic emotional return to her father, a bee-keeping country parson:

Sitting alone, looking out over the dark reaches of the river, she realised that her loyalty had shifted to another axis. It had revolved upon the axis of Macquarie's legal rights and her compassion for a husband cuckolded; now it swung on the basis of religious precept, personal dignity, and love of the Reverend Mr Verst. (p. 237)

The 'closed' married woman, who had not even accepted her father talking to her son about the reproductive cycle of the bee, becomes gradually released into physical connection with the natural life of Paradise Flow which the Slav comes increasingly to embody.

Class tensions are not central in this novel; they contribute to Laurel's increasing alienation from her husband over the eviction of tenants, but are perhaps primarily important in providing a convenient resolution in which Laurel and Anton can be united after a threatened tenant shoots Big Mac dead.

Devanny was expelled from the Communist Party in 1941 – her avowed feminism and forthright personality having no doubt contributed to her making enemies in various quarters over a period of time. Her own account of one alleged incident contributing to her expulsion is as follows:

I distinctly remember telling [Katharine Susannah Prichard] in Brisbane of some dreadful actions on the part of those young men I was supposed to 'debauch.' Actions such as one of them trailing me into the bush and finding me swimming in the pool (in my old-fashioned woollen swimsuit) throwing off his clothes and plunging in naked. I simply walked out the other end, ignoring him, picked up my towel and went off. . . . You know, Miles, I had simply *no* sex life, and I'm not pretending to be an angel at that.¹²

The grounds for her expulsion were never stated to Devanny and so it was difficult for her to defend herself against trumped up charges (conveyed to her only by hearsay) of 'sexual immorality,' 'political degeneracy' or 'ideological weakness.' She was never given a chance to defend herself publicly, but simply told that she would be readmitted when it became clear to the Party leadership that none of the charges could be substantiated. Devanny then decided upon two major writing projects, one

an autobiography, and the other a trilogy about the sugar industry, of which only the first volume, *Cindie*, was ever published. In 1944 she wrote of her new emphasis on writing as opposed to activism:

To get on with my sugar saga, I intend to go somewhere quiet and settle down for the years it will take me to write it. This work has been in my mind for so long that the characters are beginning to assume real life characteristics to me. But no matter what one does, the written word can never take on the vitality of one's dreams and aspirations.¹³

Devanny found, however, that when she tried to devote herself entirely to writing words did not come to her as easily as they used to; despite trying to "forget all about 'propaganda' talk in writing, and go ahead and write as it comes to me,"¹⁴ she found that her final view of *Cindie* was: "I will never write really well, Frank, only usefully. It is a chronicle, an excursion into creative reportage."¹⁵

Cindie is, nonetheless, one of Devanny's more interesting novels. It opens in the nineties on the Queensland canefields and deals in some depth with the transition from the period of the farmers' use of press-ganged Kanaka labour to the time when most of the Kanaka workers were repatriated as a result of the White Australia policy favoured by the Labour movement. At the beginning of the novel, the white landowner's family, with Cindie (who is originally the maid), attend a church service with the Kanakas, at which "Blanche was impressed and pleased with what she took to be a demonstration of semi-feudal fealty." (p. 51)

The sense of the conditions of pioneer life is conveyed mainly through Cindie, who almost at once embarks on working totally on the land, getting a sense of a creative relationship with the earth that is shared by the landowner's son Randy when he comes back to the farm after being away at school:

"It's like painting a picture or writing a book." . . . "I know all about these big artist blokes. They find it hard work producing something big. They have to sweat and grind, Cindie, just like we do building the farm. Beating the borer, the grubs, selecting and experimenting with canes, the soil, it's like an artist trying out different combinations of paints, or a writer working out his problems. I reckon that to be a good farmer,

Cindie, is as good as being a fine artist. That's how it looks to me. I bet no artist ever painted a finer picture than our paddocks of cane present in the sunset, Cindie." (p. 269)

Devanny's presentation of the labour involved in building the farm, and also of the Kanaka workers is romanticised to a degree, and is interestingly reminiscent in the latter case of Prichard's presentation of aborigines in her goldfields trilogy.

