My Adventures in Queensland History

Beverley Kingston

This is a story of an adventure that began as adventures often do, on a slowly-moving train somewhere in Queensland in 1946. The train was in fact moving so slowly that my father was able to leap out break a piece off the giant sensitive plant growing alongside the track and climb back in to show us its pretty mauve flowers and how the leaves curled up when they were touched. I was just five and we were returning to North Queensland to live. I was to spend some years trying to capture sensitive plant for my collection of dried plants. (My best specimens were another noxious weed, noogoora burr.) There were to be many other collections before the morning about fifteen years later when the late Roger Joyce wheeled a library trolley loaded with books into the room for our first lecture in Australian history at the University of Queensland. As I recall they were mostly the *Historical Records of Australia* and he began to talk about what was in them. It was all very different from the kind of Australian history I knew and I wanted to begin collecting immediately.

I was already well schooled in that version of Australian history enshrined by Kathleen Fitzpatrick in her little Oxford volume on the explorers — we’d had *Woods Australia* for Junior — and wherever we went Dad seemed to know about monuments and tracks to follow. As we drove from Ingham to Innisfail on regular visits to our Robertson grandparents we never failed to marvel at Kennedy’s perseverance in the scrub north of Tully. On those trips we usually had our picnic lunch under a huge weeping fig on the beach at Cardwell, more-or-less opposite the school and the headmaster’s residence where the young Alan Frost was beginning to put together his version of Queensland’s history as he tells it in *East Coast Country*. We tried to imagine Cunningham’s journey through the dense scrub as we walked the winding track up Mt Cordeaux or ate innumerable picnic lunches beneath the Cunningham memorial at Ipswich. Later on the way south to Dubbo where the Kingstons lived, Dad could usually be persuaded to detour to Thunderbolt’s grave in the Uralla cemetery which we preferred because we already knew there were doubts about the authenticity of Thunderbolt’s Rock on the main road. Some of the names we read off the RACQ strip maps in the back of the car had thrilling meanings. It was hard to believe, for example, that the Talbragar we crossed coming in to Dubbo was actually the same river Henry Lawson had written about in his *Poetical Works*, reprinted by Angus and Robertson in 1951, a book I’d found earlier among the small stock in an Ingham newsagncy, excitedly requested as a birthday present, and read avidly. I put it alongside Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner on my special bookshelf. They all spoke to me about Australia, though it was not the Australia I knew in north Queensland.

Among the books mentioned by Roger Joyce in 1962, I was greatly attracted to H C Allen’s 1959 comparison of the frontier in Australia and the United States, *Bush and Backwoods*, perhaps because of a copy I found marked down from 31/6
to 6/- in the American Book Store in Brisbane’s Edward Street. It joined the growing collection on my shelf at Women’s College. Allen promised to throw light on a problem of which I had been aware ever since I had unsuccessfully tried to persuade the kids in Marina Parade, Ingham, to play games with bushrangers instead of cowboys. I even tried writing stories and scripts for them. The trouble was none of us knew enough about bushrangers, but they were allowed to go to the flicks on Saturday arvos and therefore knew a good bit about cowboys. For my long essay as a third year honours student — it was over ten thousand words — I chose the application of the Turner thesis on the American frontier to Australian history as my subject. I wasn’t specially interested in Frederick Jackson Turner’s argument about the role of the frontier in creating a democracy, or in Fred Alexander’s gloss about the impact of the mining frontier in Australia on the vote for federation, though I read them with admiration and devoted a chapter to those questions in my long essay. What interested me was the poetry and the drama of settlement, Turner’s prose, the way Keith Hancock had translated it to Australian experience, and S H Roberts’ superb description of the squatting age in New South Wales. In North Queensland the frontier was still very close. Grandfather Robertson had arrived as a baby from Scotland with his family in Townsville. His first job was as a tally-clerk on the wharf at Innisfail counting bunches of bananas grown by Chinese settlers on the Johnstone as they were shipped out to southern markets. In his spare time he assembled incoming farm machinery, and because he had a fine copperplate hand, developed a sideline inscribing coffin plates for the undertaker. Most of the people in his stories of the early days were still alive, or their names were. I wanted to know where all the names had come from.

