

## FROM FORREST TO SHAW: A CENTURY OF KIMBERLEY BOOKS

On 3 July 2002 Dr Cathie Clement spoke to Kimberley Society about novels and other Kimberley writing. Cathie is a consulting historian who specialises in the provision of information about people and places in Australia's north-west. In 1996 she produced a bibliography titled *A guide to printed sources for the history of the Kimberley Region of Western Australia*. The bibliography was published by the Centre for Western Australian History and the University of Western Australia with support from Kimberley Society and other bodies. It lists approximately 1300 items, which include books, brochures, journals, newsletters, newspapers, papers, theses and typescripts. It does not list archives or manuscripts.

Cathie commenced her talk by describing the guide and pointing out that it is organised by subjects and contains a 63-page index. The subjects are: Reference and General, Aboriginal People, Exploration and Later Expeditions, Social History, Economic History, Political History, and Local History. The Economic History section contains sub-sections headed General, Agriculture, Grazing, Maritime, Mining, Tourism, and Transport.

With her tongue not too firmly in her cheek, Cathie remarked that the incentive for producing the guide was that it would allow her to frequent second-hand bookshops without the risk of doubling up on purchases. Her copy of the guide and its electronic counterpart are continually updated with entries for books and other items of Kimberley writing that come to her attention. Hundreds of items have been added.

One of the first additions was a facsimile of Alexander Forrest's journal of his 1879 expedition through the Kimberley. Cookwood Press released a limited edition (400 copies) of the journal in 1996. Previously available only as a parliamentary paper, an original can still fetch close to \$400. The facsimile contains sketches from the expedition and a fold-out map of its route.

In discussing the Forrest journal, Cathie noted that the early publications on the Kimberley took the form of reports and papers rather than books. Their emphasis tended to be on resources and opportunities for their exploitation. Joseph Panton, a Victorian police magistrate and part owner of Ord River Station, presented two papers to the Royal Geographical Society. The first focused on resources while the second one, titled 'A Few Days Ashore in West Kimberley, North-West Australia' told of an 1884 visit to John Walkinshaw Cowan's sheep station at Lagrange Bay. Joseph Panton called there in the course of a voyage on the steam yacht *Cushie Doo*, which belonged to his partner in Ord River Station, W H S Osmand.

Joseph Panton's strong interest in the Kimberley also led to him presenting a third paper—one that had been written by John Forrest. Read on 29 June 1886, when steamers were busy carrying would-be prospectors to the Halls Creek gold rush, the paper gave an enthusiastic account of the district and its new goldfield. Five weeks later, the first credible reports told of the rush being a duffer.

Newspapers carried thousands of items and articles about the gold rush but comparatively little found its way into early books. Fred Burdett mentioned it in two books published in the 1930s and, around the same time, Barney Lamond wrote his reminiscences. In 1986 Hesperian Press published the reminiscences under the title *Tales of the Overland: Queensland to Kimberley in 1885*. Another volume of gold rush reminiscences and contemporary writing followed in 1991 under the title *Kimberley Scenes: Sagas of Australia's Last Frontier*.

The 1890s yielded a Royal Geographical Society paper in which Joseph Bradshaw presented 'Notes on a recent trip to Prince Regent's River'. William Saville-Kent produced *The Naturalist in Australia*, which, like many other Kimberley-content books that appeared in the decades to come, was published in London.

Cathie spoke enthusiastically about E J Stuart's 1923 publication titled *A Land of Opportunities: being an account of the author's recent expedition to explore the northern territories of Australia*. It describes a 1917 expedition in which the author and others prospected for minerals and metals on the Kimberley coast and islands while William Jackson made a film and photographed people, buildings, wildlife and the landscape. The richness of the book was one of the catalysts that prompted Cathie to begin her study of the region's history in 1980.

Another rich but little known area of early Kimberley writing is in the genre of novels. Richard Dehan's *The Sower of the Wind* (1927) blended cross-cultural romance with a plan for the creation of an Aboriginal republic. *The Hidden Kingdom* (1932) presented a fanciful but supposedly true account of a doctor being kidnapped in New Zealand and taken to an unknown natural fortress east of the Ord River.

This was the era in which Ion L Idriess began writing about the Kimberley. Seven of his books are set in the region, and Cathie spoke about information from *Tracks of Destiny* having been cited last year in a public debate over the 1915 Mistake Creek massacre. She had dated the massacre and mentioned the Idriess reference in her East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project work in 1989, providing "facts" that others used to attack Sir William Deane, the outgoing Governor-General, for making a personal apology for a massacre that he believed had occurred in his lifetime.

Henrietta Drake-Brockman had Kimberley work published in Australia in 1934. *Blue North: Being a Narrative concerning the Incidents and Adventures which befell John Fordyce when he went in Search of Freedom and Pearls in the Year 1876* was a novel set in the Lacepede Islands. The author's knowledge of the Kimberley stemmed in part from time spent there when her husband was Commissioner for the North West. Geoffrey Drake-Brockman's autobiography, *The Turning Wheel*, was published by Paterson Brokensha Pty. Ltd. in Perth in 1960.

Another relevant autobiographical account came from C Price Conigrave whose book *Walk-about* (1938) covered a natural history expedition to the north Kimberley in 1911. It also covered the author's round-Australia motor vehicle trip in 1937.

Turning again to more fanciful works, Cathie mentioned Zane Grey's *Wilderness Trek: A Novel of Australia* (1944) in which two American cowboys encountered hardship, treachery and romance on an 1883–1886 cattle drive from Queensland to the Kimberley. Dora Birtles' *The Overlanders* (1946) followed, with the story of a family abandoning an eastern Kimberley station in the face of the feared Japanese invasion of northern Australia.

By the 1950s, Mary Durack was well established as a writer. Her novel *Keep Him My Country* (1955) was particularly adventurous for the somewhat staid Western Australia of that time. Like Katherine Susanna Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and Tom Ronan's *Vision Splendid* (1954), it told of repercussions and soul-searching that stemmed from relationships between European men and Aboriginal women. The world-famous *Kings in Grass Castles* followed in 1959.

Tom Ronan's Kimberley works ranged from *The Pearling Master* (1958), a novel dedicated to 'the old-time foreshore rats and pearling masters of the port of Broome' to *Deep of the Sky* (1962), a biography of his father. Autobiographical work included *Packhorse and Pearling Boat* (1964) and *Once There Was A Bagman* (1966). The latter mentions contact with German aviators Hans Bertram and Adolph Klausman.

The box of books into which Cathie dipped yielded still more novels. There was Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* (1958), G M Glaskin's *Flight to Landfall* (1963) and Lucy Walker's *The Gone-Away Man* (1969).

The 1970s brought us to the Shaw in the title of the talk. Bruce Shaw and Jack Sullivan published "'They same as you and me": encounters with the *gadia* in the East Kimberley' in *Aboriginal History* in 1979. The paper presents slightly abridged reminiscences in which Jack Sullivan recalled both the stories he had heard about the early days and the conditions he experienced as a mixed-blood worker on cattle stations in the eastern Kimberley.

Cathie spoke of Bruce Shaw's prolific body of work as a completion of the circle begun by Alexander Forrest. In a century, the focus of writing about the Kimberley had shifted from a view in which Aboriginal people were seen as a resource to one in which they were portrayed as the backbone of the cattle industry. Bruce Shaw's later works include *My Country of the Pelican Dreaming: the life of an Australian Aborigine of the Gadjerong, Grant Ngabidj, 1904–1977* (1981); *Banggaiyerri: The Story of Jack Sullivan* (1983); *Countrymen: the life histories of four Aboriginal men* (1986); *Bush Time: Station Time: Waddi Boyoi and Johnny Walker Reminiscences of Eighty Years* (1991) and *When the dust come in between: Aboriginal viewpoints in the east Kimberley prior to 1982* (1992).

In discussing only a tiny portion of the books that deal with aspects of the Kimberley, Cathie provided many fresh insights into a region that has clearly fascinated writers from all walks of life. Whether she will publish an expanded version of the *Guide to Printed Sources for the history of the Kimberley region* remains to be seen.