

Capricornia

A tale – a *moral* tale - of two brothers, a half-caste son, of blackfellas and whitefellas, frontier men and women, endless roguery, probing cops, a railway of a sort, crashes, booms and more roguery, booze, unionists, people wanting to get rich ... and the sort of book it takes to make us know these things.

In my edition of *Capricornia*⁽¹⁾, the word ‘civilisation’ first appears on page 3, but the first two pages are also focussed on the arrival of this phenomenon in Australia’s Northern Territory. Civilisation? The blacks resisted it more sternly than in the south, Herbert tells us, and his immensely zestful account of life in Port Zodiac (Darwin) and places within a couple of hundred miles thereof makes you wonder whether ‘civilisation’ was the word for what arrived beyond the tropic-line which he uses as his name for the region. Civilisation? The book is also about the Shillingsworth brothers, Oscar and Mark; Oscar dies three-quarters of the way through, while Mark is still there at the end but the family line has been continued by Mark’s yeller-feller (half-caste) Norman, a clever young man with considerable engineering skills who gradually moves to the centre of the book insofar as Herbert’s storytelling allows it to have one.

A paradox about this novel (if that’s its category; I’ll discuss this in a moment) about Australia’s north is that its first draft was written in London. Frances de Groen’s biography of Herbert (2) suggests that it was written there between March 1931 and his

return to Australia late in 1932. It’s tempting to think of Herbert choosing this locale for writing in a mood of colonialist rebellion against the mother country, but we should bear in mind that British readers of the imperial heyday had an appetite for tales from the frontier; magazines as well as book publishers catered for this desire for adventures not available in their island home. Frances de Groen suggests also that what Herbert wrote was a reworking of an earlier story called ‘Black Velvet’, which suggests that the sexual imbalance between male and female whites which is everywhere in *Capricornia* was in his conception, if you’ll excuse the word, right from the beginning. In the book as published, it only takes Herbert twenty-four pages for a black woman called Marowallua to bring to birth the yeller-feller child called Norman (Naw-nim, or No-name) whose father is Mark Shillingsworth. Herbert is quick to set out the main lines of his narrative: a (reasonably) respectable brother who comes into possession of a large station called Red Ochre, south of Port Zodiac, and a footloose brother whose life and associations take us through those parts of Territory life which are beyond the pale of respectability – meaning most of them.

Herbert is a yarn-spinner, and *Capricornia* is a vast agglomeration of yarns told to entertain us, as they do. Is it also a novel? My answer is yes and no. A novel is a social fixture of sorts, containing or implying a certain way of looking at society as a whole, and a novel is written by someone whose understanding of society and his/her characters is both far-ranging and deeply penetrating. If,

with these thoughts in mind, we search the book for passages on the inner life of the main characters we will look in vain, and yet, rough and sometimes raucous as the book may be, and cheerfully as Herbert gives us the various surprises, wriggles and contrivances of his plot, we do know we are in a novel as I understand it for most of the book's considerable length because we are aware of the book's moral dimension almost all the time. Herbert is too good a teller of tales not to provide something so important to his readers' understanding, and there is more to it than that: Herbert is aware, as most of Australia was not at the time he wrote the book, that the black people, and perhaps even more the half-castes, the yellere-fellers, are people too, with thoughts and feelings as deep, as important to themselves, as those of anybody ever considered in a literature. Norman is the book's focus and its subject is everything that ever happened and/or is happening in the vast area north of that line that gives the book its name. By way of comparison, think of a book being called 'Germany', 'France', or 'The Upper East Coast of the USA'. If the book is raucous, crass, lacking in inner analysis, sprawling and/or unrefined, so is Herbert's subject. What you are getting is true whether or not you like it, and somehow, give or take a few rough spots and things ignored because the narrative (or those listening to it, in Herbert's mind) needs to move on, it all works. Things happen, or don't, by the skin of somebody's teeth. Before he took ship to England, Herbert had spent time in the north and he knew what he was about. Personal identity, personal coherence, consistency of the parts of a personality were not as necessary in the Territory as they were in the cities of the south, and the young

Herbert – he wasn't calling himself 'Xavier' at that stage – found himself, in the north, in the sort of place where he could be what he was and if anyone objected to what he revealed of himself, he could fight them or forget them according to his inclinations. Any uncertainties about himself – see de Groen's biography for more on this – aligned him all the more closely with those he saw about him, most of all, perhaps, with the mixed race people who were everywhere, scorned by the whites who nonetheless used them to the hilt, and regarded as lesser people by the fully initiated blacks of whom there were still plenty in the Territory, even by Herbert's time. Here's Herbert developing his theme through the words of Andy, a white man of sixty talking to young Norman:

... 'D'you know, Sonny, I like to think that the Great Bunyip, the Spirit of this Southern Land of ours, the Lord of your Aboriginal forefathers from the beginnin' of time, and now the Lord of us who are growin' up in your forefathers' place and goin' the same old manly, carefree way, wants to keep a bit of the place in its aboriginal glorious wild state, and has chosen this here Capricornia for it. If that's so, good luck to Him, says I.

Andy has a lubra living with him, wearing an expensive green satin dress when Norman meets her, and she is 'adorned with good jewellery'. Andy calls her Velvet, thinks she's wonderful, knows that just as she's getting nice and fat and cheeky one of the blacks will sneak her back, but this troubles him not at all because 'I'll soon get another'. He laughs at old Alfie Alcock of Bonnidinka who gets trackers to help him chase runaway lubras; the trackers lead him a dance and he never sees his black woman

again. He's a fool, says Andy: 'comicaest thing you ever seen'. The names in this passage catch one's eye; 'Alcock' is as obvious as Herbert could make it, and 'Bonnidinka' takes us back to a time when it was common for a cyclist to give another person a 'dink', meaning two people on one bike. I think I am correct in seeing Herbert as using this word in a sexual sense; he's certainly laughing, as we can see by looking at the names of some of his other characters, especially those he wishes to satirise, such as policemen (O'Crimnell, O'Theef, Robbrey, Tocatchwon), clergymen (Reverend Simon Bleeter, Reverend Theodore Hollower), or men of law (Judge Pondrosass or Alexander Nawratt, lawyer of Port Zodiac). You may think these names crude but they show clearly enough that Herbert's sympathies are with those who live their lives trying to avoid the grip of what's virtuous, and I want to repeat, here, that although that includes all the rough and ready white men of the Territory, his strongest sympathies are reserved for the blacks and the yellor-fellers. Much the same can be said of the central character Prindy in *Poor Fellow My Country*, but that's far too big and complex a book to be considered here. *Capricornia* will give us quite enough to think about.

So what do I think about it? I think it's a wonderful creation, and perhaps it's an anti-novel as much as it's a novel, and why? Because what it describes is as much an anti-civilisation as it's the civilisation its controllers – policemen, southern legislators, official spokespeople like the clergy, and so on – try to make it. So many of those who are in the north are renegades from the south, the Empire, and the ways enshrined in law, that the regulations, enforced as

they may be by those in control, sit on top of all the other impulses of a society that doesn't respect things set up to govern it. Society is an agreement, after all, and the agreement north of the Tropic of Capricorn is far from the social settlement of the south. One feels this in Herbert's names for Batman (Melbourne) and Flinders (Adelaide); something about his throwaway use of these names suggesting that the places are to some extent risible to *Capricornia's* author. His choice of an incident to mark the end of combat in 1918 shares the same mood of scorn: he follows up one tragedy on the railway line with another.

Mick went to look, saw, gasped, goggled. When the truck was lifted and the crumpled mass freed from the wheels and springs and rails and laid on a blanket on the cess-path, he bent over it, kissed its shattered head, wept over it like a mother over a dead baby, crying again and again, "Oh Joe, man dear! – Oh wirrah man wirrah! Oh whoy did ye do it! Oh whoy did ye doye so harrd?"

Four days later, while riding up to Town on the trike to report certain visions of delirium tremens to the Roadmaster, Mick was struck by the mail-train, was run over and cut to pieces.

So the Great War ended; and the weary nations knelt before the Throne of God and bespoke God as though they never expected to have trouble with Him again.

I've already referred to a scene involving Andy, the landowner, and young Norman, who will himself become a landowner later on, courtesy of his uncle Oscar. In the same scene Andy prevails

upon a man called Joe Mooch (there's never much respect in Herbert's whitefella names) to play on his concertina and sing. We get 'Waltzing Matilda' from first line to last, and also a reminder of another favorite:

Oh don't you remember Black Alice, Ben Bolt,
Black Alice so dusky and dark,
That Warrego gin with a stick through her nose,
And teeth like a Moreton Bay shark –

Australian folklore is mostly disrespectful, and insofar as Herbert is addressing fellow-Territorians, as he is most of the time, I think, in his imagination, he lets his sympathies flow where his audience would expect. There are moments where he simply lacks the skill to do what he wants to do, and plenty of other moments when he has no trouble presenting his readers with what he feels like showing us. Two examples follow; one where he sets out to describe a Territory station, and one of a wedding. The station is Oscar's 'Red Ochre', and Herbert devotes something more than a page to presenting it.

At times he loved it best in Wet Season – when the creeks were running and the swamps were full – when the multi-coloured schisty rocks split golden waterfalls – when the scarlet plains were under water, green with wild rice, swarming with Siberian snipe – when the billabongs were brimming and the water-lilies blooming and the nuttaguls shouting loudest – when bull-grass towered ten feet high, clothing hills and choking gullies – when every tree was droning with humming birds and native bees – when cattle wandered a land of plenty, fat and sleek, till the buffalo-flies

and marsh-flies came and drove them mad, so that they ran and ran to leanness, often to their death -

The passage goes on, dashes succeeding dashes because a lyrically descriptive prose is beyond Herbert, who is so concerned to list the riches of a place he loves to the point of fascination, until he's dealt with the wet season (I delete his caps) and does it all over again for the Dry (dry). His subject matter – the wonder of a place that's close to his heart – is beyond his capacity to make prose work for him. Everything in his style is geared to narrative of a certain sort and he can't adjust or put it to one side, which is another way of saying, I suppose, that his narrative has a certain speed which he hasn't many means of varying.

Here's another passage where he's at ease with what he's doing:

The first watery whistle of the engine brought the crowd from the house, headed by bride and groom, he in whites and topee, she in satin and veil. All were agreed that they were the Bonzerest couple ever seen. Arm in arm they walked in front of Trooper O'Theef and Pat O'Hay, who played the Wedding March on fiddle and concertina. They climbed into the brakevan in a blizzard of confetti and rice, and amid a hurricane of cheering from the crowd and a cyclone of whistling from the engine, were drawn away into the mystery of the future. Then Mrs McLash and Blossom buried their faces in each other's fleshy necks and mingled the attar-drops of their hearts.

The total cost of the success to Tim, after deducting the amount he secured for the sale of two crates of butter dishes and one of biscuit-barrels to a Chinaman in Town, was 308

pounds, 13 shillings, and 7 pence. He did not smoke for six or seven months.

Herbert's at his best when he can work simply. He shows Norman getting angry when someone at Red Ochre calls him a half-caste, and, knowing somewhere in his being that it's true, and that he must reconcile himself to his situation, he leaves the station. Unfortunately, it's the Wet season, and before long he's lost in jungle, surrounded by water, and can't think of anything to do but bash on through the scrub. At some stage he shoots a turkey and is trying to cook it when he sees 'a savage', as Herbert calls the man, naked but for a belt of human hair, striped by paints, and carrying an armful of spears. To the surprise of Norman, and the reader, the 'savage' recognises Norman, and is in turn recognised by the lost young man:

"Me Bootpolish," replied the savage. "You no savvy?"

"Bootpolish," breathed Norman. "W-what – old Bootpolish work longa Red Ochre?"

"Yu-i," said the savage, and skipped to the fire and retrieved the burning bird.

Norman caught him by a shoulder, and looking wide-eyed at his death's-head face, cried, "Bootpolish – Bootpolish – what you doing here?"

Bootpolish grinned and answered, "Belong me country. Me go walkabout. Me fella bin hearim rifle, come look see."

Norman is quick to make it clear that he needs to get back to the station, and then to the South, as he calls it, or he'll lose his job. At this stage, in a careless piece of writing, Bootpolish introduces other

black men, including one called Muttonhead, who makes it clear to Norman that, the Wet being what it is and the country being what it is, he's stuck where he is for four or five moons. Much better, Muttonhead makes clear, for Norman to stay with the people who know the place:

"More better stop. You harcarse. Plenty harcarse stop longa bush longa blackfella."

"I – I mean I gotter ."

"Proper good country dis one. Plenty kangaroo, plenty buffalo, plenty bandicoot, plenty yam, plenty goose, plenty duck, plenty lubra, plenty corroboree, plenty fun, plenty ebytings. Number-one good country. More better you sit down all-same blackfella – eh Norman? Dat lo-ng lo-ng time you gotter wait – You gottim plenty baccy?"

This is hardly very elegant writing, but I think even the white reader can feel that Muttonhead is putting the obvious case for the blackfella's life. Norman stays in the jungle four months, presumably enjoying its gifts, as listed for him by Muttonhead, before he returns to Red Ochre. He's quickly back, literally, in the saddle, taking a mob of cattle to Port Zodiac for shipment to the Philipines, but the boat which was to transport them gets wrecked, and Norman has to return. On the way back to Red Ochre he stays at 'Gunamiah' and enjoys the hospitality of Andy and his lubra Velvet, as already mentioned. Andy has a good deal to say about the situation of the white man in the Northern Territory and I feel that he provides Herbert with the means to deliver himself of some broadsides to unsettle those of his readers who haven't come to

terms with Capricornia as he has had to. What looked like the crudity of the passage beginning 'Proper good country dis one' looks like simple truth when it's recalled twenty pages later. This is Herbert's way of telling his readers that Capricornia, the region, will change them if they go there and submit to it; the whole book is an account of submission to the north, the tropics, and that submission, that encounter with Capricornia, won't even have begun until the wisdom of the blackfellas has been acknowledged and the situation of the half-castes considered. Those policeman, clergymen and southern legislators referred to earlier who insist on trying to make the ways of the south apply in the north are forever swimming against the tide of locally-based experience. Norman, who has been raised as a son by Oscar at Red Ochre, and has been educated in Batman, has, in a sense, been deprived of the wisdom which is properly his, and he has to learn it all the hard way. The book ends with him learning the hardest, nastiest lesson of all. Let us now look for a time at the last chapters and what Herbert is telling us in them about the North and the South.

It's hard to find a suitable point of entry for considering the finale of the book, because Herbert is developing and inter-threading its strands for so many pages, but the late chapters are centred, much of the time, in courtroom dramas, especially the murder charge brought against Norman for allegedly shooting Frank McLash. Having already followed the events leading up to the death of McLash, we know Norman is innocent, but innocence is not always easily proved, especially when there are various associated guilts which the accused person would prefer to keep hidden. Norman, in this case, is the father of a child born to Tocky, another half-caste,

