

JINDYWOROBAK PUBLICATIONS

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JINDYWOROBAK Towards an Australian Culture

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JINDYWOROBAK

Towards an Australian Culture

INTRODUCTION.

The Jindyworobak Club is probably the most important literary movement in Australia to-day. Though its members are mainly practising poets and versifiers, its challenge to a better understanding of the Australian environment is a challenge to all Australians to create a living and unique Australia. The Jindyworobaks have shouldered the burden of asserting Australian cultural values, and their search has therefore been for the distinctively Australian. The casual reader may suspect that in the emphasis of the Australian lies the seeds of disruption, and that what the Jindyworobaks will achieve is the breaking off of Australia from the British Empire. But straight-thinking people will realise that these writers are standing for something that means not a breaking but a re-examining of the ties that have linked Australian culture to the English cultural heritage that is ours. It is the belief of the Jindyworobak that a true virile Australian culture can be achieved for us only by the joining of the distinctively Australian to the best of our English cultural heritage.

KENNETH H. GIFFORD.

Melbourne,

1st January, 1944.

I. TRAVAIL OF THE PRE-CULTURE.

"The racketing rush of trams
in George Street on wet nights,
the hooting horns of motor cars
and the lurid neon lights—
the clattering pandemonium
of Sydney haunts the brain
when a man sits where the world is bare
of all but the bush and rain.

The stars in the sky are dead,
the moon in the clouds is dark;
but now the trams go clanging down
to the city by Hyde Park,
and hundreds are sick with glamour where
the night-lights glitter far—
in places as slick as the names that stick,
Top Hat and the Ginger Jar.

But once on a night alone,
the rest of Sydney gay,
I watched mad moonlight revel on
red roofs at Double Bay;
and more than another thing in life
I wished to plunge again
in a quiet where the world was bare
of all but the bush and rain."

Those lines written by Rex Ingamells are truly representative of the spirit that underlies and seemingly has always been the dominant undercurrent in the stream of Australian

poetry. The Australian poet almost invariably writes in the town and of the bush. There is an inescapable sense of contrast between two cultures, and the poet in choosing that of the bush has chosen that which alone is capable of developing into the true national culture we must have before we may lay claims to nationhood. The conflict between the city and the bush is a conflict between an alien and an Australian culture.

Australia has produced many verse-makers. Their works have ranged from the almost-jingoism of Paterson to the singing cadences of Shaw Neilson, the "Great Lover" of Australian poetry. Their subjects have ranged from the stirring struggle of the pioneers to the quieting sound of billabongs at night. And they have produced their schools, their literary movements in abundance. They have risen flaming in the heat of noon-day, and, without exception, they have faded with the greying of the sunset at night-fall. For all the burning of their flames they have left but little mark; here and there a scar to show where they have rested awhile, and then even that is gone. These are the grass-fires of literature; perhaps they even achieve a little cleansing, but they never attain the majesty of the irresistibly powerful blaze that sweeps relentlessly, leaving its mark for generations to come. The Jindyworobak Club is the first great bushfire in Australian literature. Before its blaze tangled undergrowth and foreign-cultured trees alike collapse; along its pathway the ground is prepared for the fertile literature that must follow.

"Jindyworobak" is an aboriginal work meaning "to annex", "to join". To those who are striving towards an Australian culture it has come to mean something more; it has come, as we shall see presently, to represent an annexing of all that is beautiful and true in the Australian background, and the joining to it of all that is good and applicable in our English cultural heritage. It has come to be above all the Charter of Australian culture, the right of Australia to be Australia and of Australians to be Australians. The Jindyworobaks are, as Ingamells has described them, "those individuals who are endeavouring to free Australian art from whatever alien influences trammel it, that is, to bring it into proper contact with its material." And art, here, I believe, includes any true expression of the creative spirit.

