

*From Exploration to Celebration:
Writers and the Landscape in
Australia's Northern Territory*

TREVOR JAMES

RUSSEL WARD's *The Australian Legend* has considered the effect of the Outback upon Australian character and identity and advanced the view that the "new, nationalist writing of Lawson, Paterson, Furphy and others and, above all, of the influential *Sydney Bulletin*, was a powerful means of spreading the bush ethos more widely."¹ That the Northern Territory does not form a clear strand of Ward's thesis suggests that the North of Australia did not wholly mesh with the wider world of the Outback — that sweep of inland plains which fringed the eastern settlements from South Australia to central Queensland — at the formative stage of Australia's identity. For the Australian imagination the Northern Territory remained what Jeannie Gunn gave a name to — the "Never-Never." Even today there is no proper name, it is merely the "Territory," a frontier separated from the "real" Australia of popular imagination by a psychological Brisbane-line, that infamous line which divided Australia during the Second World War to show at what point the country would be defended against Japanese invasion. In short, for the rest of Australia the Northern Territory has been regarded as not merely peripheral geographically but imaginatively as well.

Today inhabitants of the Northern Territory refer to the "tyranny of distance" — normally with reference to economic and political factors — but it is not yet appreciated how isolation has shaped the sensibility of those who live in the far North. In an empty landscape the problems of imaginative location have been immense. Darwin remains an outcrop of habitation at the extremity of an empty hinterland and this has been compounded by

a history where the reference points by which a culture can be established have been lost; the settlement lacks substantial continuity between the past and the present. Although settled since 1870, it has been repeatedly destroyed, sometimes evacuated, always rebuilt: through cyclones in 1897 and 1974, and through bombing which began in 1942. Links with the past are few. Memorials remain, but little more. In the words of the Director of the National Trust in the Northern Territory:

Although Darwin's built heritage has suffered greatly as a consequence of cyclones and a war, enough is left to illustrate important aspects of the city's history. The oldest structures, such as parts of Government House, the former Court House and Police Station and Brown's Mart, borrowed architectural form and detail from contemporary southern buildings. The flimsier structures of that era which were more closely associated with local climatic conditions have for the most part long since disappeared.²

Of course for literature and those who write it, the problem is that memorials do not secure the imagination. In Darwin this inconstant human and cultural landscape has left an urban environment bereft of the particular colour, memories and bonds which can sustain, and be celebrated by, literary activity. The environment is still too raw and the roots whereby the imagination can embrace it too shallow, the hold too tenuous. Here the writer is still an explorer, a pioneer in a terrain that is still alien.

1. *Much Prose and Little Poetry*

Prose has been the natural medium through which the first settlers in Darwin explored the landscape. Diaries and letters demonstrate its use as the initial register for response: settlers and explorers used it either to mourn hardships or to eulogise the prospects that the land seemed to promise. The constant need appears to have been to explain physical reality, perhaps to oneself, certainly to readers in the inhabited south. For example, the prospectus posted by Captain Bremer about 1824 states:

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that persons of respectability may obtain town allotments within a mile of the pier for a period of not exceeding seven years and suburban areas of eight acres within five miles — flourishing gardens of plantains, tamarinds, oranges,

demons, maize, bread-fruit, mangosteens — tracts of meadowland for sugar-cane from Rio, cotton and rice . . . gardens now advancing to perfection.³

It was to be a perfection that would never be fulfilled for, as with so many things in the North, this early optimism was to be dashed and the settlement abandoned. Yet this polemically freighted prose abounds in Northern Territory writing and, in a more general sense, endures in work by writers such as Douglas Lockwood, Ernestine Hill, Ion Idriess, Keith Willey, Glenville Pike, and more accomplished artists like Tom Ronan and, above all, Xavier Herbert.

Much of the early prose is in the form of memoirs — usually highly romanticized — and it is possible to trace the conflict between expectations of various sorts and the intuitions imposed by the landscape itself. In general terms there is a resolute appreciation of natural beauty which is subverted by a tension or qualification which hints that the writer is alienated from the landscape he admires.

