

Being a Queenslander: A form of literary and geographical conceit*

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THERE IS a saying in Queensland that the real Australia doesn't begin until you are north of Rockhampton; and as a Queenslander and a passionately arrogant one—but not defensive—I place this statement beside those pejorative remarks that have accumulated over the years—Queensland the home of cockroaches, white-ants, bananas—the slick offences from that part of my childhood spent in Melbourne. My father has gummed to his sub-editor's desk in the *Courier-Mail* a verse that greatly amused him. He had cut it out of the Melbourne University magazine:

The people of Melbourne
Are frightfully well-born.
Of much the same kidney
Is the beau monde of Sydney.
But in Queensland the people insult yer
And don't 'ardly know they've been rude
They're that ignorant common and crude.
It's hardly worth
Mentioning Perth.

Many people have speculated on suffering as being an impetus to the creative instinct. Similar to being a Catholic perhaps, with Catholicism's early emphases on the nature of guilt, damnation, eternal punishment, the beauty of suffering (not involuntarily but voluntarily), being a Queenslander in Australia provides much in the nature of achieving possible apotheosis.

Originally it was the isolation of the place, the monstrous distances, the very genuine suspicions of political neglect and expedience by a federal government located two thousand miles away. And when I say two thousand, I am referring, of course, to those areas where the real Australia begins. When I was a teacher in Townsville, during the Punic Wars as Albee might say, I always remarked silently and amusedly the manner in which the locals referred to southerners—and they didn't mean the people of New South Wales or Victoria—or even Tasmania (where is it?); they meant Brisbane.

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Queensland separated from N.S.W. in 1859 when it received self-government. What is there that is different? What causes the listener who has been told "I come from Queensland" to repeat the words always with rising inflection and ever so slight italics?—"You come from Queensland?" After all our origins were much the same as Sydney's—convicts, brutality. We killed the local inhabitants with as much brio. This is only a suggestion but I think it goes back to something far more basic than this. The human race places great store on the outward trappings of conventional behaviour—or conformist behaviour. Almost from the first, Queenslanders made no attempt to reduplicate the architecture of their southern neighbours. Houses perched on stilts like teetering swamp birds, held stiff skirts all round, pulled a hat brim low over the eyes; and with the inroads of white-ants not only teetered but eventually flew away. And then, we tend to build houses so that we can live underneath them. Perhaps those stilts made southerners think of us as bayside-dwelling Papuans. Our dress, too, has always been more casual. Our manners indifferent, laconic, in temperatures that can run at over ninety for weeks on end.

Growing up in Brisbane in the thirties and forties meant alignment with a shabby town, a sprawling timber settlement on a lazy river; meant heat and dust and the benefits of the sub-tropics—brighter trees, tougher sunlight, slower-moving people and a delicious tendency to procrastinate. I think it was the weather. These virtues were raised to the n^{th} power north of Rocky. Our school readers, apart from standard classics, promulgated those writers we learnt to associate with Queensland influences, if not Queensland birth. Brunton Stephens, Essex Evans and Ernest Favenc we took jealously as part of our culture; add to this that writers like Zora Cross, Steele Rudd, A. G. Stephens, William Baylebridge and Vance Palmer were actually born there and these names became pennants we waved.

I have an idea that Queenslanders were not early conscious of a kind of federal racism directed at them until late in the war and after. The scandalous implications of the Brisbane Line which still brings a rush of blood to the necks of old-timers were perhaps what first directed the Queenslanders' realization that he was disregarded, a joke, a butt, to the attempt to compete and prove cultural worth. Queensland had already produced two artists who received national recognition—Lahey and Hilder—and after the

American rape Brisbane's little cultural parterres blossomed in galleries, theatre and literary magazines. *Meanjin* had its birth-pangs on the sub-editor's table of the *Courier-Mail* where Clem Christesen was working. A few young students from Brisbane High conceived the idea of a youth magazine called *Barjai* which ran for at least five years and was the nurturing ground of writers like Barrie Reid, Laurence Collinson, Vida Smith, Charles Osborne and myself. Later again the Brisbane Art Gallery received a much needed injection when it was directed by Laurie Thomas. (Memories here of a childhood trailing the brown paintings the directors previously had so loved—my paternal grandfather in those days had a landscape hung—and we would religiously stand before it in those gloomy rooms before taking a breather under the cotton palms of the outside garden and eating stale scones and drinking scalding tea—very brown—at the kiosk.)