The real test of a people's culture is the way in which they express themselves in relation to their environment, and the loftiness and universality of their artistic conceptions raised on that basis. Australians have not yet reacted to their background; in the main, they have not even truly sensed its existence. There are still too many oaks and poplars hiding the gums, too many blackberries infesting the countryside for the Nodding Blue Lily to make its shy presence known. If we are to achieve an Australian culture we must sacrifice much to which we have been accustomed in the past, and in its place we must find an even older past, a past that is truly Australian. An Australian culture depends, to quote Mr. Ingamells, "on the fulfilment and sublimation of certain definite conditions, namely:

1. A clear recognition of environmental values;
2. The debunking of much nonsense;
3. An understanding of Australia's history and traditions, primaeval, colonial, and modern."

Each of these conditions will demand consideration as our theme develops, but the first and by far the most important must be given considerable attention. It is basic to the whole conception of an Australian culture; it contains the germ of life from which alone an Australian culture can develop. If we are to be honest, we cannot speak of an Australian dawn as did Evans in his poem *On the Plain*:

"Half-lost in film of faintest lawn,
A single star in armour white
Upon the dreaming heights of dawn
Guards the dim frontiers of the night,
Till plumed ray
And golden spray
Have washed its trembling light away.
The sun has peeped above the blue;
His level lances as they pass
Have shot the dew-drops thro' and thro',
And dashed with rubies all the grass,
And silver sound
Of horse-bells round
Floats softly o'er the jewelled ground."

Observe the epithets that the poet chooses: a "film of faintest lawn", a star "in armour white", the "level lancets" of the sun. There we have the English tradition at its height, with the breath of mediaevalism still clinging quaintly to the hardly-changing scene. Perhaps those lines are a perfect picture of, say, Sherwood Forest with its quiet covering of leaves: I do not know. But I do know that they achieve nothing more than the casting of a filming veil when applied to the Australian countryside; the Australian bush is rugged and virile, the great plains in the morning are crisping, firm. And the Australian author, be he painter, novelist or poet, must recognise this fact. To quote Mr. Ingamells again, "any genuine culture that might develop in Australia, however it might be refreshed and inspired by English influences, would have to represent the birth of a new soul. . . . Its quintessence must lie in the realisation of whatever things are distinctive in our environment and their sublimation in art and idea, in culture." Twenty years before Jindyworobak, Wilson touched on the very nerve-centre of our still-born culture, and sensed for a moment the aching void that lies at the heart of our literature:

"We should give the local saints a chance to play the local game,
Not import them from outside because they've got an old brand name."

Australia has suffered too much from her foreign ties; her culture has been developed in their cloaking mass, her individuality has been choked in their hopeless maze. For a century and a half we have trodden blindly, unseeing; and still today we tread a twilight path. As a people we are afflicted with an alien culture totally unfitted for the country with which we must grapple to gain our daily existence. Europeanism chokes our minds from birth, spreading its strangling tentacles into our schools, reaching into our democracy to pull it down into the gloom of European night. As Mr. Ingamells has so acutely observed in his own statement of the Jindyworobak force:

"Pseudo-Europeanism clogs the minds of most Australians, preventing a free appreciation of Nature. Their speech and thought-idioms are European, they have little

direct thought-contact with Nature. Although emotionally and spiritually they should be, and, I believe, are more attuned to the distinctive bush, hill and coastal places they visit than to the parks and gardens around the cities, their thought-idiom belongs to the latter not to the former."

This pseudo-Europeanism is no cloak behind which our writers seek to shelter; it is a tower of destruction threatening to crash upon our glimmering nationhood, to crush it in its incipient struggles, and to doom us to unthinking subservience. Take, for example, the outlook on the Australian scene that formed the background of the literary criticism of Professor Cowling. Here are his words as they appeared in the *Melbourne Age* on February 16th, 1935:

"Australia is not yet in the centre of the map and has no London. There are no ancient churches, castles, ruins—the memorials of generations departed. From the point of view of literature this means that we can never hope to have a Scott, a Balzac, a Dumas."

The same theory applied to poetry begets such lines as:

"The cattle-tracks between the trees
Were like long dusky aisles."