The Land of the Dawning is the strange, almost pathological memoir of W. H. Willshire who served as a mounted constable in the Northern Territory. His account of the Katherine, south of Darwin, is revealing:

What a sense of freedom one experiences standing on high ground, with nothing above but the pure, glorious sky, and a far-spreading view of the country below, with here and there a gleam of water where the river winds, till the whole melts away in the distance against the far western sky. . . . The silence of the night is broken at times by the dismal chant of the natives, who, painted like skeletons, skip about the fires in their barbaric sensuality and nudity.⁴

A close examination of this otherwise unremarkable passage reveals that Willshire does not describe the landscape so much as project his perceptions upon it. At the centre is his image of himself, free and heroic in a wild land, which is little more than a romanticized variant of the edenic visions Bremer had promoted. Where Willshire's fabrication collapses is in his allusion to the Aboriginal inhabitants of this idyll: for a moment his control is broken and there intrudes a sense that the landscape is in fact

alien — where “the silence of the night is broken . . . by the dismal chant of the natives.”

Another nuance of this ambivalence can be detected within the few literary allusions to the Northern Territory by “Banjo” Paterson. His experiences were gleaned during the period that the Eastern and Australian Steamship Company commissioned him to write for their *Tourist Guide*. It appears that the experience made a deep impression upon him: certainly the activities he engaged in — pearl diving with the Japanese divers, buffalo and crocodile hunting — suited his temperament. In the *Bulletin* (1898) he wrote:

I would give a lot to be back at Port Darwin in that curious luke-warm atmosphere, and watch the white-sailed pearling-ships beating out to sea, to see the giant form of Barney Flynn stalking emu-like through a dwarfish crowd of Japs and Manilamen, to be once more with the B.A.T. and the O.T. and the G.R. and Paddy Cahill while the cycloon [sic] hummed and buzzed on the horizon, or to be in the buffalo camp of Rees and Martin, shooting the big blue bulls at full gallop, or riding home in the cool moonlight, the packhorses laden with hides.

A man who once goes to the Territory always has a hankering to go back. Some day it may be civilized and spoilt, but up to the present it has triumphantly overthrown all who have tried to improve it. It is still the Territory. Long may it wave.⁵

By comparison with Willshire’s work this passage has interest. We warm to Paterson’s instinct for the vital detail. While the pearling-ships may teeter on cliché, the human landscape, and early institutions — the British Australia Telegraph Company, the Overland Telegraph — are so detailed and located that they become present to us. Yet alongside of this is a sense of novelty. An alien element intrudes with the implication that the Territory is a place for adventurers: the “curious luke-warm atmosphere,” the stress on Asians and strenuous activity, dislocate the Territory from the main-stream of everyday human reality; a thrust which is pointed with the comment “someday it may be civilized . . . but up to the present it has triumphantly overthrown all who have tried to improve it.” In effect this places the region and its landscape beyond the reality of Australian life.

Paterson’s other slender literary relics from his time in the

North, "The Pearl Diver" and the excerpt "Buffalo Hunting" from the novel *An Outback Marriage* (1906), concentrate upon the adventurous way of life that he had found there. In the latter there are some details of the landscape which should be appreciated: in particular his description of the buffalo and the plains where the hunt took place:

The surface of the plain was level enough, but frightfully bad going; the sun had baked the black soil till great gaping cracks, a couple of feet wide and ten feet deep, were opened in the ground. The buffaloes had wallowed in the Wet season and made round well-like holes that were now hard, dry pitfalls. Here and there a treacherous, slimy watercourse wound its slinking way along, making a bog in which a horse would sink to his shoulders; and over all these traps and pitfalls the long waving junglegrass drew a veil.⁶

Although this realistic description is primarily to establish a horseman's view of the context for the hunt, the emphasis is upon the deceptive quality of the landscape, that despite its undulating terrain it is full of traps for the unwary. When Paterson attempts to express the quality of the landscape as a whole, he resorts to images that evoke a romanticized wilderness, "a great grey chaos — a land half made," where man is estranged. Despite the fact that Paterson is one of the first professional writers to give any attention to Australia's North, his efforts leave it understood as alien, a "strange wild land." His poem "By the Grey Gulf Water" is a curious mix of his adventurism with a landscape which he cannot engage in terms of the Outback. Details are incidental. At its core is an uncertainty which he seeks to resolve by imposing his own romanticism upon the landscape: that it is a void which tests the human spirit:

Far to the Northward there lies a land,
 A wonderful land that the winds blow over,
 And none may fathom or understand
 The charm it holds for the restless rover;
 A great grey chaos — a land half made,
 Where endless space is and no life stirreth;
 There the soul of a man will recoil afraid
 From the sphinx-like visage that Nature
 weareth.⁷

2. *Station Literature*

Great cattle runs divide the Northern Territory and these small bastions of habitation in a vast landscape began to appropriate it for a home. Dr. Alan Powell records the impression Crown Point Homestead made upon the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer when he called in 1894:

At that time everything was green, the verandah overgrown with creepers, was cool and restful; we had fresh vegetables from a garden watered by a well close by the river, and the change from the dust and flies of the camp to the comfort and refinement of the little station home was more than welcome.⁸

From these outposts has developed a history and a literature, oral for the most part but much now written, which records early attempts to inhabit the land and the experiences of drovers and settlers. While most of this writing is trivial and easy to ridicule, to apply stringent criticism is to miss the importance of these first attempts to imaginatively inhabit the landscape. These initial tenuous expressions have a literary function: they begin to normalize experience and thereby appropriate the landscape in the mind.

Early couplets, attributed to one of the Durack family which drove cattle from North Queensland across the Territory to Western Australia and settled a station on the Victoria River, express the early tensions between northern pastoralists and the racial conscience of the urban South. As their land was taken over, Aborigines speared cattle and men — only to suffer appalling reprisals. Jim Durack had no qualms about his position:

You who tread safe the city's beaten tracks,
May well believe in kindness to the blacks
Would you still hold your dusky friend so dear
If he was dodging round you with a spear?⁹

Kings in Grass Castles, Mary Durack's lengthy biography, attempts to give shape to the experience of her family in the Territory and is an example of the prolix romanticism which the region seems to foster although the writer is more restrained than, say Ernestine Hill or Douglas Lockwood.

One of the literary classics based on the Northern Territory station life is Jeannie Gunn's *We of the Never-Never*. This roman-

ticized autobiography, despite reticence about the writer's inner life, is a valuable record of the experiences that faced women in the Outback at the turn of the century. Her treatment of the landscape is matter of fact. The Gunns worked the Elsey station in the Roper River area, and settlements such as Pine Creek, the railway and the OT combine to provide reference points for the narrative which discreetly centres upon personalities and adventures. In the Prelude there is a slight departure from this: aside from the movement of the narrative, Gunn provides more "literary" touches, and here the sense of something alien about the land begins to break through:

... away Behind the Back of Beyond, in the Land of the Never-Never; in that elusive land with an elusive name, a land of dangers and hardships and privations yet loved as few lands are loved, a land that bewitches her people with strange spells and mysteries, until they call sweet bitter, and bitter sweet. Called the Never-Never ... because they who have lived in it and loved it, Never-Never voluntarily leave it.¹⁰

This passage discloses Gunn's place in the development of the relationship between the literary imagination and the landscape of the Northern Territory: she is both estranged from it and yet bound to it. The new note is the affectionate acceptance of the land and the hardship it imposes, while the familiar ground tone of estrangement intrudes through Gunn's romanticism — which hints that there is a strain and the imagination still uneasy.

This romanticism, the idea of a "bond" with the land, is a common motif in the poetry that issued from the runs. This stock and station verse, despite its obvious limitations, celebrated the drover's life, the peculiarities of people and cattle in a landscape which was assumed and thereby unobtrusive. A recent example of this type of writing would be that by Jim White who worked as a drover in the 1930's on his father's Northern Territory property, Brunette Downs. White, up from the South, was confronted by a local at the Crow's Nest bore and informed in terms which echo in Paterson, Gunn, and Herbert:

... well I belong out here I know no other life and once you've had a drink of the Georgina you're in strife.¹¹

“A drink of the Georgina” alludes to the idea of a bond between the land and its inhabitants. Nuances of this motif recur but the tenor holds constant. For example, a central image in Herbert’s *Poor Fellow My Country* is the sacred pool with the legend that those who bathe there will return — at least to die. White’s use of the “Georgina” marks, then, a phrase which was already well established in the 1930’s and is part of an evolving imaginative bond with the landscape. There is no fusion, as yet no mysticism about it, but an affection born out of working with the land and adapting to it in the process. In the words of Dick Scobie, who worked the Hidden Valley Station:

I can hear the cattle bellowing,
I can hear the tramp of feet,
And when the wind blows off the stockyard,
The smell of the dust is sweet.¹²

A minor mode certainly, but nonetheless such writing marks a process whereby the imagination is bonded with the land and the landscape itself assimilated and normalized.