Our house in Gordonvale, a classic Queenslander on stilts with a verandah round three sides and pawpaws hanging over the back steps, had a name — Lakemba — which is the name of a small Fijian island. I imagine that the house was named by someone connected with the Mulgrave Sugar Mill, either directly from Fiji or perhaps via Lakemba in Sydney which was originally the name of a house built not all that far from the old Canterbury Sugar Mill. (Our Lakemba nameplate was removed and discarded in the course of renovations. I rescued it and took it with me to Ingham where I propped it up outside the cubbyhouse I made under the tankstand.) I loved the names of the rivers, the railway sidings, and the station homesteads. The canefields were quite closely settled, criss-crossed by roads, creeks and tramways. On frequent car trips from Gordonvale — fourteen miles north to Cairns to shop, forty miles south to Innisfail to Grandma Robertson’s — we slipped through the names like beads on a string — Aloomba, Behanna Creek, Fishery Falls, Deeral, Babinda, Waugh’s Pocket, Eubenangee Swamp, The Russell, Sunrise, Mirriwinni, Daradgee, Garradunga. I thought I might write an account of the settlement of Queensland comparable to Roberts’ which captured the poetry of the names and the pattern of explanation they represented. It was a bit Paul Carterish I suppose, though never so reductionist or pretentious. So I began to search for accounts like those Roberts had used in memoirs and published journals of the early settlers in Queensland and to try to plot the routes they described on the map from Mt Abundance to Natal Downs. My long essay on the frontier gave me a good grasp of some major themes in Australian history at that time. It was, I see now, largely preoccupied with the
impact of the environment on the nature of settlement. Australian historians then were inclined to see the Australian environment as hostile to the settlers in sheer physical terms, because of the relative shortage of water and potential arable land, and therefore the scattered nature of settlement and the distances to be travelled. The Aborigines in that version were seen as simply less threatening than the American Indians, especially given advances in European technology, some of which, like the revolver and barbed wire for fencing, developed as a result of the prior American experience. It is interesting now to note the great change that has occurred in our reading of that environment. While we depended more on our rural industries for exports, I think we were inclined to treat its unforgiving qualities with respect if not fear. Now that it has become an integral part of the tourist industry and somewhat subdued by airconditiong, air transport, and refrigeration, we take it for granted except when there are dramatic floods, bushfires, cyclones, or hailstorms which we regard as an affront to our planning and control. I think too that as we lose our sense of our British heritage and all that British history which linked us to Stonehenge and Shakespeare, the antiquity of our environment has become more significant. The story of Gondwanaland and of early Aboriginal arrivals is a kind of necessary replacement for those dying British roots in our sense of our own connection to the past. It also has the advantage of inclusiveness. No-one whether of Aboriginal, British, European or Asian stock is left out at Uluru or Kakadu. Back in the sixties, however, when I first began to read Australian history there was very little about the tropical environment I knew from my own experience, or the particular kinds of problems encountered by the early settlers as they moved into the tropics. This led me to think that I wanted to find out more about the moving frontier in Queensland for my thesis in fourth year.

When I turned up at the Queensland State Archives (QSA) looking for sources — I thought I’d begin with the spread of settlement around Brisbane in the 1850s and 1860s — Bob Sharman scratched his head and said he thought perhaps I should begin by looking at Governor Bowen’s despatches. The QSA at that time was housed in the old government stores building on the riverbank. It was one of the oldest buildings in Queensland, solid stone and dating from the days when Brisbane was a convict settlement. The entrance was at street level on the third floor. Below were two levels down to the quay and the river door which were reached by a primitive lift worked hand over hand with a rope and pulley. The archives as yet had no research room but there was a table by the huge stable door overlooking the river on the second floor. Government stores had once been hoisted up there from the quay below. Bob sat me down at the huge old table, fetched the first volume of Bowen’s despatches, and showed me where to find the rest. Pinned up nearby was a poster listing the ten commandments for archivists — mostly about leaving records as you found them. Having read this curiously, I turned to Governor Bowen. His clerk’s copperplate was as neat and legible as my grandfather’s. I was alone most of the time, and free to browse as I liked, though also welcome to go upstairs for tea with the staff at the appointed hours and listen to their helpful professional chatter about archives. Before long I found the records of the Lands Department round the corner and made my own deductions about that New Year’s Eve gathering in 1860-61 when a great many pre-emptive applications for crown leases were made and registered in bulk on New Year’s
Day. A few months later I read Geoff Bolton’s account in *A Thousand Miles Away* and hugged myself as if I had a kind of secret knowledge. I knew I wanted to be part of this, whatever it was.

