

CHERYL FROST

HUMOUR AND SATIRE IN  
EARLY NORTH QUEENSLAND WRITING

Humour in literature is usually related to unease or tension in reality. In societies in decline it often takes the form of satire, highlighting the distance between people's ideals and their practice. In pioneering societies, such as North Queensland until about 1910, it tends to be light-hearted and simple, presumably because the physical conditions of life do not leave much time for concentration on interior states or social problems. In any case, the tone of such societies is usually optimistic, whatever the rights and wrongs of colonial expansion may be.

Much of the humour in early North Queensland writing takes aspects of physical life as its subject. Victorian prudery ruled out sexual and scatological humour, and humorists therefore drew on the environment, especially, in the first place, on its fauna. Insects, above all mosquitoes, were a common theme. The following is part of a lengthy discussion on the subject by Robert Thomas Wood, who spent a year on a station west of Bowen early in the 1860's:

Ease was a stranger to me and apparently to nearly all. From the night of my arrival to the day of my departure, the only intervals of peaceful slumber I obtained was when the mosquitoes gorged with my blood rested a while until hunger made them fierce again. From sunset to sunrise they seemed omnipresent. If I sat down to read, a dozen or more would commence to buzz playfully round my head, settling now and then and thrusting their sharp bills deep under the skin, until I was almost maddened by their annoying attentions. It is useless however to take revenge in action. The only defence possible is to smoke fast and furiously, and brush partly away any individual whose long stay proves him to be more gluttonous than the rest. To strike in fury is a piece

of folly the uselessness of which is soon learned by experience. . . . There are some few mosquito slayers in Queensland who by long practice have attained to perfection. I sometime afterwards made the acquaintance of a young lady who would sit for hours in the evening carrying death into the buzzing host around her, and piling their corpses on the table before her until she had made quite a little pyramid as a monument of her prowess.<sup>1</sup>

Near the end, this passage moves from subjective humorous discomfort towards the objective grotesque. In a poem which he sent to his sister Edith from Bowen on 20th January, 1871, Ernest Favenc, who helped open up much new territory in North Queensland, kept his complaint ruefully personal:

I was far from all hope of a net-curtained bed,  
And mosquitoes upon me were 'lighting,  
And sadly I turned and covered my head,  
And sought not to think of their biting. . . .

Oh! give me a land where at peace I may rest  
Free from scratching and biting and sorrow  
And soundly I'll slumber and snore with the best  
And blissfully wake on the morrow.<sup>2</sup>

Among other early writers in North Queensland who deal seriously or comically with the mosquito were C.W. Bowly, Arthur Bicknell and Marian Rowan.<sup>3</sup>

The crocodile, at the other end of the biological scale, at least from the point of view of size, is another favourite topic of early North Queensland humour. Crocodiles, often referred to as alligators, inspired comparatively complex tales in which an element of fantasy predominated. They were part of a mystique which set out to prove that the region was inhabited by larger and stranger creatures than anywhere else — that it was a land where the impossible happened. Probably an analogy can be drawn with Texan claims to hugeness.

“A North Queensland Temperance Story,” which was published in Ernest Favenc’s second collection of stories in 1899, tells how Dick Transom’s mother-in-law vanished into the River Goram — into “a bottomless hole which was fairly alive with saurians.” She fell from the buggy as he was driving her up to the station on a visit to her daughter:

Ill-natured people remarked that the accident happened immediately after she had announced her intention of residing permanently with them. Anyhow, she was in the back seat of the vehicle, engaged in giving her son-in-law valuable advice, when the near hind wheel went over an extra-big boulder in the causeway, and as at the same moment the off one plumped into a hollow – the poor old lady, with but a small piece of her mind delivered, took a sudden header into the fathomless pool, from which, needless to remark, she never emerged.<sup>4</sup>

The problem was, though, that she took with her a hand-bag containing valuable articles and a will in favour of Transom's wife. He attacked the crocodiles in the pool with guns and dynamite, and recovered various parts of the old lady's anatomy, but not the handbag. – "It was rumoured amongst those gathered about the crossing that there was a crocodile of enormous size still dormant in the hole. He was a well-known character, and all were certain that he was not included amongst the slain."<sup>5</sup> Transom, who seems to have been full of enterprise, then prepared a bait for the crocodile – a good-sized leg of beef soaked in the rum served at old Rumblepeg's shanty at the crossing. The result was everything that could have been wished for, though not, perhaps, entirely believable. Transom came to the pool at dawn:

A low sandspit was in front of his post of observation, and on this the largest crocodile he had ever seen slowly and unsteadily dragged itself. Waddling across the wet sand it laid its head on a stranded log and groaned with such fervency that Transom had to groan in sympathy. Then it banged its head against the log in a dismal, reproachful sort of way, as much as to say, "No, I'll never, never touch it again; nothing shall ever tempt me. . . ."