3 *Journals and Writers*

Another aspect of the process whereby the Northern Territory became imaginatively inhabited was a journal much read by the pastoralists and their families, the short-lived *North Australian Monthly* (August 1954 to December 1965). The content was popular and specifically aimed at the Northern context. In the editors’ words was a call to arms: “we do not want overseas material, contending that Australian writers are as good as any overseas, and that North Australia provides more colour and better subjects for the writer. We especially cater for bush people, and for dwellers of Northern towns.”¹³ Short stories, usually in a Northern landscape, were stereotyped while the poetry had a page ominously titled “Bush Verse.” Most of the writers — but certainly not all — were ladies with a literary inclination; diction, metre, and sentiments suffered accordingly. Among the contributors were Glenville Pike and W. E. Harney, author of *North of 23’, Life Among the Aborigines, Brimming Billabongs*. Harney, married to a part-Aboriginal girl, suffered from both sides of the

Roland Robinson himself began to bring the Northern Territory within the range of national poetry. A conscientious objector during the war, he worked for the Civil Construction Corps and met Bill Harney and Eric Worrell — both of whom were especially concerned with the Territory. While later poems such as “Kimberley Drivers” and “The Fitzroy River Crossing” have a base in North Australia, it is the 1948 sequence “The Roper River” which is of special interest. In particular the poem “Black Cockatoos”:

Rise then, you screaming mob of black cockatoos,
 and spread your red barred tail feathers out and scream
 over the spears of the reeds and the purple lilies,
 over the red rock walls of this sun-gashed gorge,
 and gather in broken and screaming flight and turn
 heading far up this jade green river's reaches.
 So shall I find me harsh and blendless words
 or barbarous beauty enough to sing this land.¹⁶

Here Robinson fuses explorer and celebrant. There is no pretense of familiarity with the landscape: it is a “barbarous beauty” that confronts him. Indeed it is this lack of intimacy which seals the occasion as belonging to *Terra Australis* where Europeans are still explorers. Strangeness provokes wonder which celebrates particular beauties — “red barred tail feathers,” or “the spears of the reeds and the purple lilies” — as the poet seeks to articulate experience in a world where his language, his being itself, remains alien.

4 *Tom Ronan and Xavier Herbert: A Major Achievement*

It is noticeable that the dominant figures in Northern Territory writing have been those whose talent was for prose but not for poetry. Ronan and Herbert are the first serious artists to question the nature of settlement in the North and to imaginatively locate it and their choice of genre goes beyond the matter of talent and readership to reflect the true nature of the task each set themselves. A large subject required scope and a controversial one needed emphasis: both writers' works reveal a polemical intention which aligns them with the compulsions which produced the earliest prose about the Territory.

Ronan's *Vision Splendid* is episodic in structure but remains a good description of life as a drover in the North during the first half of this century; the loneliness, dust and flies. Narrated through the Englishman Toppingham, a fragile unity is maintained. Darwin figures briefly as "North Harbour" and the 1942 bombing is mentioned, otherwise the focus of the work is a celebration of the drover's life in the North with urban interludes as a foil. Only in the final section of the book does Ronan attempt to address consciously a problem which, though central, he sensed that the narrative had failed to engage with sufficient clarity. With this shift to overstatement, the underlying polemical intention surfaces:

I know what this country wants. It wants faith.

Go anywhere else in the world and the majority of the people believe in something. Particularly rural people. In any English village nearly everyone goes to Church or to Chapel, and those French peasants were great attenders at their Mass.

City folk may not be so religious, but at least they believe in something; a politician or a new craze of nudism or psychoanalysis. Their loyalties may not last more than a week, but while they hold a faith they hold it fervently.

