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Xavier Herbert's Obsessions

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Capricornia, by Xavier Herbert, introduced by Mudrooroo Nyongan. Imprint Classics edition, Sydney: Angus & Robertson. Paper. $16.95.

South of Capricornia: short stories (1925-34), by Xavier Herbert, selected and edited by Russell McDougall. Melbourne: Oxford University Press. Cloth, $42.50.

Xavier Herbert: episodes from CAPRICORNIA, POOR FELLOW MY COUNTRY and other fiction, nonfiction and letters, edited by Frances de Groen and Peter Pierce. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. Paper, $19.95.

Just as we might have thought there was nothing new to be said about Xavier Herbert's flawed achievement, these three books challenge us to rethink its nature. Mudrooroo Nyoongah's introduction to the new printing of Capricornia argues that the novel fails to present an alternative to the society it depicts. Russell McDougall's collection of Herbert's magazine romances shows both the effort Herbert put into perfecting his craft as a writer and his early interest in the connections between land, race and masculinity. The selection by Frances de Groen and Peter Pierce amply demonstrates both the variety of his work and his obsessiveness, energy and sheer crankiness. Taken together, the three books reveal again his politics of passionately committed nationalism, but they go further to suggest that the source of this politics, in both its positive and negative

aspects, is his need to assert his own virility.

This need asserts itself in his determination to order the world according to his own cranky notions of historical and scientific logic. Mudrooroo shows how the epic sprawl of Capricornia is dominated by a simplistic version of Darwinism, whereby all life is a constant struggle of '"natural selection", which destroys the old in a process of "evolution" towards a "new synthesis"' Mudrooroo finds this narrative painful for the Aboriginal reader, but he also points out that it is weakened, if not contradicted, by the novel's alternative theme of fate. In this reading, the Dingo fate that finally takes Norman's baby and the hope of a new synthesis, a new race, leaving only the cry of the crow, is an allegory of an Australia that refuses fundamental change. The reading, although persuasive, does less than justice to Herbert's perception of the land itself as the agent of a fate which Australians are unable to avoid because, unlike the original inhabitants, they are unable to see the land as anything but a resource for exploitation.

Mudrooroo recognizes the hard masculinity of Herbert's novel, which he relates to the 'Sexual need and sexual shame' that 'mark the colonisation of Capricornia'. He does not however relate this sexual drive, with its casual exploitation of black women and abandonment of their offspring, to the exploitation of the land, nor the sexual shame to the aim of prosperous gentility that is both excuse and pathetic reason for this exploitation. In both Capricornia and Poor Fellow My Country Herbert identifies the human inadequacy of the invaders, their lack of any inner strength or outer culture, as the source of their brutality and the failure of their ambition. They remain sterotypes, as

Mudrooroo complains, because they have no capacity to transcend their social roles. Yet in the writings published in his lifetime, and the personal letters and notes now published, as well as many of those still in archives, Herbert reveals the same inadequacy as the drive behind his own writing. But while this is the source of his contradictions and failures, his writing nevertheless enabled him to transcend the limitations that trapped most of his characters. His work may not resolve its contradictions, but it is aware of them, and thus showed a recognition, although not a realization, of the potential of his country.

McDougall's collection traces the development of Herbert's fiction from stories where love triumphs in the exotic tropics to those which, while still romantically plotted, exploit his growing experience of life and work in the north. Despite their romantic plots, these stories show the same fascination with the land and the same need to dramatize man's encounters with it, to make them 'larger than life', that we find in his later work. This subjectiion of life to the demands of narrative is the way he imposes his order on experience. While in these stories, unlike the later ones, the men win their women and achieve their worldly ambitions, their author maintains his mastery over both.

As is appropriate to the genre, the heroes of these stories are men of action, professional seamen or miners or engineers. Their preference for deeds over words marks Herbert's own lifelong ambivalence over his own status as a professional writer. While he approaches his writing with absolute seriousness, he also doubts the value of mere word and is reluctant to associate with other writers or academics. His

literary forms come from popular authors, and his ideas from the company of young-men-about-town that he portrays in his autobiographical Disturbing Element. Consequently, the early stories are racy yarns with a disturbingly casual sexism and racism. Beautiful white girls are to be mastered by love, black men by authority, yellow men by force, the land by technology. His first long work, The Sea Vultures, an adventure story for boys published in the Melbourne magazine Pals in 1927, is a fast-moving yarn in which a sturdy Sydney schoolboy rescues his father and brother from 'the grip of the Living Death'. This is the secret drug which gives power to the Chinese gangster whose very appearance sends a 'chill of horror' through the hero: 'Never had Harry seen a face and form so sinister, so cunningly evil.' However, virtue triumphs in the final chapter, and Herbert learns how to pace a sustained narrative.

Even in the earlier stories there are traces of the later author. Some show a delight in untouched nature that goes beyond mere exoticism. The women who are tamed by the men have a strength to match their male lovers. The clergyman is a figure of fun. In the later stories, after Herbert's wider experience in the north and his sojourn in London, realism comes to replace the exoticism, even if romantic endings still override the inherent problems. Among these stories we find ones like 'Machinations of a Jinx' which were to be completely reworked in Capricornia. We find also a change in racial attitudes, Possibly in response to the 'Australia First' attitudes of P.R.Stephensen and W.J.Miles, he shows the Japanese, in particular, as wily opponents rather than sinister enemies. The Aborigines, too, become helpful companions rather than insignificant shadows. In 'Shotgun

Wedding', unpublished at the time but also the germ of an episode in Capricornia, he directly confronts the problem of miscegenation, although allowing himself the luxury of a happy ending of the kind his later realism would refuse. And in the final story of the collection, a piece of knockabout comedy, he actually allows the Chinese to outwit the whites. The moth of Capricornia is emerging from the chrysalis of popular stereotypes.

McDougall has been assiduous in tracing these stories through the archives and through files of early magazines, particularly the Australian Journal, from which Herbert received his first regular income as a writer. His collection includes all that he has been able to find of Herbert's shorter fiction written before Capricornia and not otherwise republished, including extracts from two novellas reconstructed from typescripts. The book also reproduces the original magazine illustrations that accompanied the stories. The editor's introduction, which amongst other things shows the various noms-de-plume through which the persona of Xavier Herbert developed, and his placing comments to each story, whet the appetite for the substantial biography of Herbert on which he is working.

The de Groen and Pierce collection presents the most substantial challenge to our understanding of Herbert's work. The selections from his published work, supplemented by extracts from letters, diaries and public proclamations, provide a balanced conspectus of his work and personality, and should prove an ideal introduction for undergraduates. The extracts do justice to his less well known works, and even to the difficult Soldiers' Women. The particular collocation of work however goes beyond

this introductory function to suggest new critical perspectives on Herbert's work as a whole, and particularly on the relationship between his politics, his personality and his writing.

In their introduction, the editors come to terms with both the Promethean and the Protean qualities of Herbert's work. They argue that its thematic repetitions, as well as the constant reiteration of incidents, places and characters, require us to see the author's work as the product of the single drive to write 'as a means of apprehending the "reality of [his] existence" and of forging for himself an identity which he signified in terms of Australia's national identity.' While they do justice to the Protean variety of his work, and of the changes and contradictions in the opinions he proclaimed, which are well demonstrated in their excerpts, their achievement is to show the unity behind this variety. This unity, as they argue, arises in part from Herbert's own doubts about his personal and sexual identity, his feeling of dispossession and alienation. His work seeks to remedy this alienation by constituting an ideal world, governed by the logic of nature rather than the castrating emotion of the family. This endeavour necessarily produces a world of melodrama in which larger-than-life characters strive to free themselves from the encumbrances of the villains who try to tie them down to distorting attachments to wealth, domesticity or political power. Yet, as the editors argue, this melodramatic vision is itself one of power and necessarily totalitarian, 'because it engrosses everything on the outside to the preoccupations of the self'.

This observation goes to the heart of the difficulties

Herbert presents to the critic. The Promethean drive to express the self in a national ideal is a masculine drive for power that subsumes sexuality in its effort to absorb the female in the universal persona of the artist. The work becomes an offspring uncontaminated by the female, whose only role is to nurture its progenitor. This necessarily entails not only the mysogynist rejection of women but the misanthropic rejection of men as rivals in the task of creating the ideal community. The desolation and violence in which his major novels end is the only logical conclusion of their generating force.

The attempt to subject the world to the will of the writer produces the bewildering contradictions revealed by this collection, particularly in the viloent alternations of his attitudes to Aborigines and half-casts, or 'Yellow-Fellas'. In Capricornia and Poor Fellow My Country he offers the image of mixed blood as the ideal product of Australian history, yet at other times, in letters and essays, he rejects them them as 'Bloody Nothings': people of no worth. Similarly, at times he lauds full-blooded Aborigines as the only true Australians and at others reviles them as spongers, hypocrites and charlatans. It is not enough to explain these extremes of judgement as the product of different moods or stages of Herbert's development. Rather, they are all products of the existential alienation that he tries to redress through his work. The attempt fails because of his refusal to accept the unstructured and terrifying domain of the real in his world. He attempts instead to reduce experience entirely to the domain of the symbolic. By excluding the real from the dialectic of the self, he reouces self to a paranoic identity of the symbolic and the imaginary.

Herbert's flight from the real can be seen in his arguments about race and miscegenation, which are variations of his unscientific attempts to impose a scientific order on experience. It can be seen in his constantly shifting attitudes to Aborigines, which are an index of his attempts to project on them his own feelings of dispossession, and his anger at their refusal to submit to the dictates of his symbolic system. The killing of Prindy, and his later re-emergence as a spirit of the destroying waters, signify the author's rage at his artistic and political failure to reduce the real to a manageable symbolic system.

The strength of this collection by de Groen and Pierce is that it both confronts us with these arguments and gives us the evidence which prompts and challenges our conclusions. It is, to this date, the work that most successfully confronts the psychological, political and literary dichotomies that have troubled previous scholars of Herbert's work. I am sure he would have detested it, for it takes his work seriously enough to challenge it.