

What Shall We Do About The Australian Tradition?

by JOHN MORRISON

ANY writer, I suppose, who was asked to briefly define 'creative writing' would say that's simply the examination and interpretation of life and people through story-telling. I, for one, believe that a story MUST be told, but that if it is told on any other terms it won't be literature. I feel you'll agree with me that the material of literature is — not real people, and life as it is really lived. Not people and situations tricked up out of nothing, but people and situations seen and experienced — AND THOUGHT OVER. I'd also say: RESPONDED TO. By the writer. He should not only be informed and interested, he should be moved. He should, one way or another, be seriously concerned with what he has experienced — concerned to the point where he must say something about it. Put it this way: a writer cannot expect his readers to get excited over something which hasn't first excited himself.

And here's the point I'm immediately aiming at: the less he concerns himself with form and fashion the better. In other words, the more he gets himself absorbed in his material, the better chance he has of absorbing his readers. I'd like to quote from something I wrote recently in commenting on a reprint collection of Chekhov's short stories:

"My experience among young writers is that most of them have a fundamentally wrong approach to their art. They look inwards instead of outwards. And they worry about how they are presenting their material, when what they SHOULD be worrying about is the material itself. . . . They don't seem to realise that the great writers made their impact primarily by the things they had to say, not primarily by the way in which they were said. It goes without saying that strength and artistry of expression must be there, but in

To Kill a Mocking Bird—continued.

Harper Lee not only paints vivid characters that live, but paints the atmosphere with equal realism. "In the Deep South there are 'no clearly defined seasons'. Summer drifts into Autumn sometimes not followed by Winter—Day-old Spring melts into Summer again"—One lives in the sultry nights and sweltering days held by the tense and dramatic story.—The gold thread running through the whole pattern is the essential goodness of Man.

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themselves these qualities are of no avail if the writer has nothing worthwhile to communicate."

I want to emphasise that I'm not under-estimating the importance of form, technique, style. Nor of the need for writers to experiment with new methods of communication. All I'm insisting on is that, above everything else, the writer must believe in the importance of what he has to say. Everything else comes afterwards. And I DO believe that too many young writers, and some not so young, are giving too much attention to that everything else. They become self-conscious, instead of giving themselves up body and soul to their material. They remind me of the story of the bearded old grandfather who was getting into bed one night, watched by his little grandson. The little boy had eyes only for the beard. And just as the old man was about to pull up the blankets he asked: "Grand-dad, when you go to sleep do you have your beard on top of the blankets or underneath?" And the old man couldn't tell him. Whichever way it was he'd been doing it too long, without a thought. He tried to answer the boy by experiment — with the beard underneath, then with the beard on top, but neither seemed right. In the end he lost his temper and chased the boy away. According to the story, he worked himself up into such a state that he passed out altogether in the small hours of the morning.

Well, that's how I think it is with some young writers. Spontaneity goes from their work. They get dazzled with science. They sit looking at words instead of images. They can't relax into simple communication any more than that poor old man could relax into blessed sleep.

And I think that the chief reason why they're doing this is because they're being encouraged. They're being encouraged to be smart at the expense of veracity, to be different at any price, to aim at subtlety as an end in itself — regardless of truth, regardless of the importance or otherwise of what they are saying, and regardless of MEANING.

And I suggest that this encouragement is going hand-in-glove with a deliberate playing-down of the Australian tradition.

It's being said in a variety of ways, and in a variety of places, that Australian writers are vegetating. That they're obsessed with a few traditional images. It's being charged right, left, and centre, that these images are superficial, and that we've allowed ourselves to be bewitched by them. That we sit staring at them glassy-eyed, instead of getting on with the writer's job of interpreting contemporary life and

exploring the intricacies of human behaviour. We aren't only superficial — we're insular, parochial.

In all this I admit there's some truth. It's the conclusions, and the suggested remedies, that I want to quarrel with.

I think many of us ARE too orthodox. Responsible critics have charged Australian writers with being oddly inhibited in some ways. I think there IS a tendency to cast backwards too much. I think many of us ARE too narrowly dedicated to established tradition. But I don't think we're going to improve matters by turning our backs on that tradition. And there seems to me to be some danger of Australian writing doing just that.

To begin with, I don't think there's anything very subtle or complicated about what's wrong with Australian writing. I think all that's wrong is that we just haven't grown up yet. We haven't had time.

It could be argued that Australian literature does have roots — in the literatures of England, Ireland, and Scotland. But what's the question is an Australian literature. A literature that peculiarly and distinctively belongs to this country. And on those terms I don't see that we have much to worry about in that, in such a short time, and with such a small population, we've failed to turn up a genius of world stature. What we can point to are quite a few writers who are read and enjoyed in other countries. Which means that they must be speaking some kind of universal language.

What I want to suggest is that a writer can only address himself to all people THROUGH HIS OWN PEOPLE. If he doesn't accept and understand his own people he won't understand people at all. No other material is available to him. It depends entirely on himself what comes out of it. Balzac was thoroughly French. Gogol was thoroughly Russian. Dickens was thoroughly English, but they're acceptable to all men simply because they were BIG writers. They were ABLE to probe deeply. And I think — without necessarily putting Henry Lawson on that high level — that it's significant that the best writer we HAVE produced in Australia was also the most thoroughly Australian.