The majority of white men here in the Territory believe in nothing: no God, no creed, no code of life or of reason. Why, they don't even believe in the country that gives them their living.

... I've spoken to men off the land from a lot of parts of Australia ... any one of those would tell you that his own particular patch of dirt was the best in the world. But not the Territorian. He's like Rolf Gibbon:

"A man is mad to come here and a bloody sight madder to stay." Or Bob Blivens: "we ought to pension off all the white people down south, and give the country back to the blacks with full apologies for the mess we've made of it."

Yet Gibbon stayed here till he died, and Bob Blivens is just a few hundred miles over the Kimberley border.

Yes, the "north" — the "Never-Never" — Australia's Backyard, its unwanted child — the "Land of Anomalies." All it wants to make it flourish is the sort of faith that will make people come here, not to make a pile and get out — they won't, anyway: make a pile, I mean — but come here to stay.

No one seems to do that. No one bar the old black fellow. And that is why the black fellow will win out in the end.¹⁷

This virtual postscript to one of the first Australian “classics” set in the Northern Territory stands between the romanticism of the early prose writers and the achievement of Xavier Herbert. Ronan summarizes a history of settlement: that the North had never been “able to flourish,” its settlement limited to adventurers and imaginatively always uninhabited. This lack of “faith” is qualified by the isolated examples of a few who have been totally committed to the land.

Although relevant to, but beyond the scope of, this essay, the reference to the Aboriginal as the one who will “win out in the end” should not be ignored. For Europeans in a land where isolation enforced a sense of alienation, the Aboriginal’s ease in the landscape has come to provide a paradigm for the imagination. What Ronan touches upon here is specifically developed by Herbert: that those who would truly inhabit the land must have a mind attuned to its spirit — such as is the case with the Australian Aboriginal. In this development Herbert anticipates an aspect of Bernard Smith’s suggestions about an Australian aesthetic in the 1890 Boyer Lectures — that the future viability of Australian culture will depend upon “its capability to come to terms with the continuing Aboriginal presence” and the development of a “convergent culture with its sources in two traditions, the one derived largely from European sources, the other derived from this ancient land.”¹⁸ The view is not wholly new: for example it can be seen as a refinement of Brennan’s call in 1927 for an “imaginative alchemy . . . whereby the fine gold of the spirit shall be set free.”¹⁹ For Herbert the Aboriginal is the Alchemist’s stone for the true Australian imagination.

Set by *Capricornia*, Xavier Herbert’s reputation has not been advanced by *Poor Fellow My Country*: one critic unkindly described the latter work as “a curiosity, a kind of literary brontosaurus.”²⁰ While this paper is not aimed at mounting a defence for a flawed work, criticism has not attended to the merits of Herbert’s writing with due care and, more specifically, his treatment of the landscape of the Northern Territory has not been recognized as a major achievement. Of the writers who have de-

scribed the Northern Territory, Herbert has given the most substantial treatment of Darwin — or Palmerston as it was known until 1911 — but much has changed while the town remains for him an unloved thing, an intrusion upon the landscape. When the town is bombed in 1942 and deserted by its residents, Pat Hannaford is allowed to sum up the fragile identity of the community with an indictment — “looks like we’re still only bloody immigrants, no better’n Oxes and Pongs and all the rest. Jesus!”²¹ This concentration upon the human landscape of Darwin, his relative indifference to urban detail, relates to this concern for identity: that those who would inhabit the Territory must first make their peace with the spirit of the place, the land itself.

It seems possible to establish four broad uses of landscape in *Poor Fellow My Country*: descriptive, allegorical, metaphorical, and, finally, a stage in which landscape merges with individual being in a moment of heightened awareness or union. Of these the descriptive use is the easiest to deal with. Of note is the way Herbert deals with the problem of space in the Australian landscape, a space without obvious points of reference, a broad undulating terrain:

Ahead the bleached plain rolled like a sea as the sunlight swept it, white crests above long blue troughs. The trees were few enough to count, and really stunted, but magnified by isolation and the tricks of early light so as to stand as little giants.²²

There is nothing original about likening the plains to the sea, but the tenor of the simile is particularly apt; it magnifies the sense of the void. Juxtaposed against the immense presence are particular trees; a contrast which intensifies the sense of space and foreshadows what is later made plain, that in this landscape individual concerns and illusions are of no ultimate reality. This economic but functional use of description recurs sufficiently to demonstrate that Herbert engages the landscape with the sense that it stands against the imagination and has to be interpreted rather than documented.