After about five minutes spent in repentance and good resolutions, the crocodile seemed to be taken worse; it got up, swayed about on its short legs, gave a mighty heave, and there on the sand lay the long-sought handbag.

Rumblepeg's rum had beaten the dynamite.

Louis Becke, who during his stay in North Queensland was a companion of Favenc's, as well as later in Sydney, also told a tale about a saurian. Julius Augustus Jenkins, a young Englishman newly arrived in Townsville to work as a ledger-keeper, outdid the local bushmen in an alligator hunt by employing an unusual method of capture.<sup>7</sup> He hired as an observation post a bamboo hut built on stilts by Chinese shrimpers and fishermen on a low mangrove-island near the mouth of Ross River. After spending a miserable night in the hut in the pouring rain, he noticed towards dawn that the island had been submerged. Some exciting events followed:

Suddenly there arose a strange and violent commotion immediately beneath the floor of the hut, which presently began to sway to and fro, then came shakings, followed by a succession of thumps and bumps against the posts, and the hut canted over more than ever, and then began to move, and the occupant realized that he was adrift, and being carried down to the mouth of the river.<sup>8</sup>

The hut finally landed against some other mangrove islands, the rain ceased and the floodwater began to fall. An agitation nevertheless continued beneath the hut. Julius clambered down to investigate, and found in the folds of the net which the Chinamen had hung beneath the hut, "a huge *something* which certainly moved, and then a chill of horror passed through him as he saw the protruding forearm of an alligator."<sup>9</sup>

In a ballad published by Heber Hedley Booth, also in 1909, a much more conventional hunting technique meets with much less success. A group of bushmen stranded in Burketown by floods undertake an alligator hunt for amusement. Dick the Cheerful seizes a goat for a bait, without its owner's knowledge, and stakes it out among the mangroves. After a night in the open with the mosquitoes of the River Albert, which "came in their myriads strong," he is rewarded by the sight of what a Brisbaneite would have misjudged to be a rotten log, halfway across the stream. The decoy, however, has its own original way of response:

The 'gator made his rush too late, and flopped  
back in the flood with a splash,  
While viciously, right in Dick's line of sight, that

goat made his frantic dash.

The bullet harmlessly flicked his back, as he  
lowered his horns at the charge;

The Cheerful exclaimed as he hurriedly aimed –  
“That beast should not be at large!”<sup>10</sup>

Dick finally comes to rest on his back in the Burketown mud, a comic punishment for his *hubris* and aggressive optimism. The poet constantly resorts to the distinctive locality to explain unusual attitudes and events.

Crocodile stories became such a recognizable feature of the North Queensland literary scene that in *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* in 1908, E.J. Banfield consciously attempted to cap the genre by reporting on a crocodile which was actually discovered dead.<sup>11</sup>

The fauna was not the only aspect of pioneering in North Queensland to offer opportunities for comic exaggeration. In the 1890's Archibald Meston, who was one of the first serious students of aboriginal culture in North Queensland, and who led scientific expeditions to the Bellenden Ker Ranges and into Cape York, contributed to the *Sydney Bulletin* a series of articles entitled “The Land of the Crocodile.” He wrote under the pen name of Maroogaline. The following anecdote confirms and extends Favenc's view of the bush inn:

Tom Buckland is a well-known man in Charters Towers. Some years ago Tom was on his way up there from Townsville. There was no railway in those days, and accommodation was of the usual primitive type. Tom stopped to dine at a rum-selling caravansary on Ross River, about four miles out of Townsville, on the site of the present suburb of Mundingburra. On the table was a round of half-raw beef, carved by a dirty ruffian who wiped his sore eyes with the same towel with which he polished the table tumblers, and who looked as if he had lived since boyhood in a country destitute of water and soap. He cut the beef in hideous chunks, and called out, “Hey, there!” as he heaved each fragment across the table to an astonished guest. Just before the conclusion of this sumptuous repast, a meek-looking man came into the room and said: “I hope you coves won't go away until

that poor young chap is buried!" "What young chap?"  
"That young fellow lying out there in the kitchen."  
"In the kitchen?" "Yes; he died yesterday, and has  
been laid out in the kitchen ever since!"