I don't think my love affair with Queensland ripened into its mature madness until I came south to live. Maybe it was the resentment I felt when the Education Department appointed me on the status of "first year out", negating at a pencil-stroke the five years in which I had been teaching in the north. Maybe it was the remark of a head teacher here who stated solemnly that Queensland had the lowest educational standards in the world. Those things, together with recollections of the grotesque black comedy of teaching conditions, the un-withheld warmth of people who had become dear to me, and in latter years, the monstrous bathetic quality of him I can only refer to as Our Leader—who is not indeed, a Queenslander, but as one of my colleagues says, "One of nature's Queenslanders".

Since the war there has been interested and active writing growth. When I was eighteen, I met Paul Grano who was on a Commonwealth Literary Grant and had just published a collection called *Poems Old and New*. Although Grano was born in Victoria, he had lived in Queensland since 1932. Many of Grano's poems in this collection were the direct result of the Queensland environment, and if you will again forgive my *levitas*—I quote in full:

Patriotism (After visiting the Rest Room at the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau).

All wood here used is Queensland wood,
the blossoms pictured are of Queensland trees,
the table, too, is as it should
be, a product of our factories,

we must agree are not so good
 the paper flowers with wiry stem
 but let it quite be understood—
 they're Queensland flies that crawl on them.

I ignore totally the irony of Grano at this point and cite the poem only as a positive pronouncement on the aggressive patriotism of the Queenslander which he saw, understood and was amused by.

But his own nationalism was never in doubt. He says in "Quest":

Should I set out for Seville,
 (O orange-scented air!)
 it'll be in search of Gosford
 and gold-pied orchards there.

In dim Westminster Abbey,
 where memoried great men lie,
 I'll seek the long forgotten
 graves where the teams went by.

On cold starlighted prairies,
 where covered waggons pressed,
 I'll listen for the hooving
 of cattle to our west.

O when I sail from Brisbane,
 I'll search each strangling way
 to find the flaming visions
 that home-blind eyes betray.

It was for me, anyway, quite remarkable to find that someone could draw his poetics from Samford and Cleveland and write in his semi-satiric poem "A New Shirt!" Why? (Grano wore dark green shirts only):

That day on Coot-tha
 when we saw fall
 from furnaced clouds
 rain sifting down
 like golden ash
 on Brisbane town

—and it was about then that I realized the shabby areas of town and country which I publicly demolished to my southern friends but privately adored could be unashamedly declared as lyric argument. You see the nub of my paper is that literary truth is derived from the parish, and if it is truth it will be universal. A colleague, Manfred Mackenzie, says of me "You may think I'm parochial but I'm really elemental". Further to this point here is a

comment from Grano's notes on *Poems Old and New* about a poem called "The Tree Planter":

Written about 1938. I had in mind the case of a wife of a cane-farmer in north Queensland. He specialized in working up farms and then selling, so that the family were frequently on the move. In some thirty years they had twenty-two different homes! At each new place she would plant fruit trees hoping that at last the wanderings were done with and the family finally settled. The trees had not matured before the family shifted to another holding. The final shift was to a suburb of Brisbane.

Here is the poem:

She so often planted trees,
tidy orange and cool-leaved custard-apple,
shrubby mulberry and dark-shadowed mango,
but ever her sorrow she saw no fruit;
if there for the blossoming
she had left ere the ripening
and others it was who ate of her labour
or greedy for caneland put axe to the roots
of the trees she had mind to grow old with.
And now she is old, with no orchard to walk in;
and her mouth, should it harshen with longing,
there is none of her fruit for its comfort
but only the cart—or the shop-bought!
Her sorrow it is
who planted so many trees.