who has escaped from 'lawful' custody in Port Zodiac and is living with the black people at Red Ochre, now Norman's property, and sometimes in the house with him. Alarmed by the presence of some police troopers and the questions they put to him, Norman tells Tocky to hide herself and her child in the empty tank of a windmill not far from the homestead. She will be out of sight, and safe, he thinks. Soon after, he himself is taken from Red Ochre to be charged with the murder of McLash who was actually shot by Tocky – a story too complicated to be recounted here. The case against Norman looks ominous, and he's persuaded to employ 'the Shouter' to defend him: the Shouter is a brilliant barrister from Batman, and a past-master in analysing cases and influencing juries. In this case, though, the case will be decided by two judges on the bench, not by a jury (the Shouter having pulled that trick in an earlier matter!). The Shouter's reconstruction of the death by shooting is quite brilliant, and Norman is found not guilty by the judges. Norman, however, has hardly time to feel relieved before he is presented with the Shouter's bill and associated expenses. The Shouter knows Norman hasn't got the money to pay but offers to relieve him of Red Ochre station by way of compensation, and it appears, for a moment, that this is likely to happen. Enter Nibblesome, another legal practitioner of Port Zodiac, who has become aware that the Shouter (real name Bightit!) has already purchased two other stations in the area and has begun to examine the situation of the meatworks, currently closed for want of export markets. Nibblesome warns Norman not to enter any agreement with the Shouter and goes off to make inquiries. When he returns, he tells Norman that the Shouter is acquiring Northern Territory

stations at bargain prices because he has formed a company down south to buy the meatworks, because the Australian government has secured a five year contract to supply canned and frozen meat to the French army and navy, there's been a recovery in the meat market in the Philipines, and Argostinia (Argentina), a rival of Australia as a meat producer, has had a series of earthquakes. There's money to be made and the Shouter means to make it.

Norman has to pay for this advice, but with any luck he may be on the way to wealth and a change of fortune at last. Not so. When he gets back to Red Ochre he discovers the skeletons of Tocky and her baby in the tank where he'd told them to hide. He's alerted to this by the cawing of crows hanging around the tank. How, exactly, did this happen? We're not told. Herbert's wiped out any idea of a happy, or promising, ending with this catastrophe. Norman's line of descent has been broken. What will he do now? The book has no more to say. 'Kah, Kaaaaah!' say the crows, given the book's last sentence. We've followed Herbert's yarnning through any number of incidents and adventures but they lead inescapably to despair. The meatworks will reopen, the Shouter will make money, but fortune is always manipulable, and those who need its blessings most – the blacks and the half castes – will always miss out. Bightit, the Shouter, is a brilliant man, and he's on top of the management of his life, something that rarely if ever happens for the blacks and yella-fellas, who are always struggling, as are all the station and railway workers we've been reading about, except that they are usually a rung or three above the coloureds. I said at the outset that Norman is the centre of the book insofar as Herbert's storytelling allows the book to have a centre. I meant by this that Herbert's characters

aren't developed to the extent, common in Shakespeare, where what happens to them is a function, perhaps a dictate, of what they do. In Herbert's presentation, characters are two-dimensional, and subject, first of all, to movements of the plot, and it is the plot, the arrangement of the narrative with all its constituent stories, which embodies Herbert's world-view. You want to know what Herbert thinks? Examine what happens. Herbert the yarn-spinner is fond of introducing characters who give the reader a lecture; Andy, already discussed in this essay, is only one of Herbert's characters who directly address the reader with the views Herbert wants to get across. Such passages can be treated sympathetically or not, as you please. What is inescapable, and makes Herbert a much better writer than the surface of his prose would suggest, is the effect of all the interlinking stories stitched together, very skilfully for the most part, in his narrative. There's nowhere to get out, halfway through. The reader's bound by some agreement of narrator and listener to see it through to the end, and the end, which is by Herbert's choice, arrives at a dismal moment when those who ought to benefit, ought to be in fortune's favour for once, have run out of luck, and energy, completely, and those who, like Bightit, ought to be discredited, and are, perhaps, in the readers' eyes, are prospering as never before.

Kah! Kaaaaah!

- (1) *Capricornia*, Xavier Herbert, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, A&R Classics edition 1996 reprinted 2000
- (2) *Xavier Herbert: a Biography*, Frances de Groen, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1998