Gumtrees can no more be twisted into a resemblance, however fanciful, to the oak-pressed lines of Gothic architecture than can the Australian countryside suddenly bloom forth in the ruined castles for which Professor Cowling longs. It is not until we free ourselves from this cramping encumbrance of intellectual conservatism that we shall achieve our entity, or our emotional and spiritual potentialities gain the conditions necessary for growth.

But though the Jindyworobaks are fighting to free themselves and their country from the ensnaring meshes of Europeanism, it is not to be assumed that the Jindyworobak Club is narrowly chauvinistic in its outlook. That point is clearly established by Victor Kennedy in his *Flaunted Banners*: "The Jindyworobak movement," he says, "does not go all the way

with the youthful banner bearers of modernity in overthrowing all restraint and discipline; nor in decrying what has been done in the past." The Jindyworobak retains the balance necessary to see the humour that obtains in his inevitable struggle. Consider *The Thorough Aussie* by P. L. Grano, himself a contributor to the Jindyworobak Anthologies:

"My flesh is grass. It's only meet
The circle should be made complete.
So when I die I pray return
My body to the soil and do not burn.
But, Hell! how angry I will be,
If after all it's Luck's decree
No native grass I am to feed
But some darn alien noxious weed!"

Or again, and perhaps rather more pointedly, there is *Patriotism* by the same author:

"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 be quite understood
They're Queensland flies that crawl on them."

Such laughter is filled with the cleansing Australian sunlight. While it persists, the spirit of Jindyworobak will not consume itself.

II. BACKGROUND FOR POETRY.

In the fire of Australian literature there has been much smoke and little flame. Kendal and Lawson, Gordon and Paterson, tin gods of the Pseudo-Europeans, are by the tests we have propounded in a large part of their works un-Australian. Writers such as Harpur, O'Dowd, Neilson, and our contemporary James Devaney are not to be lightly passed over; but the great Australian poets have been few. Yet as early as 1923 Serle had classified more than 2,700 volumes of verse by at least 1,400 Australasian poets and would-be poets. In painting, the story is happily different; but in literature, and, particularly in verse, Australia is too cluttered up with a multiplicity of minor writers. Why should so many strive yet so few succeed? The reasons are, I believe, fourfold:

1. The refusal of Australia to allow her writers to live by writing alone;
2. An almost total lack of criticism of a standard high enough to be helpful;
3. A nation-wide antipathy to all things Australian—grim historical relic of the days long past when some now illustrious name wore the broad arrow of the convict settler;
4. A failure among writers to appreciate their peculiar Australian environment.

The picture of the artist struggling as schoolmaster, clerk, or journalist to earn a poor living by day and turning at night to endeavour to fulfil his creative urge is too well-known to anyone connected with our literary circles today to bear painful repetition. The forcing of our writers into a conflict against rather than with their environment is only another product of the national sentiment, "Brains wanted—Cheap."

It is with the failure of so many of our writers themselves that we are here chiefly concerned, a failure that has cast a deep shadow over our literary life, and surely must be a potent factor in separating the better Australian writer from

his public. If the Australian writer is to achieve a self-fulfilment, he must be made to forget any sense of inferiority to his overseas fellow that his countrymen have tried to instil in his mind. Art is international and universal even although its expression may be specialised and individual. The English and the Australian poets are kindred spirits; both alike are creators

"destined to power although they know not why."

It is only because the Australian poet has failed to remove the lawny veil that hangs awkwardly upon the rugged Australian nature that he has failed (with certain important exceptions) to achieve a greatness akin to his English brother's.

The Jindyworobak Club reveals itself as a common reaching out in the minds of many varied writers to the atmosphere in which they move, to the background of which they are bred. Their inspiration is Australian nature and Australian history:

"Sun and rock relay me power . . .
nebulae, instruct my seeing . . .
bird and beast and tree and flower
grant me your brotherhood of being . . .
I am to you ambassador
to keep the faith of vanished men."

They have drunk deep of the true spirit of Australia, and their urge is to paint it in living pictures:

". . . Write me! Dip your pen
in Australian night and day!"