Instantly there comes to mind the Victorian Bruce Dawe's poem "Drifters". (Dawe now lives and works in Queensland.)

One day soon he'll tell her it's time to start packing,
And the kids will tell "Truly?" and get wildly excited for no reason,
and the brown kelpie pup will start dashing about, tripping everyone
up,
and she'll go out to the vegetable-patch and pick all the green
tomatoes from the vines,
and notice how the oldest girl is close to tears because she was
happy here,
and how the youngest girl is beaming because she wasn't.
And the first thing she'll put on the trailer will be the bottling-set
she never unpacked from Grovedale,
and when the loaded ute bumps down the drive past the blackberry-
canes with their last shrivelled fruit,
she won't even ask why they're leaving this time, or where they're
heading for
— she'll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
"Make a wish, Tom, make a wish."

I suppose Dawe's poem is the better written. I think it is. But to support my statement that the parish is the heart of the world, I argue that the idea behind both poems is the same—each deals with the insensitivity and materialism of the male, and the more poetic "nesting" sensibility of the female (not only in practical terms) and so each poem contains its own universality. Whether a writer takes his matter from an isolated hamlet in Patagonia or the lushest cities of Europe, the clichéd beauties of the English countryside or the salt-pans west of Isa, it is the manner in which these things are seen and interpreted that creates the truth and the poem—not the thing itself.

But one who has returned, his eyes blurred maps
of landscapes still unmapped, gives this account:
'The third day, cockatoos dropped dead in the air.
Then the crows turned back, the camels knelt down and stayed there,
and a skin-coloured surf of sandhills jumped the horizon
and swamped me. I was bushed for forty years.
And I came to a bloke all alone like a kurrajong tree.
And I said to him: "Mate—I don't need to know your name—
Let me camp in your shade, let me sleep, till the sun goes down."' "

You see when Stow writes like that it is not intellectual magnificence that moves the heart. Only simplicity is truly moving—which explains why one weeps over Lawson's Mrs Spicer but not over Laura Trevelyan's Voss. Grandeur inspires awe and wonder. Rarely tears. And of course simplicity is the heart of the parish.

John Blight is a Queenslander who has published five collections of poetry since 1945. His heart-land is the Central Queensland coast and *My Beachcombing Days* is a group of ninety free-form sonnets concerning the sea and its littoral celebrations of shell, fish, gull, elegies for the rotting coastal towns and the growth that is spoiling the unspoiled:

But people mass down on the beach, and some are so clever
no matter how early I rise, I despair
of finding a quiet beach, with no footprints there.

His latest collection, *Hart*, although Blight has now moved to a city, is larded with sea memories and images of small places. I take the opening lines from "Evolution":

Remember, while you are sleeping here off shore
in the night, less than a suburb away, more
than a suburb of people in numbers, the fish
are awake and swimming much as they wish.

Or "On Sundays":

Up, up the steep dune the crab trudged
 knitting the tracery of its steps on eight legs;
 marks of lace left where it passed through marram grass.
 Down, down a blind alley man dodged/vomiting his guts and
 language, dregs
 of his wages spent; leaving broken glass
 —so I want to get away on Sundays to the beach.

Parson Ellery said, "Why don't you come and teach
 Sunday-school on Sunday afternoons, John?"

I woudn't have it on. I have to teach
 myself that I can understand the non-
 christian purity of crabs living, with none
 of the benefits of Holy Ghost, the Father and the Son.

Gwen Harwood, Peter Porter, Thomas Shapcott, Judith Green, David Malouf and David Rowbotham are Queenslanders who have made considerable contributions to poetry even though Porter has fled and Harwood now lives elsewhere. And to be honest I must concede the Porter himself says "I don't write very often about Australia as my life is now firmly centred in England".