I say this because one of the most familiar urgings aimed at Australian writers is that they should stop looking at their characters as Australians, and see them as just people. The suggestion being that only in this way will we break fresh ground.

For my part, I don't see why we can't have it both ways. I don't think we can afford to forget for a moment that our characters are Australians. I do agree that we could be less naive and self-conscious about it. We DO have to widen our horizons. We DO have to plough deeper. But I want to see it done from the firm basis of traditions

already established, because I think they're good ones. We can say all we want to say through ordinary Australians and in Australian terms.

So that is the danger as I see it. If our writers allow themselves to get unduly worried over the jeers about the accepted Australian tradition — and I think some of them ARE unduly worried — they'll find themselves turning away from their own people and the Australian scene. They'll find themselves digging in all kinds of out-of-the-way places, searching for subtleties and complications for their own sakes. They'll find themselves writing about queeries and weirdies instead of about normal people. They'll aim to be different at any price. Even to the length of inventing a weird new language. And I believe something like this IS happening.

We don't have to break away from tradition at all. We have to enlarge on it, build on it. We don't have to emulate Henry Lawson, any more than we should emulate any other writer. What we have to do is take it from where he left off.

Only those with an axe to grind have ever disputed either the validity or the special flavour of our tradition. I think it's been an advantage to me, as a writer, to have come to it from the outside as it were. I don't think I've ever stopped seeing Australia and Australians through the eyes of an Englishman. And I don't think it's done me any harm. On the contrary, I think it's kept me on my toes, because, even after forty years, the novelty and excitement of being here hasn't worn off. It's something that remains, in great or small degree, with all of us who come in from overseas. And something which inevitably, has found its way into the very bloodstream of native Australians. Australians have grown up with a concept of themselves as a new kind of man, with special qualities — or at least old qualities in a new mixture — and in a brand new and rather wonderful country.

Well, that's how it was, and is. A new country, different from any other country. And a new people was, and is, emerging. Not vastly different — I don't want to overstate the case. But different enough to capture the imagination of our writers. Under the existing conditions there wasn't any great pressure on them to plough deeply. They found the topsoil fertile enough. All our early writers were very active participants in what was going on, and that was enough for them. But what they did have to say was true, and remains true today. They gave us images, the image of a country, and the image of a man — the Australian.

Critics are right when they say that our writers today must do more. They're right

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The Mosquitoes are big in the Territory

by FRANK HARDY

(AS TOLD BY BILLY BORKER IN THE FIRST AND LAST HOTEL, SYDNEY)

DID I ever tell you about the old-aged pensioner who cleaned up three policemen during the shearers' strike? No, you've often promised to, but never seem to get round to it. Have a drink and tell me about him.

Don't mind if I do. The mosquitoes were bad last night.

What's that got to do with it? Oh, nothing — just that I can't stand mosquitoes. It's not so much the sting as that buzzing noise they make.

There's no mosquitoes out my way, so I don't have to worry. Here's your beer. What did this old-aged pensioner do again?

Didn't sleep a wink all night with mosquitoes buzzing and stinging.

Why don't you get some of that D.D.T. spray. It's sudden death to mosquitoes, I've heard.

But I think these are Northern Territory mosquitoes.

What? Do you think they flew two thousand miles just to bite you? Anyway, what difference would it make?

D.D.T. has no effect on Northern Territory Mosquitoes. The mossies are big and tough in the Territory.

Must be. Not that you'd notice. Once a big mosquito landed on the tarmac at Darwin Airport and they pumped 50 gallons of petrol into it, thinking it was a jet plane. The big mosquitoes are the reason why the place has such a small population.

I thought the low rainfall and poor soil were the cause of it.

Have you ever been in the Territory? No.

Then how would you know? There was an old-age pensioner one time who died after being attacked by a swarm of mosquitoes in the Territory.

You don't tell.

Aust. Tradition (Cont.)

when they say that we must enlarge our horizons and get to closer grips with the questions of what makes men and women tick. But I differ strongly when the criticism takes the form of a sneer at bona fide tradition. In short, I want our writers to be careful they don't throw the baby down the sink with the bath-water.

He did, but the mossies used to form up like dive bombers and swoop under the sides of the net.

Why didn't he tuck the sides in? He did, but then they used to form a straight line so their proboscis points acted like a big knife and cut a hole in the net for them to fly through.

Positive fact. If you don't believe me ask "Truthful" Jones. The mosquitoes hunted him out of the Territory, so he ought to know.

How did that come to happen?

Well, they're big and tough, like I said, and they don't like the white man taking the territory off the Aborigines.

Now I've heard everything.

You never heard of a mosquito biting a black fellow in the territory, did you?

Can't say I have.

Well, what did I tell you. If the mosquitoes have their way, there won't be a white man in the Territory in twenty years.

Listen, are you going to tell me about that old-aged pensioner or not?

Who brought up the subject of mosquitoes, anyway?

You did.

Well, what do you expect, when they kept me awake all night?