For the first time their subject-matter has become truly Australian, because for the first time they have appreciated the true Australia. Their vision has become a faith that they must spread through the heart of their great continent:

"My heart would give you joy of this
that riots in the air,
the vibrant colour, warmth and sound,
Australia everywhere."

The Jindyworobak is unique in Australian literature because he has learnt a new approach to his environment, yet an approach that has in it the age of the very rock-hills themselves. It is an approach that has only been cultivated as the result of much hard labour over the last one hundred and thirty years, but it is now approaching its consummation. Where our early writers saw only a cold and unrelenting, ever-forbidding rock-face the Jindyworobak is now able to see the whole storied past of a thousand years. How well is this spirit captured in *Beside the Range* by the Inkata of the Jindyworobak Movement:

"Do you but see uncertain hills,
upon whose crests the white stars freeze?
and only hear the cricket-shrills
and word of wind among the trees?
Yet you may mark red fires and blacks,
whose limber bodies leap and gleam,
and shouts come from the mountain-backs
to burst the boundary gates of dream."

That spirit is distinctively Australian; it has its source not in any quaintly-clinging mediaevalism, but in the virile earth-culture of the vanished tribes.

III. THE EARTH CULTURE OF THE ALCHERA.

Our traditions in Australia today are twofold. We cannot forget all that great heritage of culture that our forefathers brought with them from England, but we must take equal care not to neglect our equally rich and peculiarly distinctive experiences of our Australian home. Here in Australia we have traditions worth having, traditions such as no other country possesses, and it is these traditions that are of supreme importance to us culturally. But to appreciate them we must banish many cherished but ill-conceived notions of those who were truly the Original Australians. Today the aborigine is forgetful of all that was best in his own high culture. He has become the embodiment of all that is worst in ours. He is a

degenerate, fly-blown creature begging for charity on the edges of the civilisation that has ruined him. He is no more than a walking parody of the proud race from which he sprang. The sad spectacle is given lasting permanence in Garry Lyle's *The Outcast*, a poem deep with feeling for this dying race:

"Squats the old man
age-crippled by the town's edge,
bush-longing town-hatred
defeat in his eyes,
defeat and a death-wish.
Immobile he squats,
alien, outcast, despised
by the parvenu lords of his land."

The aborigine was not always the unedifying wreck of humanity that the white man has made him. His was a race that proudly lived and proudly fought to retain its independence against the unheeding land-grabbing dominance of the white conquerors. His resistance was futile, fraught with bewilderment at the new material culture thrust before him; but it was a resistance worthy of his proud traditions. With true insight into the aboriginal mind, Tarlton Rayment recreates the seething anger that spread through the coastal tribes when Captain Cook first trespassed on the New South Wales coast one Sunday afternoon in April 1770:

"This has been our tribal land since the days of the Alcheringa. The Euro and the Emu fall to our spears. Our women are fat; our children are many. Vast is our hunting-ground.

"The tribe of Bra-yak-alung is mighty, for many moons-sit-down since our Wise Man, Bra-yak's son, drove out the Wild-Cat People, and we dwell in plenty.

"But our brothers, Nambur and Ku-ran-dur, have come to tell us of strange things. They saw a mighty Koon-doo sail on the Great Waters; from her belly came smaller Koon-doo's with white men carrying long fire-sticks that make loud talk.

"Ku-ran-dur threw his spear. The white man's fire-sticks replied with much anger.

"The strangers bring no message, yet they walk over the land of Bra-yak-alung. So be it. Take your spears and boomerangs: test each man's shield, and we, who are the Wise Men, will lead our warriors to Victory. Those who trespass so must die."

The culture of this virile people was peculiarly an earth culture; they were as no other race has been so long as history can tell a part of nature herself. Their whole culture was bound up with their environment; their whole life was lived in nature. Though originally strangers to the Australian continent, through constant contact of thousands of generations with Australian earth they had become a part of it. Every bird and beast, every tree and flower, every prominent rocky eminence had its own history told in song and story round the red-blaze of the evening camp-fires.