It quickly became clear that my original plan of following the spread of settlement in the vicinity of Brisbane was not viable. This was partly because most of it had occurred before Queensland was separated from New South Wales and the records were not available to me in Brisbane, or else they were among those records which had been supposed to be transferred to Queensland at separation but never arrived. There was already in the 1860s discussion of the difficulties thus being caused in the new Queensland Lands Department. I could see that in order to make sense of the massive ledgers and bundles of correspondence which made up the Lands Department records I had to have some understanding of the laws under which they were created and operated. So that became the immediate focus of my study. It meant hours among the *Votes and Proceedings* and the *Government Gazettes* listing significant changes in the land laws and accompanying regulations. Because I had no legal background or training, I was very inefficient and probably only comprehended a quarter of what I was doing.

During the course of that year I tried to make sense of the record as I could uncover it, not only at the archives, but also through the Brisbane *Courier* for which I had to go to the Parliamentary Library. Microfilm did not yet exist in Queensland, and the only copies of the 1860s *Courier* were there. It was a bit unreal walking up that superb bi-furcated curved staircase to the splendid nineteenth-century library overlooking the Botanic Gardens, sitting at an immaculate nineteenth-century writing desk complete with inkwells and quill holders and reading the bound volumes of newspapers, almost from cover to cover, never sure what I was looking for or what I might find. But it is no wonder that I began to imagine myself back in Brisbane in the 1860s and sometimes wrote 1863 instead of 1963 in the attendance book at the Archives.

Expanding my list of memoirs and other accounts of settlement in the John Oxley Library (the Queensland State Library’s special Australian collection) was neither so atmospheric, nor rewarding. The librarian in charge kept both the catalogue and many of the collections of private papers under her personal surveillance in case anyone should find out anything detrimental to the reputation of those involved, or Queensland in general. Still, by the end of fourth year I was able to produce an account of the main changes in Queensland’s pastoral legislation from 1859 to 1869 which was good enough for Gordon Greenwood to offer me a job as one of his full-time research assistants — I think he had four or five. Goodness knows what they were doing. I did bits of jobs as requested but it was precious little really, and we were given to understand that this was a form of patronage until a suitable research scholarship became available. I spent part of my year in Greenwood’s research room playing with the idea of a history of Stanthorpe, beginning with the geological record on which I’d done a fair bit of work. (And I’m happy to report that the remnants of my prize-winning collection of Stanthorpe granites have found a home at last in Gavin Souter’s Lucinda memorial cairn at Middle Harbour.) But mostly I read the theses on Queensland history — third year, fourth year, a few masters and PhDs — which were kept on shelves behind my desk. I also did any casual teaching or marking other members
of staff put my way. And when Roger Joyce said he had a thesis on the Darling Downs by a chap called Waterson to examine, I said I’d like to read it. ‘Okay’, he said. ‘Note any comments you have or errors you find and that will help me with my report’. When I’d finished I’d decided that this person was the one to supervise my PhD which was to be yet another instalment of the Lands Department Records. Both he and Geoff Bolton, however, were at Monash, not a place of which Greenwood approved nor one where he wielded any influence. So it was back to collecting material on India and Australia for Bob Neale, and the development of the atomic bomb for Greenwood’s next volume of international history. Gordon Greenwood liked to send his students to top British and American universities, but when I enquired tentatively about a scholarship, he offered me Toronto. I knew then I wasn’t destined for great things, and eventually I found my own way to Monash.

Despite what Henry Reynolds says, the early 1960s were good years for Australian history. Bob Gollan’s *Radical and Working Class Politics* appeared in 1960 followed by Margaret Kiddle’s *Men of Yesterday* and D W Meinig’s *On the Margins of the Good Earth* in 1962, and Geoff Bolton on North Queensland, Geoff Serle on Victoria’s *Golden Age* and Tom Perry on *Australia’s First Frontier* in 1963. The next year saw Noel Butlin’s *Investment in Australian Economic Development* and the reissue of Stephen Roberts’ *Squatting Age*, followed in 1965 by Michael Roe’s *Quest for Authority in Eastern Australia*. Geoffrey Blainey’s *The Tyranny of Distance* had us thrilled in 1966, but it was the publication of Loveday and Martin on parties and factions in New South Wales and the influence of Waterson who was beginning to compile his material on Queensland politicians which gave me my focus.

