

# MIRROR OF THE NORTH

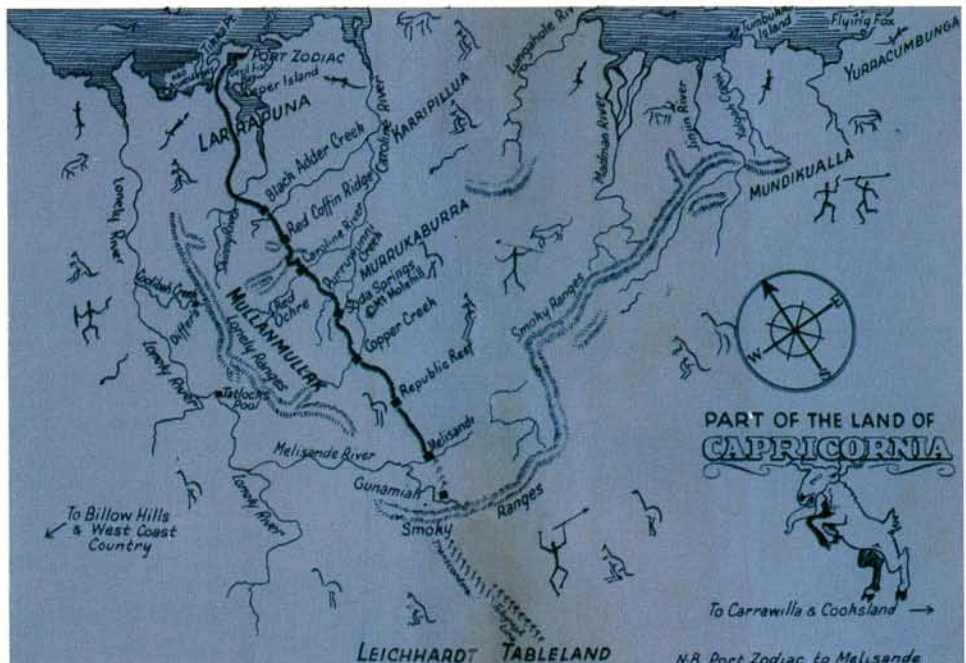
ANN MCGRATH

DARWIN, the capital of the Northern Territory, celebrated the coming of 1938 with the usual boisterous round of Christmas and New Year parties. By 2 January Xavier Herbert, author, was trying to recover from eight riotous days, five of them 'under the influence', having had in all of them 'too much to say to people who can't understand'. He was 37, and with his wife and colleague Sadie Norden lived in a small decrepit house typical of the town. Ramshackle and racially diverse, Darwin reminded one visitor of something that had dropped off the back of a truck. Many houses were contraptions of galvanised iron, fibro, cheap materials and scraps. The convent school was a tin shed. Little attempt had ever been made to beautify the town, and in March 1937 a cyclone had stripped or uprooted most of the trees.

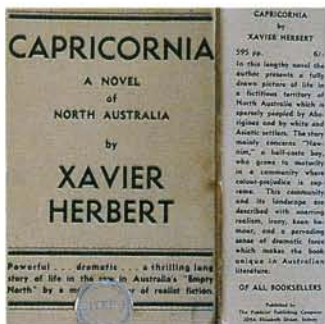
The Northern Territory's population was only 20 per cent European. A quarter of the Europeans were women, and most were transient. There were serious doubts about whether the white race was suited to permanent settlement in the tropics and the part-Aboriginal population was growing faster than the European. Although Government House in Darwin failed to commemorate the sesquicentenary, an Australia Day sports event was funded mainly by the Chinese population.

Asians and Melanesians traditionally had lived in Darwin's Cavenagh Street, but by now only the wealthier shop owners remained, the rest having been shifted to an old police paddock a few kilometres out of town, which lacked even the basic facility of a well. Poor whites lived under cliff shelters at Mindil Beach and Doctors Gully. Some Aborigines lived on beaches at East Point, Rapid Creek and other places known to them by local Larrakeah names, but many were being herded from the Kahlin beach compound, a 'home' for 'half-castes', to Bagot, a similar 'home' several kilometres out of town. People who worked in European households or gardens either returned to the compound each evening at six, or camped in the humpies they built in their employers' backyards.