But even though Malouf has moved from Queensland, that flavour still informs his work, particularly the novel *Johnno*. (I must digress at this point to comment that in response to the "I was a lapsed Catholic radical stud" autobiographical novel that has been thudding regularly on to reviewers' desks, there is a wave of "I was a tortured Queensland sensitive".) *Johnno* is a beautiful evocation of the Queensland wound and it certainly heads a large list of others like Trist's *Morning in Queensland*, Hall's *A Place among People*, and Macklin's *The Queenslander*. But I am fearful that with my contributions as well we will create some kind of tropic cliché. Of course subject-matter has travelled far since the publication in 1929 of *The Way of the Golden Dawn*—some Simple Thoughts and Stories for Mothers and their Children by Mary Ethel Challands and Kathleen Mylne, the sub-suffering jollities of Dad and Dave, the unreal romances of Mrs Campbell Praed, the agonies of Brian Penton as Landtaker, the getting-closer-to-the-truth-of-things of Jack McLaren and Vance Palmer. Since Fred Slater of Charters Towers wrote his escapist operetta in two acts—*Nell of the Navy*—we have moved into areas of social concern that can review the "smoking out" days of the early Queensland settlements, times when settler historian George Loyau could write without a blink: "Every acre of land in these districts

was won from the Aborigines by bloodshed and warfare, whilst in some instances poison played an important part"—and thence to a rather terrible self-concern that takes the ego as its only subject, punch-ball, exercise yard. "Memory", Shapcott writes,

in the landscape of ourselves,
offers precision to assess and look
at routes and gradients sheltered in the peak
of presently.

Here, it is noticeable at once that the components of sophisticated technique have at last reached out and shone a different heat in Queensland so that even when Shapcott writes of "Mango Weather" in *Shabbytown Calendar*, basing his sentiments in Ipswich (which is forever for me the town of the park, the arguing parents and slightly-off Windsor sausage sandwiches), he touches on universals. And especially in delicacies like "Retired Master":

Wallpaper says nothing except he has lived
here rubbed himself into corners
warmth of fires coolness of sheets
a window to be always slightly ajar
if morning rounds again its voices of children
it shuffles also towards something to
encounter or else there are the papers
where no one is gallant each night
to light his wood stove he selects
from his library another volume.

Gwen Harwood was born in Brisbane and has lived in Tasmania since she was twenty-five. "Dust to Dust" and "David's Harp" are obviously products of Queensland time, the Queensland parish. Pleasant indeed to find aligned with

We walk in silence past
All Saints'. The dead do rise,
do live, do walk and wear
their flesh

a small reversal of John Donne in the lines

So, so, resume our last
rejoicing kiss.

In "David's Harp", practice-time at All Saints' in Brisbane produces a charming introduction to love on seventeen-year-old eyes:

Vain as a cat, I frown and toss
my head. He watches Brisbane's hot
sunshine, strained through Victorian glass,
lacquer a Station of the Cross.

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The following poem won't fully give the richness of Harwood's interests, her preoccupations with music, her lightly satiric glance at the processes of living, but it will reveal to you the fineness and sharpness of her pen:

In the park

She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.
Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.
A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt.
Someone she loved once passes by—too late
to feign indifference to that casual nod.
“How nice,” etcetera. “Time holds great surprises.”
From his neat head unquestionably rises
a small balloon . . . “but for the grace of God . . .”
They stand awhile in flickering light, rehearsing
the children's names and birthdays. “It's so sweet
to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,”
she says to his departing smile. Then, nursing
the youngest child, sits staring at her feet.
To the wind she says, “They have eaten me alive.”