Holy Mahomet! The banqueters rose as one man,  
and went out to the kitchen to see if this was not  
some ghastly joke. There was no joke about it.  
Stretched on a form, close to the fireplace where all  
the dinner had been cooked, was the corpse of a man  
in the first stage of decomposition, partly covered by  
kitchen towels that had probably been temporarily  
removed to wipe the dinner plates!<sup>1 2</sup>

The grog shanties flourished probably because they provid-  
ed an escape from the privations of bush life. The early Rock-  
hampton poet, Alexander Forbes, tried seriously to warn his  
fellow-workers against them:

I

In every petty inland town  
The publican has settled down  
    Convenient to the road,  
There stands his house, I know it well,  
And at a glance the eye can tell  
    The rascally abode.

II

No clergyman is stationed here,  
Nor church, nor chapel doth appear  
    In this most Christian village,  
But Satan can his high-priest send  
The spiritual wants to tend  
    Of those whom he would pillage.

III

Above the door, a gaudy sign  
Declares that spirits, ale, and wine  
    The public here may buy;  
And, like a spider, every day  
The landlord doth his web display  
    To catch the silly fly.

IV

Here thoughtless bushmen often come,  
And swamp their hard-earned cash in rum

Their constitutions spoiling;  
And in a week will fool away  
Those cheques, for which a twelve-month they  
    Have wearily been toiling.<sup>1 3</sup>

Forbes' intense homesickness when he first arrived in Queensland was related to his longing for "Scottish usquebaugh – Sweet Highland mountain dew."<sup>1 4</sup> While his comment on the local beverage does not bear comparison with Favenc's in his "Temperance Story," it is nevertheless forceful enough:

    In Queensland here, to me its clear  
    Good whiskey is not sold,  
The very smell of what they sell  
    Would make your blood run cold.<sup>1 5</sup>

Favenc wrote several stories about the bushman's institution of the spree. Though he was seriously aware of its destructiveness,<sup>1 6</sup> his typical treatment of it was comic. "Tommy's Ghost," which appeared in the same collection as the "Temperance Story," records an event on a remote outstation inhabited by two stockmen, Tommy and George, and old Ben, the cook. Tommy and Ben ride to a shanty to procure supplies for a spree. Tommy begins his potations on the return trip, to the point where on arrival he can no longer sit his horse: "Ben, however, thoughtfully saved the bottles and let Tommy fall, instead of doing what a new chum would have done – saving Tommy and letting the bottles fall."<sup>1 7</sup> Ben and George then begin on their share. When Tommy awakes and demands more rum, they tie him up. In the morning they discover to their horror that he has died, and they ride to the homestead to report, but on coming back in the evening they find that the body has vanished. Ben stays in the hut to cook a meal, while George goes to the creek for water, and encounters what could only be Tommy's ghost:

    Ben was fanning the smoky embers with his hat, when he heard a yell of terror that nearly took the roof off the hut, then came the sounds of flying feet towards the place. Ben's heart stood still, but his presence of mind did not desert him. With great pluck and promptitude he slammed the door in the face of George and his pursuer, and left him to fight it out outside.<sup>1 8</sup>

The problem is solved when the ghost's bad breath proves its corporeal quality.

Smoking was another habit of the male pioneer which is often given humorous treatment in early regional writing. Robert Wood, newly arrived from England, was much struck by it. He records his state of mind after a misadventure with a wild pig:

For about a week I found it best to lounge about on the verandahs spending my time in reading and smoking. In the latter pernicious amusement I was fast becoming an adept. Nearly everyone smokes in the bush, and those who do not, wish they could. In the silence and solitude of its life, some aim is necessary. Man cannot live without an object, and debarred from winning honour in the strife of crowds he takes — to colouring pipes.