Xavier Herbert had been born in 1901, the year of Federation, and believed that social reform might bring about an ideal commonwealth. He now saw much that



Endpapers of Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*.



Dustjacket of Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*, published by the Publicist, Sydney 1938.

was not ideal. An early version of his novel, *Capricornia*, had been rejected in London for being 'too Australian' and he had stormed off, proclaiming defiantly that he did not care, for he had 'a Continent to win, a Nation to build!' It had taken him many years to rework a lengthy first draft, and finally he had persuaded the nationalist P.R. Stephensen to publish it in Sydney.

*Capricornia* broke from the usual portrayal of the Territory as a romantic setting against which real Australian bushmen performed heroic deeds. Herbert's white Australians were 'a nation of thieves' who had plundered the land and fertilised its soil with the blood and bones of its dispossessed. *Capricornia* presented the ignoble bushman: egocentric, brutal, selfish, racist, exploiting a beautiful landscape and a noble people. It condemned the treatment of Aborigines, especially the sexual use and abuse of Aboriginal women and the neglect of the resulting children.

Yet Herbert loved the north deeply. The untamed land, its spirit relatively undisturbed, fascinated him, and he thirsted to learn more about the bush and the skills of its Aboriginal custodians. He saw in the Territory something of an older Australia. The north was still a frontier reminiscent of the nation's formative years, and he knew that he would 'always yearn for the wilderness', even when his art condemned him to the city.

The declaration that he did not care about the initial rejection of *Capricornia* was brave but hollow. The struggle to get the book published was a major crisis in Herbert's life. In a letter to his friend and fellow author, Miles Franklin, in 1937, he had called it a 'violent spiritual battle', but explained that it had done him a 'world of good'. 'I am calm now', he wrote,

chastened, for the first time in my life, and ready to proceed with my craft. Had I succeeded in publishing *Capricornia* three years ago—or even six months ago—I should have been ruined. I could not have carried success. I feel sure I can now—and failure too.

Still, he wanted success desperately. He told his close friend Arthur Dibley that *Capricornia*'s publication would 'act like the opening of flood-gates to my



long-stemmed libido', and he hoped the novel would win the Australian Sesquicentenary Prize for literature. 'Poor *Capricornia* is brumby-bred ...', he told Miles Franklin. 'That may be a virtue in the eyes of you and me—but you and I are not the judges; nor is it likely that the judges are like us ...' The judges were authors Frank Dalby Davison, Flora Eldershaw and Marjorie Barnard, and after *Capricornia*'s 'trainers', W.J. Miles and P.R. Stephensen, entered his 'horse', Herbert explained that he had tried to ignore the race, with great success at first, but now 'I find that I have developed a fearful interest in the result'.

While he waited he did odd jobs and tried to get work as a patrol officer to make use of his knowledge of Aboriginal customs. Failing, he went bush in a rage to work a tin mining lease on the Finnis River with an ex-tracker, Bulbul, and Val McGinness, a man of part-Aboriginal, part-Irish descent. Herbert hoped to use the profits to set up a self-supporting Aboriginal station, but the price of tin fell and by early January he was back in Darwin digging trenches.

The trenches were beneath the windows of Government House next to the home of C.E. ('Mick') Cook, the chief protector of Aborigines. Like *Capricornia*'s Port Zodiac, Darwin was a rigidly class-structured town, and Herbert was sensitive to the class slur associated with labouring. He had seen Cook and the Territory's administrator, C.L.A. Abbott, several times, but they had not acknowledged him, wearing shorts and 'plastered with sweat and mud'. 'Both have passed within a few feet of me, riding in their cars, and, although I faced them boldly, showed no sign of recognition', he wrote. They were 'not the kind to look with interest on a gang of labourers'.