My subsequent PhD thesis had elements of faction politics in Queensland and some social and administrative history, though I never could be as interested in the working of agricultural reserves as I was in the politics of the Lands Department and the pastoral lessees. Queensland’s policy of setting up agricultural reserves was sensible and effective but it didn’t lead to any of the drama or the heroics of free selection as in New South Wales and Victoria. Though the Lands Department files were thick with letters from small farmers on matters relating to their problems, they were so varied that it seemed impossible to make any pattern of them. The real drama in Queensland was to be found in the extension of pastoral settlement, its effect on land policy and management in government, and on cabinet formation. Yet even here the fact that most of the land was on short leases from the Crown, much of it in relatively remote or inaccessible parts of the country, impossible to use or administer properly, meant that it was difficult to sustain outrage over greed or impropriety.

In many ways the settlement of Queensland proceeded in an orderly fashion thanks to the lessons learned during the squatting age in New South Wales in the 1840s, though of course to say any of these things is now heretical. Despite a modern conviction that the pastoralists’ only intent was to dispossess the Aborigines, I still believe that the real enthusiasm in Queensland in the 1860s was not in obtaining land, or security of tenure, because there seemed to be so much land, but in simple access to grass, water and transport. It was about making the greatest possible profit from the least possible capital investment. Railways,
especially, but roads, bridges and shipping facilities all provided by the
government made the significant difference to the profitability of land, so who was
in government mattered. The first wave of settlers were not so much determined
to secure land for themselves, especially if they had to pay for it. Their aim was to
set up infrastructure drawing on capital available for state supported investment to
secure quick profits from grass and stock. Such short-term thinking could not go
on, of course. By the 1870s the debate had also begun over the relative merits of
taking quick profits from wool and to a lesser extent meat and building a relatively
stable settled community. And since most of the investment in pastoral expansion
came from outside Queensland, the debates were not properly focused. In general
the locals were becoming more preoccupied with maintaining the viability of the
few scattered settlements and improving their own place within them, so the
profit-taking interests of overseas and intercolonial investors fell down the
agenda. Queensland politics began to take on the regional characteristics which
continue to this day.

I became intrigued by the role of land as a kind of panacea in Australian
history. Henry George was probably never really fashionable, not even in the
nineteenth century, though he was quite popular in certain circles in Australia.
After all, his idea of land as the single source of wealth denied the importance
of capital and capital formation to those who believed that was the most important
thing. But George also denied the value of their labour to the landless urban
working class, and so was anathema to Marxists. Yet one is often reminded of
Henry George, especially on Saturdays reading the real estate section of the
Sydney Morning Herald. Is there a connection between the ‘trophy homes’ on the
foreshores of Sydney Harbour and the small parcels of land once handed out to
ex-convicts so that they might become farmers, or the irrigation blocks awarded
to ex-servicemen after the First World War? Certainly the trophy homes cost
millions of dollars to buy. Land on Sydney Harbour has become a scarce and
therefore valuable commodity. But land was already a scarce commodity in the
British Isles in the eighteenth century. Australia’s major attraction was that land
was available and cheap, certainly more available as far as governments have been
concerned than money raised through taxes. So handing out land, in small parcels
or large, has been a continuous theme in Australian history since those first farms
were made available to the convicts at the end of their sentences. The squatting
movement illegal at first, was quickly normalised because it promised an export
income and the immigration of desirable settlers with funds to invest. When
governments sought to apply a similar policy to the creation of small farms in the
1860s for the same reasons, free selection was denounced as dangerous. It was a
good deal less dangerous, however, than rioting diggers. And because it was on a
smaller scale than squatting it was less successful, though in principle it was
hardly different. (Of course there were no inquiries into the failure of squatting or
the inefficient use of capital during the madness of the 1840s as there were into
the later failure of free selection.) Like free selection, soldier settlement aimed to
diffuse potentially troublesome unemployed returned servicemen and at the same
time boost agricultural production. Once more it was a cheap form of welfare
presented as economic development.
In Queensland throughout the twentieth century, scarcely a government came or went without some plan for closer settlement, new leasing arrangements, special subsidies for clearing cactus or brigalow or whatever, to win votes and contribute to Queensland’s development. More recently the cynic in me has wondered what the difference is between the Aboriginal land rights movement and free selection or soldier settlement or any of the other diffusionist land policies pursued by Australian governments over two hundred years. All promised more than they could deliver and all whipped up frenzy in proportion to their distance from the land itself or those deemed to be the beneficiaries. Try as I might now, I can’t quite follow what seems to be the somewhat dubious manipulation of history in the land rights business. It is no surprise that it has been fraught with difficulty. Had land simply been made available to Aboriginal applicants from existing Crown reserves as was done in all the other deserving cases over the past two hundred years, it would have been less threatening and confusing to everyone. There is of course, the problem of emotional or symbolic attachment to the land, but as Peter Read is now allowing, attachment to a particular part of the country is not necessarily unique to people of Aboriginal origin. I wonder about this myself sometimes when I catch a whiff of that peculiar mixture of warm damp earth and rotting vegetation which invariably puts me bank on the riverbank at Innisfail.