"Ah, yes, Randy," Cindie had replied wistfully. "But replacing the Kanakas by whites means taking the most colourful thing out of cane farming for me. The black bodies of the Kanakas amongst the golden cane: there's a picture for you, Randy! Black skin is so velvety and shining. And their singing! Randy, what shall I do without the singing of the Kanakas? Our whites are so — so dry! There seems to be no joy or romance in them.

"The blacks have educated me, Randy. Our own Aborigines and the Kanakas. Their talk of the earth, the sea, the sky, of bird and animal life, their spirit worlds. I can't bother with the white workers, somehow. I suppose they know about — things. I suppose they must have interests. But if I speak to them about nature they look at me as though I were mad. Once I asked a white worker: 'Don't you take any joy in life at all?' And what do you think he said? 'You bet! Ever stuck yer nose in a pint of beer?' Now, if I mentioned something about nature to a black he would tell me more about it than I already knew." (p. 270)

As in Prichard's *Roaring Nineties* there is a sense of richness and vitality in other races that is not possessed by greedy Anglo-Saxons in the early days of the colonisation of Australia. Devanny brings out racist elements in the position of some Labour leaders on the question of repatriation and their conflict with many landowners on this. A conversation between Biddow and his daughter, Irene, who has some Labour ideas, clarifies the interests involved. Biddow comments that the Labour Party's policy of repatriation has racist aspects:

"That's because you, as a big farmer, want to retain your cheap labour, Dad," Irene cried. "You're a boss yourself."

"Nothing of the sort, my girl. Yours is not a Labour theory at all. How can the setting of one race or nationality against another advance the conditions of the workers of any country? Tell me that! It can only assist the employing class of all countries to keep them down. Labour may be right in general but

in this particular they are playing the game of the most conservative of the tory class. Damned inhuman, I call it! Racial discrimination is a policy for scum! . . ." Not that Cindie and Bid-dow were alone in regretting the passing days when a benevolent semi-feudal regime was in general the order of plantation life and cruelty the uneconomic exception. The Montagues, Callaghans, and many others of the earliest settlers in the district were at one with them in this. But since the day of the Kanaka was numbered, the effortlessness of swimming with the rising tide induced in the majority of these readiness enough to respond to its appeal.

With *Cindie*, Devanny encountered a problem for 'socialist realism'; she was depicting the owning class with a degree of sympathy: and while her heroine starts out as a maid in the family, she marries the boss's son at the end of the novel. These chickens came home to roost and Devanny was unable to find a publisher for the second volume of the trilogy, entitled *You Can't Have Everything*. The Australasian Book Society refused it, and Party members passively or actively refused support for its publication.¹⁶

Prichard had partly avoided this problem with Stalinist critics by having her central characters, Sally and Dinny, become more and more neutral and undistinguished as the saga develops. Devanny became increasingly isolated both creatively and politically, her comments in 1945 showing that it was not only over the narrow precepts of socialist realism but also over sexual politics that she continued to experience difficulties:

The basis of all my trouble in the Party was my insistence on an absolute communist outlook on matters involving the relations of the sexes. I always came up against, particularly up here, [North Queensland], the vile and strong streak of petty bourgeoisdom in the members themselves in respect to sex relations.¹⁷

In Devanny's autobiography, she attempts to clarify the conflicting attitudes which led to campaigns against her as a leading feminist comrade by some of the members of a Party increasingly influenced by a puritanical Stalinism. She tries to explore the reasons why the events that happened were so personally and politically destructive for her:

Why was I so *oppressed*? Why while dreading non-acceptance of my book yet trembling in fear of it? It was, I think now,

the content of my subconscious at work. I have always rather scorned and spurned the popular theories of the psychologists and psychoanalysts, while recognising the value of Freud's critical methods, I have repudiated almost entirely the theory of the subconscious. But not again. Because I can find in the theory of the subconscious the only explanation of what has happened to me.¹⁸

A central thrust of her autobiography is to bring out that the problem was not her own individual one but that of a whole group¹⁹ – and was therefore not only of individual importance.