I expect you to tell me about that old-aged pensioner . . . Have another drink and get on with the story.

It's a strange thing: they put an aborigine in jail if he buys another fella a drink.

Yes, it's a disgrace; here's your beer.

Thanks. You've got to hand it to the Northern Territory mosquitoes, they treat the Aborigines well. The Aborigines used to use them for transport when they were hunting birds, in the days before the white man came.

The Australian Aborigines never domesticated animals or tilled the soil — and I'm sure they didn't use mosquitoes for transport.

I must admit I didn't believe it myself when "Truthful" Jones told me, but he ought to know because . . .

— because the mosquitoes hunted him out of the territory . . . Actually, they carried him out . . .

All right! How did they manage it?

Well, old "Truthful" copped it from those mosquitoes, I can tell you, on account he was a white man. Didn't get a wink of sleep for six months.

Why didn't he use a mosquito net over his bed?

He did, but the mossies used to form up like dive bombers and swoop under the sides of the net.

Why didn't he tuck the sides in?

He did, but then they used to form a straight line so their proboscis points acted like a big knife and cut a hole in the net for them to fly through.

— would have a powerful proboscis, a mosquito as big as that.

You can say that again; like a hypodermic needle usually used to give injections to sick elephants. Strange word proboscis, isn't it? I knew a poet one time who told me it is the only word in the English language that won't rhyme with any other. But he solved it; he wrote a poem called "There was a young man from "Damosels, who fractured his proboscis."

The word is Damascus.

A case of poetic licence, he reckoned.

It seems you are a great believer in poetic licence.

"Truthful" Jones didn't believe in it. A stickler for the truth, he was. If he told a story and people didn't believe it, he'd get upset and go off his tucker. Like when he told me that the Northern Territory Aborigines used to ride mosquitoes when they went hunting and use the proboscis for stabbing kangaroos and eagles. He got real upset when I didn't believe him.

You don't mean to say?

Positive fact — didn't eat for a week. Anyway, as I was saying before you so rudely interrupted, the mosquitoes are big in the Territory. Their stings brought out lumps on "Truthful" Jones as big as tennis balls. He tried everything to get a bit of sleep, D.D.T., poison gas and a sawn-off shot-gun but they didn't turn a hair. So, one night, he thought of a bright idea: instead of going to bed, he took his mattress and blankets and a hammer and got into a big iron tank that was empty on account of the dry season.

Why the hammer?

Well, he knew the mossies would find him and attack with their pro-whats-their-names and try to cut a hole in the tank. And he was right. They attacked one at a time, at first, and everytime a proboscis struck through he bent it with the hammer. A shrewd old head was "Truthful."

Must have been.

You can say that again. But then the rest of the mossies had a conference and decided to attack in dive bomb formation. And Zoom! — a row of proboscis stuck through shaped like a "V". And old "Truthful" bent them over with his hammer. Well, the mossies brought up reinforcements and "Truthful" heard them talking outside the tank . . .

Just a minute. Do you expect me . . .

No, I don't expect you to believe that Northern Territory mosquitoes can speak English, but, you see, "Truthful" had picked up a smattering of their particular lingo, an aboriginal dialect, needless to say. And he heard them planning to form their proboscises into a hacksaw to cut a hole in the tank. And

Zoom! They attacked in a line! But "Truthful" was too quick for them. He bent each proboscis in turn with his hammer, like playing a tune on a Zylphone. And pretty soon every mosquito in the area was caught by the nose in the walls of the tank.

I believe you — but millions wouldn't. You can ask old "Truthful" Jones. He didn't get his nickname for nothing. Anyway, he was very weary seeing as he hadn't slept for six months. So he soon fell asleep. And when he woke up the tank was on the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne two thousand miles away. "Truthful" Jones never went back to the Territory after that.

Don't blame him. Have another drink and tell me about that old-aged pensioner.

Ah, that story sounds a bit exaggerated. You wouldn't believe it. And I'm like "Truthful" Jones: I can't stand people who don't believe my stories. Anyway, I've got to go now.

What's your hurry?

Well, I want to buy a hammer before the shops shut. I'm thinking of sleeping in an iron tank tonight.

KING CANE

By RITA McENERNY

Up round Bundy and Rockhampton way, Up past Rocky, and on through Mackay, That's where the cane grows straight and tall; That's where sugar cane's King over all.

Sweet is the tooth the whole world o'er That the cane of Queensland's nurtured for, With loads for America and loads for Japan The power of the King has a global span.

The planting machine and the tractor have met, The earth's deep—furrowed; the plant—cane's set, Then, first raton, with its magical green— The infant King as he first is seen.

The summer rains pour down and bestow Their vital favours; and from below, Through bore and well, in winter's drought, The hidden water rushes out.

The trash is burnt in the cane fire's flare; Then stands the monarch, charred and bare. And with a blow, as from one who hates, The cutter's knife assassinates.

The cutter's puny for the job, Although his muscles bulge and throb; And now, at modern science's whim, Machinery replaces him.

The cane falls fast, and faster still; The tram loads feed th' relentless mill. Till, mauled and crushed, a conquered thing, The King serves those who made him King.