One of the mindless discontinuities in modern Australian history can be seen in the differential treatment accorded now to the first generation of nineteenth century British settlers in various parts of the country and that given to the first generation of post-1945 immigrants. Both groups were engaged in exactly the same purpose, namely, securing a foothold and establishing themselves and their families for the future in a new country. Yet one group is condemned as invaders, land thieves, murderers, and destroyers of the environment, whether they were or not. They were bad. Multiculturalism, however, is good. The new immigrants are praised for growing rich more quickly in some cases than the squatters and selectors ever dreamed. How many of the squatters could compare after a mere twenty-five years with the wealth of the Pratts, the Lowys, the Bonds? But in what way is the development of new suburbs and shopping centres different from the establishment of farms and homesteads? Both appropriate land and exploit it more intensively with resulting profits.

Thinking like this is also now unacceptable. What seemed once to be a fairly desperate and often ruthless quest for economic and social survival in which land was occupied by force if necessary, has been transformed by modern historians into something quite different. In Henry Reynolds’ accounts the economic motive has disappeared and is replaced by ‘racism’ as the impetus for white settlement. Interpreting and reinterpreting the history of land law in Queensland has moved into federal politics with the Mabo and Wik judgements and a whole generation of legal experts on land rights has arisen. Indeed, in recent years so certain and vociferous have the correct versions of the history of land ownership in Queensland been that I have come to feel very doubtful about my own knowledge and interpretation of nineteenth-century events. Yet as Reynolds argued in *The Law of the Land*, the way history is researched and evidence interpreted is usually very selective. That is true. What I have been seeing is my own knowledge and
Beverley Kingston at her doctoral graduation, 1969. (Kingston Collection)

The Kingston family home, Queensland. (Kingston Collection)
the perspective of the group of Queenslanders I knew fairly well being written out of the record in much the same manner as the Aborigines themselves became irrelevant to an earlier generation of historians for whom settlement was an accomplished fact, no longer significant in contrast to the problems of national development during war and peace.

In a memoir of her childhood in North Queensland, Pat O’Shane has described some of the difficulties she experienced which she attributed to her Aboriginality. She and I are almost exact contemporaries. The first school she attended was a two-teacher school at Redlynch a few miles north of mine in Gordonvale. Gordonvale School had a teacher for each class, though that made little difference to our isolation or our puzzlement, because what we were being taught even about Australia, seemed to bear no relationship to what we saw about us. By the time Pat O’Shane was grappling with Cairns High School, my family had moved several times, and I was cautiously feeling my way into my fourth new school in five years. I had to become a boarder if I was to do more than Junior shorthand, typing and bookkeeping. Even despite the crash course in knowledge provided by the Presbyterian Girls’ College, Warwick, I arrived at the University of Queensland still bearing many of the defects of my remote rural upbringing. They were still more evident in Melbourne. At Monash, Doff Fitzpatrick kindly suggested that my accent needed serious work, but they’d already tried that at PGC. I think I was simply tone-deaf.