Subsequent uses of the landscape extend the process of interpretation and relation in a more obvious fashion. Of these the allegorical method seems the most contrived. For example, a

reference to the onset of the Wet Season and the noise of the geese breeding in the lagoons leads into an account of an aboriginal legend about the mating dance of the geese or "nuttagul." While the geese were dancing in the reeds Dagoolya the crocodile caught one from beneath the water while the other, unaware of what had happened, searched for its mate. From this tale Herbert constructs an implicit fable of human experience: "the injunction stood for all nuttaguls who came after. They could have but one mate for ever. Hence for ever there must be this frantic search for lost mates, because of the great wastage to which so delicately fleshed a species was doomed."²³ The detail "delicately fleshed" points out Herbert's strategy: the play on dual meaning, palatability and vulnerability, establishes a resonance which is soon clarified and enforced. Perhaps it is unnecessary, but Herbert drives his meaning home when, only a few paragraphs later, he has Pat Hannaford stop the train to search desperately for the refugee girl, Rifkah. As the natural phenomena of the landscape are interpreted in such a way that they provide an allegory for the vulnerable human search for love, so the landscape and those who people it are drawn together.

This association verges on identification in those instances where Herbert employs a metaphoric use of the landscape. As in the general descriptive mode, he uses particular details to great effect: for example, where he discerns beauty in the landscape through recognizing it in particular details concerning a Morning Glory Lily:

... the diaphonous stuff of the swamp Morning Glories surrounds a silver star. As the rain eases with approach of dawn, the tightly furled buds, pointing like long slim fingers since midnight, open while you watch, unfurling into perfect pentagons in which shape they glow and shimmer as with inner light and seem thus to float along the ground.²⁴

Here the images combine to celebrate details of the natural scene in terms that call to mind human inhabitants of the landscape who share a similar vulnerability. It is Prindy and Rifkah who are shown to be related to these plants which "with daylight . . . fall into rags, to dissolve like wafers in the ooze created by rain now falling like warm tears shed for the reality that beauty is forever

transient." Here Herbert overworks the imagery, and this simile subverts the total effect — while it clarifies Herbert's thought. Two things need to be noted: first, here is an acute particularization of the landscape and second, this is a description of people completely at home in the land, in this case a half-caste and a European refugee. Although this forms part of a much larger design, here is an imagination which is at home in the Northern Territory landscape.

From metaphoric fusion to something like a mystical union with the landscape is not an easy step to take but the necessity of it can be seen in the way Herbert structures his use of the landscape: for him it is the reality against which identity has to be realized or abandoned. Conviction leads him to a sequence of parallel passages which, while they seem unduly polemical, summarize the thrust of his work. In these Jeremy Delacy and Billy Brew share their experience of a vision in the bush: here Herbert picks up the tradition of superstitious stockmen and welds it with the Aboriginal's sacral perception of the land. In short, here the two "traditions" that Bernard Smith has spoken of converge and fuse:

He didn't move. only his wide staring and the rigidity of his body showed that he had been startled — by something to the left of him, the way he had been lying, and above him . . . suddenly he sat up. His eyes dropped to the sand beside him. It was untrod, unmarked.²⁵

Most noticeable is the way landscape has now vanished; it is simply assumed and the experience of an undefined spiritual presence is explained as a visitation by a spirit of some by-gone Aboriginal to one whom he considered "belong country." Inherent here is the view that in this landscape identity can only be secured by a total commitment of being. In Jeremy's words, "if I see things like a blackfellow, then I must belong like one."²⁶