Writing, too, is a form of emotional cannibalism. Even the critics are our dinner—and nothing, not one jot of an experience in place or person is wasted. I left Brisbane to live in Sydney when I was twenty-three, but the loyalties that persuade my entire being are to the north and funnily enough, the far north, so that when my plane circles the last small white-housed town along the reef and I watch hungrily through the port window for the high green-blue rise of tableland behind that town, I feel always that I am coming home. Home in its very nature that one must be able to laugh at with love as well as weep over. In 1970 and 1971 I was asked to give lecture-tours for the Commonwealth Literary Fund in north and central Queensland. I toted Patrick White and the myth from Mt Isa through Cloncurry (pure Drysdale) and Julia Creek to the coast; back again as far as Clermont and Springsure, through Gladstone, Rockhampton, Townsville and Cairns. In a way they were disappointing trips, and in quite another way they were totally satisfying. When I say they were a disappointment, it was perhaps because the attendance was small—average audience twelve, including babes at the breast—but those who did come had read White and Stow, did want to hear and discuss, hungered for library visits to larger centres and showed me a warmth and hospitality that was quite remarkable. My paper was a simple one, non-academic, but I still remember the woman on

whose property I stayed somewhere back of Richmond who said to me after the lecture that night: "I know you're tired. I don't want to keep you up. But I can't tell you what it's like just to be able to say the word 'book' to someone." At that point I felt the taxpayers were well repaid.

Queensland has always suffered from being a cultural joke to southerners. But the early efforts to involve the people culturally in Queensland from the days when Tommy Hudson managed a Shakespearian company in Rockhampton in the sixties of the last century and Shakespeare came to the goldfields by bullock-dray with Mr and Mrs J. L. Byers playing Desdemona and Othello at Gympie Creek to appreciative audiences of settlers and miners and some few astonished aborigines are not really a matter for laughter; in fact even less so than Harry M. Miller's productions of the vulgarity of rock operas. Round about 1868 French Charley, Charles Bouel, opened a hotel, store and theatre at Nashville (Gympie), with the motto "Live and Let Live" emblazoned across his front doors.

As a piece of *poésie trouvée* for the times I offer, extracted from the *Nashville Times*:

French Charley
 To the diggers of Nashville
 and the One Mile
 C. Bouel, T. Fawcett & Co.
 Novelties Every Night
 at the
 Theatre Royal, One Mile.
 They will always do their best to please
 the public in general.

THE BAR

As all the boys know, is always supplied with
 the best of
 Liquors and Drinks
 Knock-me-downs, Pick-me-ups, Smashes,
 Cocktails, Flashes of Lightning, Volcanoes, etc.
 Theatre opens at 7 sharp; ring up in half an
 hour after.

The prima donna, Miss Gardiner, had doubtless far more expertise than any collective dozen pop stars foisted into our youth culture of the seventies.

For comparison with Charles Bouel's poem of the last century I offer a 1976 version from a Sydney Leagues Club:

Welcome

WHEELER/DEALERS . . . HOUSE HUSTLERS . . . FIGURE
FINDERS . . . AND EVERYBODY . . .*Here is what you have lined up*AT APPROX. 8 P.M. ECLYPSE WILL START PLAYING DANCE
AND DINNER MUSIC.

8.30 A COLD SALAD AND PLATTERS WILL BE SERVED.

8.45 HOT Curried Prawns/Stroganoff will be served.

9.00 *FIRST SHOW* Presenting beautiful *HOLLY DAVIS*.

9.30 HOT Curried Prawns/Stroganoff second helpings.

10.00 Apple Struddle and cream will be served.

10.30 *SECOND SHOW* Last Australian show for LONNIE LEE
who returns to Nashville, Tennessee.AT ANY TIME DURING THE NIGHT YOU MAY DANCE
YOUR TINY TOOTSIES OFF TILL IT'S ALL OVER AT 1 A.M.
WHEN THEY SWEEP US ALL OUT.

It seems to me that we haven't moved forward from Queensland down here. We've gone back!

Perhaps it is amusing that those people travelled by dray; perhaps the ponderous journalese of the times amuses too; perhaps it amuses that culture struggled to live in canvas tents and was offered to an audience without the middle-class pretensions of first-nighters in Sydney. But what is not amusing, what is magnificent, is the human spirit, the heart of the parish, that made them want to do these things. And what is even more amazing and unmagnificent is that with all our present technological advances, widespread education and apparent sophistication, we can find monstrous crowds struggling to fifth-rate entertainers who wield guitars like phalluses, know four chords and dress like drag queens.