Charley had a regular museum of clays and and meerschams coloured by his masterly lips, and was prouder of them than the most enthusiastic numismatologist ever was of his priceless coins and medals.<sup>19</sup>

The more sophisticated humour in early North Queensland writing has to do less with habits and conditions than with groups of people who stood out from seasoned bushmen or businessmen. These were the Chinese and aborigines, newcomers to the region, and parsons.

Some writers presented the callous treatment of the Chinese diggers by Europeans in a two-edged way: they looked on the victims with distaste, but simultaneously deplored their fellow-settlers' injustice. In his account of his adventures in North Queensland, published in 1895, Arthur Bicknell tells of a coach-trip in which the driver refused to stop for a worn-out Chinese traveller. The traveller climbed on the rear of the coach without being noticed and rested there for five miles until the driver discovered him and violently pushed him off. Bicknell seems to have regarded the incident as farcical and savage at the same time. E.J. Brady, who travelled through Australia in a wagon early this century, recorded a debate among his companions on an island in the Burdekin, when the vehicle had lost a wheel:

Jack said that, as a river, the Burdekin was nowhere

beside the Richmond. Jimmy Dunn assured him that the alligators were much more ferocious in the Jardine or Batavia Rivers up by Cape York. Around Cairns they were bad, but as they seemed to prefer Chinamen to any other form of diet, they were looked upon rather favourably than otherwise.<sup>2 1</sup>

The savage humour here is similar to Bicknell's. Ambivalence to both Europeans and Chinese is a feature of Louis Becke's irony near the beginning of his novella, *Chinkie's Flat*, published in 1903. A party of Chinese makes a rich gold strike:

. . . they were discovered by the aforesaid Peter Finnerty, who was out prospecting with a couple of mates. Their indignation that a lot of heathen "Chows" should be scooping up gold so easily, while they, Christians and legitimate miners, should be toiling over the barren ridges day after day without striking anything, was so great that for the moment, as they sat on their horses and viewed the swarming Chinese working their cradles on the bank of the creek, the power of speech deserted them. Hastily turning their tired horses' heads, they rode as hard as they could to the nearest mining camp, and on the following day thirty hairy-faced foreign devils came charging into the Chinese camp, uttering fearful threats, and shooting right and left (with blank cartridges).<sup>2 2</sup>

The humour about aborigines in early North Queensland writing depends mainly on their refusal to conform to white men's expectations. E.J. Banfield, for instance, who gave such patient and unjudging attention to sun birds, bailer shells, and creeping palms was constantly critical of the black man's distinctiveness. The following incident, recounted near the beginning of *The Confessions of a Beachcomber*, exemplifies Banfield's approach throughout his four books:

From a mound adjacent to the beach a black boy brought fifteen eggs as we picnicked on the beach. . . . Another boy had eaten his very substantial lunch, but the eggs were tempting and he baked two. One, and that new-laid, is ample for an ordinary mortal. The condition of the first resembled that which the embarrassed curate described as "good in

parts"; but Mickie was not nice over a half-hatched egg. Indeed, was it not rather more piquant than otherwise? The second proved to contain a fully developed chicken. Now, the chick emerges from the shell feathered, and this, but for the unfortunate accident of discovery, would have begun to scratch for its living in a day or two. Mickie flicked away the fragments of shell from the steaming dainty and laid it snugly on a leaf. "That's for Paddy" – an Irish terrier, always of the party. Presently Paddy came along; but Paddy, who, too, had lunched, bestowed merely a sniff and a "No, thank you" wag of the tail. "What, you no want 'em? All right." No second offer was risked, and in a moment, in one mouthful, the chick was being crunched by Mickie, feathers and all. The menu of the Chinese – with its ducks' eggs salted, sharks' fins and tails, stewed pups, fowls' and ducks' tongues, ficasseed cat, rat soup, silkworm grubs and odds and ends generally despised and rejected – is pitifully unromantic when set against the generous omnivory of Australian blacks.<sup>2 3</sup>

Jack McLaren, who lived on the west coast of Cape York from 1911 to 1919 – that is, during the latter part of Banfield's stay on Dunk Island – had a very similar attitude to the aborigines. He employed a tribe to labour for him in clearing his land, planting his coconut palms, and building his house. They were his only human companions, and he devoted a considerable portion of his book, *My Crowded Solitude*, first published in 1926, to what he regarded as their strange and incipiently comic habits. What most distressed, or amused, McLaren was the aborigines' attitude to work. Because they sat late around the campfire talking and singing, they were difficult to arouse in the mornings. Lunch was the main meal of the day, and he was dismayed to discover that it too was always followed by a siesta. If, while working, they saw a wallaby or any other food, they would instantly chase or gather it. There was a further problem, which he describes with characteristic humour:

Those of the labourers who were married were in the habit of going off to the camp every now and then to see that all was well with their wives. These

people had a most absolute distrust of their women. They believed no woman should be out of her husband's sight for long. There was always some other man who desired her, I was told, and as often as not the woman desired the man. It was quite an easy matter to lose a woman, and the only thing for the husband to do was to keep alert. There was one labourer who was missing several times a day for this reason; but why he should have worried I do not know, for his wife was by far the most unattractive woman in the camp and somewhat elderly besides; in fact I suspected his anxiety was merely a ruse to gain respite from his labourings — till one afternoon I came across him spying the camp from behind a conveniently concealing tree. I don't know, however, whether he was afraid or merely hopeful.<sup>24</sup>

The townie, or tenderfoot is a frequent source of amusement in the fiction of Becke and Favenc. Becke favours characters who find adjustment to raw towns like Townsville difficult, while Favenc deals more often with newcomers to the bush. Julius Adolphus finally comes to terms with his new environment, though inadvertently, as we have seen. A similar character in *Chinkie's Flat* exists solely as a comic butt:

Mallard looked out of the window and saw a very diminutive man in evening dress.

“Oh, that's little Assheton, the new manager for the Australian Insurance Company. He's just out from England. He's a fearfully conceited ape, but a smart fellow at the insurance business. Great fun at the 'Queen's' the other day with him. He came in, dressed in a frock coat, tall hat, and carrying a thick, curly stick as big as himself. Of course every one smiled, and he took it badly — couldn't see what there was to laugh at; and when Old Charteris, the Police Commissioner, asked him how much he would 'take for his hat' he put his monocle up and said freezingly, 'Sir, I do not know you.' That made us simply howl, and then, when we had subsided a bit, Morgan the barrister, who is here on circuit with Judge Cooper, said in that funny, deep, rumbling voice of his —

“Are you, sir, one of the ah-ah-circus company which -ah-arrived today?”<sup>2 5</sup>

The baiting continues, and Assheton is finally driven to bring in the police sergeant and demand Charteris' arrest, when the latter's position is at last revealed to him. In this passage, and throughout the novella, Becke supports the ideal of the businessman who is also a relaxed bushman, in tune with the realities of the frontier. Both the style of humour and the ideal suggest that he had a youthful audience in mind. Even so, *Chinkie's Flat* casts some light on social expectations in Townsville at the turn of the century.

Favenc tells two stories about inexperienced superintendents of outback stations. In the earlier, a feud develops between the newcomer and a stockman named Tranter:

The new super. was a young man from the South, and Tranter was an old Gulf hand. The new super. was a black-protector and temperance-advocate, and objected to swearing. Tranter, to sustain his character as an old Gulf hand, swore the most blood-curdling oaths in his presence, and told the most awful lies he could invent about black atrocities.<sup>2 6</sup>

The story opens when Tranter announces that he has killed someone: “shot him like a dog.” The super. assumes that the victim is an aboriginal, and follows a complicated trail in search of the corpse. When this is finally uncovered, it turns out to be, in fact, a dog. In the second story<sup>2 7</sup> a new super. has some astounding, revolutionary techniques for taming cattle. In the end it is discovered that he is a failed clergyman suffering from brain fever. Like Becke, therefore, Favenc derived comedy from the gap between some people's ideals and expectations and the region's actual, unchangeable conditions.

