

LIHQ

LITERATURE IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

CENTENARY
100
Bulletin



Townsville Daily Bulletin Centenary:
Retrospective Issue

THE HEAD STOCKMAN.

LiNQ

LITERATURE IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

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TOWNSVILLE DAILY BULLETIN CENTENARY:
RETROSPECTIVE ISSUE

Selected and Edited by Cheryl Frost

Biographical Notes by Jim Manion

Original Illustrations from the
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Cover Design Anita Jetnikoff

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INTRODUCTION

Newspapers gave birth to literature in Australia; they were the nurses who fostered it and the governesses who directed its growth. In the nineteenth century, in a culture without radio or television, they alone informed on local and international politics, gave the facts necessary for business, and provided most people with literary entertainment or art. Their importance in the lives of the bush people and pioneers can hardly be stressed too much: there are tales of "paper circuits" in the outback, where a carefully-preserved copy would pass from station to station and from pub to pub, until its travels rivalled Leichhardt's or Marco Polo's; or of lonely shepherds who could recite by heart the newspapers piled under their bunks, or stuck on the bark walls of their huts, or laid on the floors. Many writers who are now studied with pursed lips in universities as "Australian literary figures" would have been content to be called journalists, because their poems and short stories published in newspapers were savoured or judged by a large group of their countrymen. The place of a writer in Australia now, limited to a readership of the "educated," is by no means so happy.

Though the role of one paper, the Sydney Bulletin, in fostering Australian letters, has been examined thoroughly, and the contribution of metropolitan illustrated newspapers such as the Queenslander and the Sydney Mail has been fleetingly considered, virtually no work has been done on the literary content of regional newspapers in Australia. This issue of LINQ is an initial effort towards filling this gap in respect of an easily-defined region – North Queensland. As anyone who has viewed the subject even from a distance knows, the history of newspapers is as complex and unpredictable as a game of chess, bedevilled with unexplained mergers and submergences, with burnt files, crumbling files, and files buried in libraries, with access only by bulldozer. In North Queensland, fortunately, a basic unity is imparted by the continued existence over a hundred years of the (now) Townsville Daily Bulletin and a group of papers associated with it: the Townsville Herald, the North Queensland Herald and the Northern Mining Register,

which is 1892 became the North Queensland Register. The centenary of the Bulletin, falling on 5th September this year, is commemorated in this issue of LiNQ and in the preceding issue.


Material for reprinting has been selected from the group of papers named, over the first twenty-five years of the Townsville Bulletin. Preference has been given to fiction and poetry by North Queensland writers, though work by writers resident elsewhere has also been included, where it seems to have been produced for the regional newspapers and first published there. Under these criteria, the Christmas Numbers of the North Queensland Register have proved the richest source.

The limitations and strengths of the fiction and poetry published by the Bulletin company in the closing decades of the nineteenth century reflect contemporary literary taste throughout Australia. The Townsville Bulletin was founded only twenty months after the Sydney Bulletin, and a certain parallelism based on chronology was inevitable. A major difference, however, was that whereas the Sydney writers had in mind an urban readership, removed from pioneering life in time and space, the readers of the North Queensland Register inhabited what was still the frontier. Active members of the community were engaged with the land in the mining, pastoral or transport industries, and often it was such people who turned their hands to writing when the day's work was done. That is why the writing in this volume is grouped according to occupation and environment. Such extroverted individuals had no opportunity to evolve complex attitudes – nostalgia or bitterness – towards the bush, and no aptitude for debating the merits of town and country living – there were no big towns. The result was a heightening in the literature of the region of what was, after all, an important characteristic of even the best of the Sydney writers – delight in narrative for its own sake. This delight, which is to be traced back to the national predilection for the bush yarn or anecdote, is as apparent in the poems republished here as it is in the stories.

Whether the reader regards the unreflective nature of the regional writing in this volume as an irremediable fault will depend on his taste. The critical view now in fashion is that a story is not worthy of the name unless it has a point; after

reading it, one must not be able to say, so what? This attitude reflects our sophisticated and self-critical society. But one of the geniuses of the short story, Geoffrey Chaucer, who lived in a different age, cheerfully produced stories both with points and without them. While the early writers for the North Queensland Register did not possess Chaucer's supreme brilliance in tale-telling, they offer readers some unique compensations: their direct and fresh engagement with a difficult, uncomfortable and often dangerous environment engages the heart and mind, while their prejudices and enthusiasms help explain the society which we have in North Queensland now.

C. F.



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