The origin of the legends is deep-set in time, even in the dawn of the human race itself. Let the greying mists of evening sweep along the river, let their shrouding folds envelop the city spires, and in their place see again the forest of great gums that once clothed the present site of city streets. Let the mists rise further and submerge even the trees in their greyness, let the mountains and the hills sink beneath the level of the plain. Sense the earth groaning with the travail of creation, and across it see the proud tribes pass—masters of their growing world. Now is the time of Alchera, dawn-time of history. A great crocodile rushes across the plain, fast pursued by an Alchera tribesman. In the twilight a spear is thrown, and the crocodile lies quivering. Shaking Nature arises in her trouble and heaves forth as an everlasting monument that great body of rock in the shape of Alcheringa crocodile that man has known as the Dandenongs. And the ancient tribesman himself, exhausted by his long chase, seeks rest in the spirit hunting-grounds. The heavens, still scarcely above his head, open to receive him, and his night-fire shines forth among the stars. Elsewhere a faithful woman waits in

vain for her dead lover to return. Worn out with hunger, she dies at her self-appointed post. Far away among the rocks where she waited so long in vain, her dead body gives rise to the beautiful red-blushing waratah. A great gumtree rises and the sky is forced upward to where it now rests; some of it clings to the brown earth, and the rivers and the sea are born.

The Australian earth culture is a culture alive, a culture that is in all respects pre-eminently Australian. In embracing it there is no question of becoming aborigines, of eating goannas and huddling naked in gunyahs while the cold night-wind blows, or of catching our meal with spear or boomerang. In embracing our earth culture we are embracing that which is peculiarly ours; we are letting the rugged Australian sunlight into our souls, and becoming for the first time truly Australian.

IV: NEW THOUGHTS FOR OLD.

A new culture must be possessed of a new idiom. The thought-forms of the past are no longer applicable, and a new language must arise to fill the void. The new literature must reflect the song of galahs at nightfall, catch the rhythm of sun-filled rocks, echo the quiet sound of billabongs at night. It must capture that spirit through which

"The barest hills in arid sand
burn beauty into sight
when evening, with a savage hand,
sets all their scarps alight."

It is not enough merely to think of gumtrees; the thought-idiom through which we convey our pictures must be adapted to them. Cattle tracks are no longer "long dusky aisles." In the place of such Gothic visions arise pictures of

"Stern-hearted freemen, felling tall trees,
building
rough homesteads amid far, unfamiliar places,"

rugged pictures of hard days that fade into other pictures of

"Herds of cattle, lowing by the fertile banks of
eastern rivers; drowsing under redgums, where the black-
and-white magpie sits calling ecstatically."

The Australian poet must cry with Mudie:

"Let us, oh sun, take fire
from your bright heat, let bushfires rage
about the scrub and ranges of our hearts."

He must paint the truly Australian in a way that is itself truly reflective of the scene it paints. He must learn, as R. Kate learnt in *The Waratah*, to express himself through his ageless traditions:

"How many dawns and sunset came
Across the valley of the years
Before your heart of sculptured flame
Blazed through its galaxy of spears?
Green spears that lift with one desire
To shield your heart of chiselled fire!"

His verse forms must probe the dim caverns of the Nullarbor, must wander through the mid-day quiet of the bush, and reflect triumphantly the electric colour of sundown burning on the purple hills. His song of light must be a sun-corroboree, his song of night a painting of the quiet of the night-walks of the earth the sun must travel to regain the morning. Supremely, this spirit is manifest in Ingamells' *Dark Cry*:

"Dark cry, claim the dark-shored lake.
Quicken your echoes round the hills. Dwell
in, possessing, earth and sky. Take
farewell.

Engined with knowledge, as fast
that very way the confident mind must push,
cry of a winging wild duck cast
to the insatiable hush of the bush."

V: EYES TO THE FUTURE.