Many writers on bush life, from Henry Lawson to Steele Rudd, have seen the parson as incongruous, unnecessary or comic. The parson does not figure frequently in Becke's North Queensland fiction, though the following sketch in *Chinkie's Flat* suggests that he shared the view of his fellow writers for the *Bulletin*. He is describing the paying guests at a highly-refined boarding-house on the Strand in Townsville:

Others of Mrs Trappeme's guests were the local Episcopalian clergyman and his wife — the former was

a placid, dreamy-looking, mild creature, with soft, kindly eyes. He smiled at everyone, was evidently in abject terror of his wife – a hard-featured lady about ten years his senior, with high cheek-bones and an exceedingly corrugated neck and shoulders.<sup>28</sup>

Favenc, on the other hand, portrays a number of comic clergymen. His best known story, "The Parson's Blackboy,"<sup>29</sup> deals with the consequences of a practical joke: an aboriginal girl disguised as a boy is foisted on the Rev. Joseph Simmondsen as a guide. The perpetrators of the joke are the superintendent and men at Upton Downs station, all seasoned bushmen. The story partly depends on the acknowledgment that liaisons between white men and aboriginal women were common in the bush – an acknowledgment which is rarely made in early regional writing, though it has been stressed by Xavier Herbert, especially in *Poor Fellow My Country*.

The incident provides an insight, too, into the nature of bush humour, described as follows by E.J. Brady:

The Bush joke is direct – and mostly practical. The schoolboy puts a bandicoot or a jewlizard in his neighbour's desk, the youth glues his rival in love to the saddle with cobbler's wax. Some fellows out-back and in the little towns think out elaborate freak jokes and perpetrate them, but mostly bush humour runs on set lines.<sup>30</sup>

Such jokes would provide a logical social basis for the simple humour which predominates in early North Queensland writing, and which I have so far been attempting to illustrate. Departures from white, male and frontier norms were the main comic subjects. There were, however, some minor but significant exceptions to this.

In the first place, the educated newcomers, including parsons, occasionally viewed the local bushmen with a kindly but penetrating eye. Gilbert White, who was to become the first Anglican Bishop of Carpentaria in 1900, recorded the following incident from his early years in North Queensland:

One day at Charters Towers I was in my study struggling with my Sunday's sermon, when my house-keeper came to tell me that there was a man at the back door who wanted to see me. At the door stood a

short, unkempt fellow. He did not speak, but looked up and down and finally round, as if for inspiration, and being an experienced man I knew, from the dumb anxiety, that matrimony was in the air. At length I asked, "Well, what do you want?" "Why, it's just this — my mate here, he's come on a little marrying job." "Where is your mate?" "Oh, he's there," jerking his thumb over his shoulder, "he's behind the tank." "Then he'd better come out," and from behind the sheltering tank slowly emerged a huge six-foot-two bullock driver, with a very red face, twirling his hat nervously in his fingers. "So you want to get married?" "Yes, your reverence, to tell the truth, it's just like this. I've been on a long trip with my team, and yesterday I got paid in full, £80. Well, I met a friend or two, and I wouldn't say but what we may have had a glass or so of whisky, and last night I thought I'd have a camp in the yard of the hotel, and when I woke up this morning I found that every penny of the £80 was gone, so I thought that the best thing I could do was to go right away and get married, and then next time I get any money perhaps I'll be able to keep it."<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, the successful business people and Government officials of the coastal towns were attacked by two writers — Wood and Becke — for snobbery and chicanery. Anyone who has glanced at M.J. Fox's *History of Queensland*,<sup>32</sup> in which many a pioneer family asserts its connection with the British aristocracy, will be aware that snobbery in North Queensland was not confined to the towns. Yet I have not read any attack on the squatters on that ground, possibly because potential satirists were aware of the squatters' real qualities of endurance, determination and enterprise. Wood's view of the comfortable classes in "Lowerton" — probably Bowen — on the other hand, was far from flattering:

Most of the residents are Government Officers, publicans, storekeepers and persons in their employ. Of the first class there are a large number, and they with the more influential of the storekeepers form the aristocracy of the place. And a terrible aristocracy it is to face. The genius of Chesterfield would hardly

have saved him from a mistake sooner or later, had it been his lot to have mingled with that exclusive community. The lady whom my friend had pointed out to me as the leader of fashion in a Northern town was the wife of one of the leading Government officials, and the acknowledged queen. Her position was in no degree higher than that of many others there, yet she bestowed the unbounded honour of her acquaintance only on a select few and looked upon the rest with more than the contempt of a Brahmin for a pariah.<sup>3 3</sup>

Wood visited this lady in her home and later joined the party accompanying her to a ball. The ball-room was brightly lit and the guests very pretentious, but a large sign suspended from the roof carried the words "Muggins Auctioneer." Towards the end of the evening several distinguished men got drunk and began a brawl. Wood's friend, Charley, the squatter, later drew the following moral:

"There's a type for you of colonial fashionable life," said Charley as we walked to our hotel. "It's always so North here somehow; the cloven hoof will appear. The fact is, Fred, we're a money-making people, and when we take to making anything else, we generally 'end-up' with making asses of ourselves."<sup>3 4</sup>

Wood then raised the problem of how to bring the disturbers of the peace to book, since they were all justices of the peace. (Louis Becke was to consider a similar question, much less critically, in the incident involving Assheton, already quoted, in *Chinkie's Flat*, nearly forty years later.) Charley replied that obviously the offenders would not be charged. Wood then digresses to an anecdote about events which were said to have occurred once in Lowerton on the day after the Queen's birthday. It encompasses several characteristic motifs of early regional humour:

As usual after a holiday, there was a large number of drunken cases at the police court. The sergeant of police hunted all over the town for a justice, and after searching for some time in vain (for all were too unwell after the affair of the evening before) he managed to get a young man who had recently been put on the commission to come down and hear the

cases. The young gentleman had been one of the farthest gone at the party and was now suffering a recovery, but duty prevailed over inclination and he walked with faltering steps to the court.

“Any serious cases, Sergeant?” he enquired as he took his seat on the bench.

“No, your worship, only drunk and disorderly,” replied the official.

“Then bring them all up at once,” said the justice. The astonished sergeant stared but complied, and about twenty men stood before the majesty of the law as embodied in the law’s administrator. He tried to look dignified: a troublesome thing for a man whose head aches from long and deep potations to accomplish, especially when his eyes are as red as those of a white mouse. He did his best however, and looked no worse than many of the prisoners.<sup>3 5</sup>

Not surprisingly under the circumstances, the story ends with all charges dismissed.

Becke’s novel, *Tom Gerrard*, which is set mainly in North Queensland, was first published in 1904. The narrative seems to take place some decades earlier, since the fourth chapter deals with a feud between Bowen and “the vulgar, upstart, and newly-founded Townsville.”<sup>3 6</sup> By quoting supposed editorials from partisan newspapers, Becke simultaneously exposes the absurd virulence of the feud and satirises both towns. Townsville’s only available possession is said to be mud, “and bad mud at that,”<sup>3 7</sup> while Bowen is roundly abused as “that little tin-pot township with its *coterie* of highly-paid, useless officials, who for six years past have battered on the public revenues.”<sup>3 8</sup> The alleged editorial continues:

The community consists of boozy squatters, snobbish wives of snobbish officials, anaemic old maids, obsequious tradesmen on the verge of insolvency, and two respectable and hard-working persons – the latter are Chinamen. The ‘tony’ society of Bowen is about as lively and intelligent as that of a decaying Cathedral town in the old country. The atmosphere of matchless snobbery and vulgarity that pervades Bowen can be perceived by the passing

voyager many miles out at sea.<sup>3 9</sup>

The agreement between Wood and Becke surely has an important bearing on the realities of Bowen's social life over the forty-year span.

Bicknell states that Government jobbery was "exceedingly conspicuous" in Townsville, and hints at some corruption.<sup>4 0</sup> This also receives a degree of corroboration from Becke, who in a later story, "The Pearl Divers of Roncador Reef," writes of hospital officials who took bribes from dishonest local tradesmen to falsify accounts.<sup>4 1</sup> Perhaps, since the context is fictional, the satire is not seriously intended, though other aspects of Townsville are realistically portrayed.

Humour, then, took various forms in early North Queensland writing. Aspects of life which caused discomfort to the pioneers, such as mosquitoes and crocodiles, were exaggerated to create fantastic, even surreal, comedy. Customs of the bush such as the spree and smoking were seen as funny, mainly because they departed from normal behaviour in the capital cities and in Europe. On the other hand, people such as Chinese and aborigines, tenderfeet and parsons, who could not or would not adapt to the European provincial norm, were constant objects of comic attack. On the whole, the early colonizers of North Queensland seem not to have had much capacity for self-criticism. Satire of snobbery and minor legal corruption among the businessmen and government officials of Bowen and Townsville is the only significant expression of such an attitude. It remains to be seen whether cultural conditions in the region since about 1920 have encouraged the growth of a more sophisticated comic spirit.<sup>4 2</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Bush and Town or Twelve Months in Northern Queensland* (unpublished novel, c. 1865) pp.34-35 (manuscript).