5. *Conclusion*

This paper can only begin to provide a map from which to read the relationship between a European imagination and the landscape of the Northern Territory; there can be no suggestion that

this is more than a beginning and no denial that many areas of great interest still remain to be considered. For example the geographical variety of the Territory places different demands upon the imagination and regional variations are likely to exist; as more work becomes available the force of this will be determined. Another factor is the rapid growth of Darwin — the most modern of Australia's cities. There are now facilities for tertiary education, theatre groups, and groups of writers — all of which provide a context to nurture literature. Most important is the future of Aboriginal writing in English. Not only will this literature be one of the youngest in the world, but it will provide a vital instrument for mediating the Aboriginal perception of the land to those of non-Aboriginal descent who live there; from this may come imaginative resources hitherto inaccessible; resources which will fulfill a longing in European Australians that Roland Robinson voiced in the poem "Would I Might Find My Country":

Would I might my country as the blacks
 come in and lean their spears up in the scrub,
 and crouch and light their flickering fires and spread
 their mission blankets on the ground beneath
 the dark acacia and bauhinia trees.
 Would I might find my people as the blacks
 sit with their lubras, children, and tired dogs,
 their dilly-bags, their bundles of belongings
 tied up in scraps of some old coloured dress,
 and pass the long straight smoking pipe around,
 and talk in quiet calling voices while
 the blood deep crimson flower of sunset burns
 to smouldering ash and fume behind the trees,
 behind the thin grassed ridges of their land.²⁷

NOTES

- ¹ Russel Ward, "Australian Legend Re-Visited," *Historical Studies*, 18 (1978), 181.
- ² David Carment, "Interpreting the Cultural Landscape: the Material Evidence of Northern Territory History," *Northern Perspective*, 5 (1983), 23.
- ³ Ernestine Hill, *The Territory* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1951), p. 52.
- ⁴ W. H. Willshire, *The Land of the Dawning* (Adelaide: W. K. Thomas & Co., 1896), p. 14.
- ⁵ A. B. ("Banjo") Paterson's remark is quoted on the title page of S. Ban-

- nister, "A Social History of Darwin 1892-1905," Research Paper, North Australian Collection, Darwin Community College, Darwin, 1978.
- ⁶ A. B. Paterson, "Buffalo Hunting," *The Best of Banjo Paterson*, ed. W. Stone (Adelaide: Summit House, 1977), pp. 271-72.
 - ⁷ *The Collected Verse of A. B. Paterson*, ed. F. T. Macartney (Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1921), p. 106.
 - ⁸ A. Powell, *Far Country* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982), p. 121.
 - ⁹ Mary Durack, *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959; rpt. London: Corgi, 1982), p. 319.
 - ¹⁰ Mrs. Aeneas Gunn, *We of the Never-Never* (Melbourne: Robertson and Mullens, 1908), xiii.
 - ¹¹ J. White, TS, copy held by University Planning Authority, Northern Territory History Research Unit, Darwin.
 - ¹² Powell, p. 182.
 - ¹³ *North Australian Monthly*, September 1954, n.pag.
 - ¹⁴ W. Harney, "The Songs One Hears," *North Australian Monthly*, August 1955, p. 33.
 - ¹⁵ Roland Robinson, "The Sacred Ground," *Selected Poems*, ed. A. J. Bennet and Michael Sharkey (Armidale, N.S.W.: Kardoorair Press, 1983), p. 30.
 - ¹⁶ Robinson, p. 5.
 - ¹⁷ Tom Ronan, *Vision Splendid* (Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1954), pp. 346-47.
 - ¹⁸ Cited by M. Griffith, "Francis Webb: 'The Poet of Our Desolation,'" *Southerly*, 42 (1982), 191.
 - ¹⁹ C. J. Brennan, "Some Makers of Australia," *Southerly*, 37 (1977), 383. Rpt. from *Cerise and Blue*, St. Joseph's College Old Boys' Annual, 1927.
 - ²⁰ Laurie Clancy, "Poor Fellow My Country: Herbert's Masterpiece?," *Southerly*, 37 (1977), 175.
 - ²¹ Xavier Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country* (Sydney: Collins, 1975), p. 1364.
 - ²² Herbert, p. 59.
 - ²³ Herbert, p. 892.
 - ²⁴ Herbert, p. 870.
 - ²⁵ Herbert, p. 1091.
 - ²⁶ Herbert, p. 1098.
 - ²⁷ Robinson, p. 10.