The trouble with Queensland these days is that it's filling up with southerners. Sometimes when I go north I feel I'm the only Queenslander left. I used the term "conceit" in the title of this paper and I mean by that that it is the especial quality of the Queensland oddball—that and the space—that give the state its overblown flavour. Stories filter south of plans to put Brisbane's police squad on pushbikes to facilitate speed in arrival at the scene of a crime. Recently there was a suggestion that the whole of Brisbane be surrounded by nuclear warheads. "But which way would they point?" one of my colleagues asked. Smiling. The state does seem to attract a conceitism of behaviour that maybe is due to the heat and the distance. Once in a bayside village halfway up the Queensland coast, one of the twenty or so permanent residents raced up to me pulsating with excitement. "There are people called Murphy moving in next door," she said. "Now

at last I will be able to discuss Teilhard de Chardin!" She was wrong. But what a concept!

Yes. It's all in the antitheses. The contrasts. The contradictions. Queensland means living in townships called Dingo and Banana and Gunpowder. Means country pubs with twelve-foot ceilings and sagging floors, pubs which, while bending gently and sadly sideways, still keep up the starched white table-cloths, the heavy-duty silver, the typed menu. Means folk singers like Thel and Rick whom I once followed through to Clermont on that lecture-tour while they cleaned up culturally ahead of me; but it also meant listening to the now extinct State Queensland String Quartet playing the Nigger Quartet in my fourth-class room among the sticks of chalk, the tattered textbooks; means pushing your way through some rainforest drive laced with wait-a-while to hear the Lark Ascending, or more suitably, the *Symphonie Fantastique* crashing through the last of the banana thickets.

And the distance. Since the days when the Petrie brothers opened up the Darling Downs or the younger Scottish son planters endeavoured to recapitulate gracious Delta living in sugar plantations around Mackay, since Atherton opened up north Queensland and Christy Palmerston rolled triumphantly back into town (Herberton) after going bush with the aborigines for years, Queensland has retained much of its quality as an abstraction, an idea—a genesis still preserved in the current publication of the *Wild River Times*. The vast spaces, the smaller population bring unexpected *rencontres*. You step off the plane in Cloncurry and the sole passenger stepping on is someone you haven't seen for twelve years. You borrow a bike and pedal savagely ten miles north simply to get out of a place, only to run into a colleague unseen for five years who has been stationed at a whistle-stop school twenty miles away and has been pedalling south for the same reason. You drive fifty miles for lunch. It's nothing. I have friends who'll travel a hundred miles to get to a concert and another hundred home afterwards. "It's quicker than crossing Sydney," they say. And that's unanswerable.

Once I thought the special flavour was due to the train: those other years when, wistfully from mixed-goods paralysed at shunting points, you would look out train windows blurred by soot and time at friends travelling in opposite directions. The gulp. The wave. The shouted précis of a year fading at last as you pulled apart at ten miles per hour. But it's not only that. It's as if the

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very distance itself had rendered time static; as if the passage from claypan to coast, from the ugly to the beautiful so essential and complementary to each other in this place that they become one and the same, were no passage at all.

Queensland isn't the home of the tall yarn. It's where the tall yarn happens, acted out on a stage where, despite its vastness, the oddballs see and recognize each other across the no-miles and wave their understanding.

So be forgiving if the sight
Of sudden glory in some worn-out thing
Sheds broken words from me, if too much light
Has made me blind and blundering.

Peter Miles wrote those words in the forties and I repeat them now with a final reference to Rodney Hall's poem "Personal Tour":

Here, my hand is warm,
I'll guide you through my province,
off the main road, down a cul de sac,
away from any sign of suburb
into the gully where juicy leaves
tremble by the cliff.

It took me

years to cut these steps in rock.
The bridge across my creek
is narrow, growing shaky, I'll admit.
But everything belongs.