I feel that I am greatly to blame for much trouble, that has recently . . . as I hear by Party and non-party grapevine occurred in the ranks . . . through not making my stand in 1941. But of course bad health and breakdown blinded me then, and fear and terror of losing whatever family I had left. Well, I lost them anyhow. It is the greatest pity. I could have made a new life for myself and brought about a great change in the Party outlook where women are concerned.²⁰

Devanny made an immense contribution, through her novels and activism, to the workers' movement and the women's movement in Australia. The historical conjuncture, and the Party within which she found herself, partly built and then largely paralysed her, and diverted her into writing on natural history and about aboriginal customs and life in which she also made a distinctive and original contribution. Her story is still largely untold, and our literary and cultural history is the poorer for it.

NOTES

I should like to thank Jean Devanny's daughter, Pat Hurd, and Helen Mays of the James Cook University Library for assistance with my research.*

¹This situation is about to change. Redback Press in Melbourne are likely to republish *Sugar Heaven* and Auckland University Press will re-issue Devanny's first novel, *The Butcher Shop*, with an introduction by Heather Roberts. Queensland University Press plan to publish one of the drafts of Devanny's autobiography at some stage.

*LiNQ notes with deep regret the death of Pat Hurd in Townsville in December, 1980 – Ed.

- ²For an introduction to Devanny's novels set in New Zealand, see Carole Ferrier, "Jean Devanny's New Zealand Novels," *Hecate* VI, i, 1980, 36-47.
- ³Pat Hurd recalls that her mother was *not* arrested in the march reported in *Working Women*, 15 December 1930, reprinted in *Uphill All the Way*, eds., Daniells and Murnane, University of Queensland Press, 1980, pp. 304-6, but in another march at around that time.
- ⁴Kath Olive, in a letter to the *Tribune* about Devanny, 30 April, 1980.
- ⁵For an account of Devanny's activity in this area see Ch. 6 of Diane Menghetti, *The Red North: Some Aspects of the Popular Front in Queensland, 1935-1945*, James Cook University, 1980.
- ⁶Letter to Miles Franklin, 14 August 1953, Mitchell Library.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 8 April 1952.
- ⁸Letter to Lance Sharkey, 2 July 1959, James Cook University Library.
- ⁹Jean Devanny, "The Worker's Contribution to Australian Literature," F.A.W., *Australian Writers Speak*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1942, p. 63. Devanny had presumably not read William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise*, or she might have seen it as an earlier contender. Lane's paper, the *Worker*, is mentioned in *Cindie*, in the context of his support for the White Australia Policy (p. 110).
- ¹⁰Autobiographical material records that one leading N.Q. Party member said that the novel was unrealistic because "No Australian woman would have an affair with an Italian." Of course, relations were threatened with the rise of fascism but some workers managed to argue against anti-Italian strikes on the grounds that the majority of Australian Italians were anti-Fascist, as Doug Olive recalls in "Struggles in the Canefields and for Control of the A.W.U.," *Sixty Years of Struggle*, Vol. I, Melbourne, 1980, p. 26.
- ¹¹Letter to Duckworths, 5 August 1937, James Cook University Library.
- ¹²Letter to Miles Franklin, 1 May 1953, Mitchell Library.
- ¹³Letter to Frank Rylands, 16 November 1944, National Library.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, 18 May 1945.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 10 July 1945.
- ¹⁶A letter to the Australasian Book Society from Ted Bacon reads, in part:
 "The responsible comrades are quite definite that they cannot recommend publication of the book in its present form. Apart from other objections, they are critical of the fact that a wealthy farmer's family affairs are made the central theme."
 (Letter of 31 March 1960, James Cook University Library.)

- ¹⁷ Letter to Frank Rylands, 8 April 1945, National Library.
- ¹⁸ Letter to Miles Franklin, 6 November 1953, Mitchell Library.
- ¹⁹ Articles such as Tom O'Lincoln's "Women and the CPA, 1946-1968," *Hecate* VI, i, February 1980, 53-66, and Joyce Stevens' "Work Among Women' in the CP, 1920-1940," (unpublished paper, 1980) give a fuller insight into the problems of women in the CPA.
- ²⁰ Letter to Miles Franklin, 27 May 1954, Mitchell Library.

JOYCE COLE

NIGHT-TIME GEOMETRICS

Zig-zag of despair
on padded rectangle
stretches and tosses;
bones point, joints angle,
mouth-line encloses unuttered words.

Flesh still curves
circling uneasily the vacant space,
then tension slackens
and music of the spheres
orbits woman sleeping.