Cook and Herbert had become good friends in the late 1920s, but Herbert saw himself as 'the complete idealist', whereas Cook was becoming more and more a bureaucrat. Their politics differed and, although they respected each other's intelligence, they fell out. Nevertheless, in January Cook told Herbert of a vacancy as commonwealth bacteriologist and they went to the pub to discuss it. Herbert did not get the job, and pick and shovel work did not pay enough to let him write. As he had told Miles Franklin the previous year, 'I am frustrated as a self-expresser, and hence sorely in need of great encouragement to return to my job'. He believed that he was being sniggered at by people who saw him as a failure.



Smith Street, Darwin, 1938.  
B. GAMMAGE COLLECTION







On 15 February *Capricornia*'s release was announced in the local labour paper, the *Northern Standard*. Stephensen wanted to record a 'few whoops of joy' at its publication, knowing how difficult it was to write or publish a major novel in Australia. It was, he enthused, a 'literary masterpiece', a work which might 'banish the Australian literary inferiority complex for at least 150 years to come...' Having read it six times, he considered it destined to help pull Australia out of 'its Colonial boghole' and closer to the 'Right Track to Nationhood'. Miles Franklin believed that Stephensen had 'raised such a ballyhoo about *Capricornia* that the judges won't dare turn it down'. Stephensen still feared that wowserism might beat it.

*Capricornia* sold well, but it arrived in Darwin as the town was seething about recent attacks on white women. In February an Aboriginal preacher from Goulburn Island was convicted of attempting to molest women and young girls on Darwin streets. He was in the habit of asking girls if they wanted him, exposing his genitals and ogling white women. Once he lay across the path of a local housewife, Mabel Weedon, asked if she desired him and started quoting the Bible. 'He has two obsessions—religious and sexual', police inspector Lovegrove attested, 'and is considered dangerous'. The court recommended that the gaol surgeon do something to 'restrain his sexual abnormality'.

This case had been concluded only a few weeks when Mabel Weedon was involved in another incident. Early in March she heard her neighbour, Irene Cousin, cry for help, and in Irene's bedroom found a black man, 'naked except for a small pair of white shorts'. All three were injured in the ensuing melee, and soon every available policeman and a large contingent of blacktrackers were out searching for the culprit. There was talk of lynching him and completely segregating other blacks. On 4 March all licences to have Aborigines on private premises were revoked, employers were asked to reapply, and a strict curfew was imposed on all Aborigines. An Aboriginal messenger, Packsaddle, was later convicted for assaulting Irene Cousin with intent to rape. In court it was alleged that his female employer had treated him like 'a pet pussycat'.

Herbert was very distressed by these events. On 5 March he told Dibley,

I have never felt more miserable than I have these last few days. This talk of lynching upset me greatly—far more than I thought anything could. I suffer an actual physical pain at sight and realization of the helplessness of the Aborigines. I had thought I had hardened my heart to it.

He was also treated with hostility by Darwin's whites because *Capricornia* revealed him as a 'nigger lover'. Even friends told him the book had broken taboos. Sadie tried to stop Xavier replying to racist attacks and angered him by arguing with the 'nigger-haters' in what he considered 'a most foolish fashion'. He had dedicated *Capricornia* to her; he wrote later that it had grown out of her love. But now the strain of local hostility threatened their relationship. 'She is misusing her domination over me', Herbert confided to Dibley.

By early March Herbert was being abused in the street by white Australians. There was talk of shooting blacks and regret that money 'sapped from tax-payers' was spent 'to preserve a race of white-woman rapers'. Herbert was dismayed at 'the realization that mankind *will not improve*'. He tried to answer 'banteringly and soothingly' but he did not always succeed. When A.C. Weedon, Mabel's husband, rushed from the scene of the attempted rape to the Herberts' house to ask Herbert what he 'thought of the Black Bastards now', Herbert was out, but the enraged Weedon conveyed his message to Sadie. Herbert described him as 'a detestable type, two-faced, cunning, a vicious little scandalmonger and troublemaker', and when Weedon finally caught up with Herbert both were very angry. Weedon sent

Opposite.  
Map prepared by the  
Department of the Interior,  
Canberra, for Australia's  
150th anniversary  
celebrations.