Being female was an intellectual handicap anyway, but it wasn’t the only problem. I understood that very clearly when as a first year student I read Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. There was also no way I could begin, though I tried, to emulate her reading programme, and certainly could never approach an eminence like Sartre. Later I read Bernard Smith’s *The Boy Adeodatus* with envy. On the one hand I was thrilled to find how close he had been to my past. His mother’s relatives, the Tierneys and the MacNamees, with whom he stayed when visiting his family in North Queensland, lived in the big house on the other side of the river from my grandparents in Innisfail near the punt which was the only way of crossing the North Johnstone at that point. They were the archetypal Catholics of my childhood, conjured as the enemy by my one-eyed Presbyterian grandparents. But on the other hand in Sydney, Bernard Smith had access to libraries and knowledgeable adults of a kind I couldn’t even imagine. He described a kind of education I had yearned for without even knowing what it was. Yet he was illegitimate, an under-Privileged child! However, he lived in Sydney, and he was a boy. When I read Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s remarks on her sense of her own intellectual inadequacy I breathed a sigh of recognition and relief. She had the benefit of education at the University of Melbourne and Oxford, yet she felt ill-equipped to apply for a chair at Melbourne. It didn’t seem so bad then that I’d always felt out of place because I didn’t know the right people or the approved ways of saying things, that though I read constantly and omnivorously I never seemed to understand what the others were talking about.

Ever since it dawned on me that there was a direct link between the collection of old stoves under my grandmother’s house in Innisfail and the stove advertisements in my nineteenth-century sources, I have tried to make the nineteenth-century aspects of my Queensland background work for me in a
positive way. I used to say that I had really lived in the nineteenth century. I still feel, though, that it has been impossible to compensate for those years lost to surviving on the periphery of Australia without any idea of other worlds. But how do they know, those who grew up in culturally or intellectually richer environments, or now, who breathe modern communications, what it was like living in the more remote parts of Queensland in the 1950s and earlier? How can they put themselves into the minds of a settler and his wife, say so confidently what these people knew, what they believed, what ideas motivated them? How can the latte lovers understand the elemental nature of that existence, stark, unadorned, barely civilized? Sometimes when I read reports of interviews with relatives after a murder trial I think how it might have been when the only law and order was what you secured for yourself. But before ‘the other side of the frontier’ was discovered for us, the important thing was to keep that elemental stuff under control, to strive for civilization even if it meant hypocrisy and hats and gloves on Sunday. We learned plenty to survive. It was just that a knowledge of noxious weeds, dangerous snakes, and ways of coping with ants in the kitchen, mosquito larvae in the water tank, and stingers in the sea wasn’t of much use at school or university down south.

When I was being interviewed for a job at the University of New South Wales, Frank Crowley asked in his typically confronting way whether if I got the job I’d continue with the work I was doing on Queensland or move my interests to New South Wales. He was speaking, no doubt, from his own experience of trying to complete his work on John Forrest at such a distance from Western Australia. I said I didn’t see why I should, but after a year or so, my failure to interest a publisher in my thesis along with the demands of teaching and the difficulties of continuing research on Stanthorpe from Sydney meant that my interest in Queensland history did in fact recede to maintaining a watching brief, as far as I could, on what was being published. I began to turn my attention to those aspects of the nineteenth century about which I thought I had something to say. The longer I have been away, the harder it has been to feel confident about my understanding of Queensland. Thus I have come to appreciate the real resilience and imaginative strength of novelist Rosa Praed who also left Queensland as a young woman, and to be more critical and cautious about the accuracy of her re-working of her girlhood experience in her later novels. Eventually she felt more at home in ancient Rome than in Queensland. That isn’t surprising.

These days, the main use to which I put my own Queensland experience is as a check on an all-too prevalent tendency to assume that the Sydney-Melbourne-Canberra triangle is Australia. Like many writers I have an imaginary audience in my mind as I work. Alongside the many colleagues and friends whose research and ideas are incorporated in my conversations about the past or acknowledged in footnotes there has always been a family in North Queensland in the back of my mind. They kindly read whatever I send them and tell me what they think. I don’t expect them to understand all of it or approve of what I say. But I do try to include them and if what I have written doesn’t mean something to them, I know I haven’t got it right. I tend to apply this test to my fellow historians too. Do their generalisations seem true also for Queensland? Some of them, I’m afraid, have not done very well. So I often find myself feeling
indignant at what seems to me to be the injustice being done to ‘my people’ and ‘my country’ by cavalier historians from the south.