For one hundred and thirty years Australian poets have fought against the shackles of misconception. The story of their fight is the story of the development of Australian literature (a story that must be told elsewhere). For one hundred

and fifty years Australians have lived in the twilight of a pseudo-European culture, their eyes fogged with a lawny mistiness; today they are called out into the blazing Australian sunlight, and their eyes must be adapted. Culture is not as science reserved for the specialised few; it is universal in its applicability. Culture is the strength on which national resistance is based in times of great emergency; in a nation it can be measured only as it permeates every section of the population.

It is futile to train our poets alone in the ways of our new-old culture. Unless it extends to the whole of the people, the new Australian culture we have envisaged cannot progress beyond its incipient strugglings, and its value will be lost. But if it is to be spread among the people, the choking weeds of *Australianism* must be uprooted from our schools, and in their place the seeds of the new culture must be sown. Australian history *primaeval*, colonial and modern must be taught to the partial exclusion of the history of France and of Germany, of Greece and of Rome. Our kindergartens and our wireless broadcasts for children must learn to retell the tales of the Alchera, and our city-children must be led to sense the lure of the bush. Our whole educational system as well as much of our national life will need a re-orientation. A Jindyworobak, conducting classes in Australian Literature, writes:

"My new headmaster is a great bloke, . . . a decent and comfortable scout to be near. His notion is not to limit my particular interests but to allow them to expand, and that within the school. He has a large allotment each year for purchasing library books and has asked me to supply regular lists of Australian books, declaring that he will put in the library books I recommend. He asks that I take an "observer's interest" in the Art classes and that I stimulate those classes' interests in Australian drawing, painting, sculpture, and architecture. Four periods a week I am to devote to Social Studies with various classes: in these I am to pursue my own syllabus, into which I am to introduce a proportion of Australian atmosphere. Four other periods, with the same classes, are to be on Australian literature outright."

There is the Jindyworobak at work building the new culture in which he believes. When that same system extends through every school in the Commonwealth, we may claim to have laid the foundations of a truly Australian culture. When that culture is absorbed into the stream of our national life, we shall have begun to achieve in some real measure our own nationhood.



CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF JINDYWOROBAK PUBLICATIONS.

- 1938: *Conditional Culture*, by Rex Ingamells, with a Commentary by Ian Tilbrook.
Sun-Freedom, by Rex Ingamells.
Jindyworobak Anthology, 1938, edited by Rex Ingamells.
- 1939: *Venture*, Quarterly Pamphlet, three issues, edited by Rex Ingamells.
Jindyworobak Anthology, 1939, edited by Rex Ingamells.
The Gift of Blood, by Max Harris.
- 1940: *Venture*, Quarterly Pamphlet, two issues, edited by Rex Ingamells.
Memory of Hills, by Rex Ingamells.
Jindyworobak Anthology, 1940, edited by Rex Ingamells.
- 1941: *Flaunted Banners*, by Victor Kennedy.
At a Boundary, by Rex and John Ingamells.
Jindyworobak Anthology, 1941, edited by Rex Ingamells.

- 1942: *Phantom*, by Gina Ballantyne.
Jindyworobak Anthology, 1942, edited by Victor Kennedy.
News of the Sun, by Rex Ingamells.
- 1943: *Columbus Goes West*, by William Hart-Smith.
Vagrant, by Gina Ballantyne.
Their Seven Stars Unseen, by Ian Mudie.
Content are the Quiet Ranges, by Rex Ingamells.
Unknown Land, by Rex Ingamells.
The Australian Dream, by Ian Mudie.
Jindyworobak Anthology, 1943, edited by Flexmore Hudson.
- 1944 (March to April):
The Reluctant Lover, by Kenneth H. Gifford.
Jindyworobak—Towards an Australian Culture, by Kenneth H. Gifford.
Bralgah, by R. Kate.
New Song in an Old Land, edited by Rex Ingamells.

Projected Publications:

- Beyond the Grass-Tree Spears*, by Roland E. Robinson.
Pacific Moon, by Peter Miles.
An Anthology of Servicemen's Verse—edited by Ian Mudie.

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