NORTHERN TERRITORY  
INFORMATION SERVICE



Mrs Sadie Herbert, c1938.



his version of what followed to the *Northern Standard*; the editor entitled it 'White or Black?' Weedon claimed that he was discussing the affair with Herbert at the intersection of Cavenagh and Knuckey streets, when

the discussion turned to the 'usefulness' and 'uselessness' of the Aborigines. We both became a trifle heated in the debate for and against, and the champion of the niggers finished up by losing his head and shouting, 'Oh go to — you — ! And that from the author of the book we are supposed to waste time reading.

Next day Herbert gave Dibley his version:

Oh, he had been chasing me all afternoon and evening. He was coming from our place when he caught me coming home. I dealt with him very gently, turned his taunts aside with banter, till, at last utterly exasperated I addressed him in the terms he quotes and left him.

The words were 'Go to hell you bloody white bastard'.

Darwin's hostility contrasted with the delight Herbert's friends in the south felt about *Capricornia*. Miles Franklin wrote: 'I rejoice to think of a person with your gifts being up there. There are big novels awaiting the telling'. After *Capricornia*'s publication, she wrote that it was 'gorgeous that you have to struggle so hard in real contact with the land and its denizens'. She conceded that 'right-thinking' people who believed that a novel should be a good advertisement for Australia would 'surely be resentful of such cynical truth-telling' and would try to refute him, especially on the issue of Aboriginal women and white men. But the next novel he was planning, 'Rex versus Dingo Joe', would answer them, she said, perhaps hinting that he should not waste his creative energies arguing in the street.

Xavier and Sadie had not told anyone in Darwin that the Sesquicentenary Prize was to be announced on April Fools' Day. After a restless night Herbert rose early as usual and walked to the old courthouse to give evidence to a sitting of the arbitration court on a basic wage claim. At 9.15 the secretary of the North Australian Workers' Union interrupted the witness to congratulate him. He had won the prize. Light-heartedly the court questioned his oath, since he had said he was a waterside worker, not a novelist. Herbert reacted to the news in a characteristic way. 'I was rocked', he said later,

but to what extent I didn't fully realize; for I promptly got drunk (a thing I had been longing to do thoroughly ever since the Wet Season began) and remained so for three days.

The other celebrants were a 'polyglot gang' which could have 'passed for a Chamber of the League of Nations'. 'Sadie started off by buying half a dozen bottles of beer', Herbert recalled, 'and ended with a case'. Neither Cook nor Abbott nor any of the elite called or sent congratulations, but Herbert invited 'all the bums and bagmen and chows and yeller-fellers about'. He knew that many of them 'didn't know what on earth it was about. A few even thought I had won the Golden Casket. Thus I was spared the need of posing'. Instead he got 'well and truly tanked'.

Herbert presented a copy of *Capricornia* to his mining partner, Val McGinness. Val 'couldn't read very well'. Herbert had already discussed the story with him, and the reasons behind his work, but McGinness 'just couldn't understand it':

I never could cotton on to this book-writing business... I knew that Xavier was working hard on behalf of the Aboriginal people, but I couldn't see the object of his books... he might have stirred up a little bit of a movement or something,



## MERELY MARY ANN

The Australian woman's mirror ran this column 'Merely Mary Ann', subtitled 'A Darwin Cameo' on the 'perennial servant question' that faced all Territory housewives. They were told of a new sidelight on the issue, 'instead of relating the misdeeds of Merely Mary Ann... one may hear at any gathering of Darwin matrons something like this: 'Kitty's gone to hospital. It's a boy I believe this time. Her third. She'll be back again in a fortnight, she assures me, piccaninny and all, so I'm carrying on alone till her return.' Australian woman's mirror, 31 May 1938.





*Sadie Herbert with Bulbul her tribal 'husband',  
Finnis River 1937.*

FRYER LIBRARY,  
UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

but he never ever accomplished anything by it—he never accomplished anything good—I mean with all due respect to Xavier, he was a good friend of mine ...