It bothers me now that the history of Queensland, and North Queensland especially, seems to have become a kind of mine for horrific stories of racism and sexism. Just as in the nineteenth century when Queensland writers such as Rosa Praed could gain a certain amount of international celebrity by exaggerating the violent and the exotic in their stories, now Australian history draws international attention to itself in debates about post-colonialism and ‘whiteness’ by focusing on our very own horrors. Certainly those things are there, but where do they belong in proportion to the whole story or all the other stories? I am always sceptical of a methodology which takes one writer here and one case there, analyses them both in detail to show that they confirm all the generalisations on fashionable subjects from all round the world. As a would-be historian I spent many hours discussing the nature of historical evidence and the extent to which it was possible to know about people’s motives from the evidence. It was fairly unusual for a public servant to minute a decision with an explanation of his thinking about the problem, or for a politician to confide to a diary or a letter a precise description of what he was doing and why. It was necessary for the historian to search for such sources, but mostly other skills were needed for describing what happened and trying to explain why. One of the disturbing (and to my mind discrediting) developments in modem history-writing is to impute motives to whole groups or classes of people based simply on outcomes. Thus if the policies pursued had outcomes which are now seen as racist, those responsible for them are deemed racist. Men have become sexist or masculinist because such were the outcomes of their actions. Perhaps they were, though they would not have understood those terms. It is also possible that they were acting for other and different reasons too, which are neither pursued nor considered and therefore lost as explanations. And then there is the nature of the cases chosen to illustrate past behaviour (or more likely the latest clever theory from the United States of America or the United Kingdom). Of necessity they are unrepresentative. The mere fact that they were noted or recorded says that they were not usual behaviour. A series of cases brought to court tells us something about the justice system and about those individuals involved. It can be used with skill and precision to tell us a great deal about the past, but it should not be used to generalise about society as a whole.

Recent writing about the history of Queensland has suffered as much, perhaps more than any, from these problems. Some things have not changed from the nineteenth century. Queensland is still exotic. There is a tendency to focus on what is different (and shocking). Queenslanders themselves are as guilty as any of hyperbole or tall stories, though for them it is a kind of self-defence. They know that they are marginal, in danger of being patronised, so like the sensitive plant, they take evasive action. The historian, however, is supposed to have skills for getting behind the facades, for sorting evidence which is particular from what is representative, for distinguishing between intentions and outcomes.

In their essay on Queensland for The Centenary Companion to Federation, Geoff Bolton and Duncan Waterson remark that ‘there has been a long and profitless debate among historians about whether Queensland is different’, with some historians ‘contending that Queensland simply reproduces traditional
Australian characteristics to a heightened degree’ and others ‘stressing the influence of environmental and climatic differences’.21 But in different ways these views of Queensland are both relevant. Like Western Australia and the Northern Territory, a large part of Queensland is in the tropics and in some respects the history of the far north has more in common with the rest of tropical Australia than with the south, even the south of Queensland. Brisbane and the south-east corner have always tried to belong to urban Australia albeit with a dash of sub-tropical colour and decadence, while the shadow of separatism lingers over the north. But this view of Queensland’s history can also be turned on its head. Though there is a great deal of Australian history that can be readily comprehended without Queensland, large national questions cannot be properly understood without the Queensland dimension, whether it be the influence of the tropics or the impact of intensified traditional Australian thought patterns. Perhaps it is time to think about not what makes Queensland different, but how Queensland has related to and been perceived in the south, the rest of Australia. It would certainly be useful if it could be done, and if one had the courage to tackle it.
Notes to pp 30-43

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3 Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p 996.
7 *The Squatting Age in Australia* 1835-1847, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1935.
8 With thanks to David Blair of Macquarie University for his prompt assistance with this information.
9 Published towards the end of 1963 by Jacaranda Press in association with the Australian National University. See p 20.
16 Adrian McGregor’s account of Cathy Freeman’s move from Mackay also to a Presbyterian boarding school at Fairholme in Toowoomba and her encounter with the sophisticated girls there in *A Journey Just Begun: Cathy Freeman*, Random House, Sydney, 1999, pp 50-60 reminded me not a little of my own experience.