<sup>2</sup> The letter, with poem on verso, is held by the Mitchell Library. The poem was subsequently published under the title, "An Unpublished

Melody of Moore's" in the *Queenslander*, 11th November, 1871, p.6.

<sup>3</sup>C.W. Bowly's letter from Lammermoor station, 24th January, 1874; Arthur C. Bicknell. *Travel and Adventure in Northern Queensland*. London: Longmans, Green, 1895, p.39; Marian Ellis Rowan. *A Flower-Hunter in Queensland and New Zealand*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1898, p.23.

<sup>4</sup>*My Only Murder and Other Tales*. Melbourne, Sydney, London: George Robertson, 1899, p.231.

<sup>5</sup>p.234.

<sup>6</sup>pp.235-6.

<sup>7</sup>"Julius Adolphus Jenkins's Christmas Alligator." *Queenslander*. 14th December, 1907 (Christmas Supplement); reprinted in *'Neath Austral Skies*. London: John Milne, 1909, pp.105-37.

<sup>8</sup>p.119.

<sup>9</sup>p.121.

<sup>10</sup>*Opalodes: Patriotic and Miscellaneous Verses*. Brisbane: Powell, 1909, p.78.

<sup>11</sup>Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974, pp.123-35.

<sup>12</sup>*Bulletin*. 8th October, 1890.

<sup>13</sup>"The Mantrap," in *Voices from the Bush*. Rockhampton: *Northern Argus* Office, 1869, pp.20-21.

<sup>14</sup>"Mountain Dew," in *Voices from the Bush*, p.17.

<sup>15</sup>*ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>16</sup>For example, in "That Other Fellow," first published in the *Bulletin*, 17th December, 1892, p.15, and then in *The Last of Six*. Sydney: *Bulletin* Newspaper Company, 1893, pp.127-41.

<sup>17</sup>*My Only Murder and Other Tales*, p.55.

<sup>18</sup>*ibid.*, p.60.

<sup>19</sup>*Bush and Town or Twelve Months in Northern Queensland*, pp.165-66.

- <sup>20</sup> *Travel and Adventure in Northern Queensland*. London: Longmans, Green, 1895, p.47.
- <sup>21</sup> *The King's Caravan. Across Australia in a Wagon*. London: Edward Arnold, 1911.
- <sup>22</sup> *Chinkie's Flat and Other Stories*. London: George Bell, 1904, p.3.
- <sup>23</sup> p.24.
- <sup>24</sup> *My Crowded Solitude*. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966, pp.38-39.
- <sup>25</sup> pp.57-58.
- <sup>26</sup> "Tranter's Shot," in *The Last of Six*, p.50.
- <sup>27</sup> "The New Super of Oakley Downs," in *My Only Murder and Other Tales*, pp.74-78.
- <sup>28</sup> p.60.
- <sup>29</sup> Printed in *The Last of Six*, pp.102-107, and subsequently in various anthologies.
- <sup>30</sup> *The King's Caravan*, p.327.
- <sup>31</sup> *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1918, pp.30-31.
- <sup>32</sup> *The History of Queensland: Its People and Industries*. 3 vols. Adelaide: States Publishing, 1919-1923.
- <sup>33</sup> *Bush and Town*, p.113.
- <sup>34</sup> p.124.
- <sup>35</sup> pp.133-34.
- <sup>36</sup> London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1904, p.51.
- <sup>37</sup> p.52.
- <sup>38</sup> p.58.
- <sup>39</sup> p.58.

<sup>40</sup> *Travel and Adventure in Northern Queensland*, pp.34-35.

<sup>41</sup> *The Pearl Divers of Roncador Reef and Other Stories*. London: James Clarke, 1908, pp.11-12.

<sup>42</sup> I wish to express my thanks to the librarians of James Cook University, who provided me with favourable working conditions and patiently answered questions about the material dealt with in this paper. Discoveries made while working on a project funded by the Australian Research Grants Scheme provided background knowledge essential for the completion of the article.

DAL STIVENS

CONCRETE POEM

**B**  
NEUTRON/ALD  
E = MC<sup>2</sup>  
**B**

*Dal Stevens 1981*