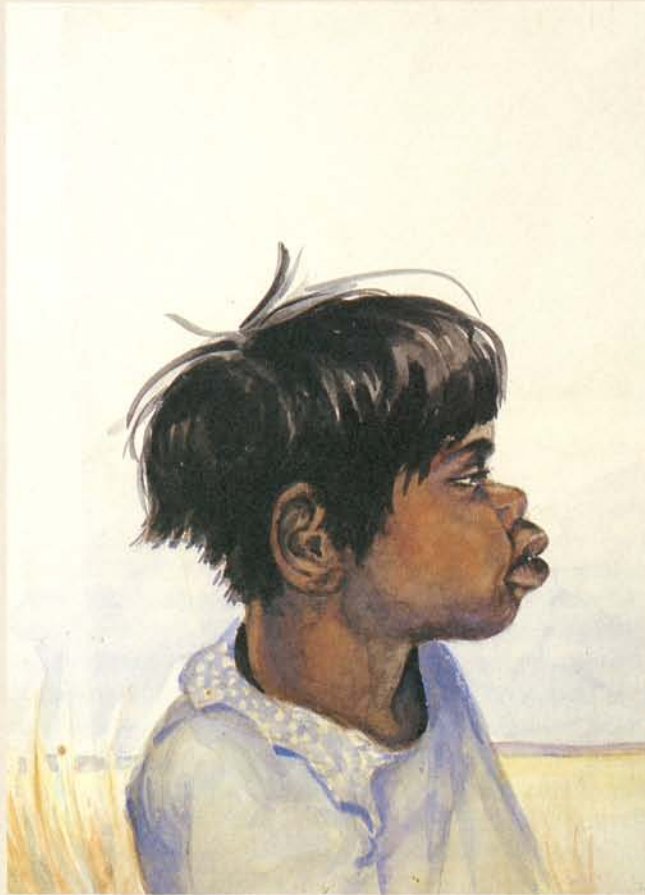
On 1 April the *Northern Standard* congratulated Herbert for having won what it termed the 'Sydney Sesquicentenary' competition. The congratulations were somewhat lost in the 'Round About' column among building tenders, football team lists, an advertisement for a visiting piano teacher, a notice of improvements to the local cemetery, news that administrator Abbott was leaving town and comment on the basic wage claim. Herbert was in any case more interested in what people in the south thought. In September he and Sadie travelled to Sydney to be entertained by the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Herbert hoped to be paid 'great attention by *everyone*, not so much for the pleasing of my vanity as for the selling of *Capricornia*', for he needed the money to keep writing.

In Sydney he found that *Capricornia* was jolting the nation's conscience. Some people in southern cities knew well that Aborigines had no cause to celebrate Sydney's 150th birthday, and disagreed profoundly with white Australians in Darwin about Aboriginal policy. Whereas a 1937 Territory report on land and landed industries had objected to Aboriginal needs impeding Territory 'progress', Donald Thomson's report on Arnhem Land, tabled in June (see chapter 6, 'Arnhem Land') pleaded urgently for a reserve where Aborigines could live without outside interference. In Sydney William Cooper, who in January had organised the Aboriginal Day of Mourning, won support from other urban Aborigines and southern humanitarians when he proposed that the north should be developed as a black nation. Such views merely confirmed the suspicions of Darwin's whites that southerners of any colour were not to be trusted. A measure of *Capricornia*'s strength was its ability to challenge and disturb Australians of such divergent views and attitudes. Xavier Herbert's honesty exposed the failure of white Australians to allow Aborigines a place in their own country.



*Xavier Herbert with his novel  
Capricornia, just published,  
Darwin 1938.*

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Little Cheeba, watercolour by Elizabeth Durack, 1934. This portrait  
was painted at Ivanhoe Station, East Kimberley, WA.

ELIZABETH DURACK



## II ABORIGINES





*Famous cameraman Frank Hurley took this photograph at Hermannsburg mission, 100 kilometres west of Alice Springs, during one of his many inland trips. Missions faced a continual struggle to raise sufficient revenue to cover their operating costs. Their problems briefly attracted national attention in 1929 when Aborigines died of malnutrition at Hermannsburg.*

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES