

TO SEE A RACECOURSE BECOME A PANDEMONIUM: HORSE RACING IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY IN THE FIRST DECADES OF WHITE SETTLEMENT

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I

"A land of ratbags"! That's what controversial author Xavier Herbert labelled the Northern Territory of Australia in one of the last interviews he gave, shortly before his death in November, 1984.¹ The phrase typifies Herbert's attitude to the North, comprising approximately equal portions of spleen and affection. During his lifetime, Herbert conjured up two vehicles to address these conflicting sentiments: the epic, sprawling sagas *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975).² Since the publication of *Capricornia* in Australia's sesquicentenary year, close to fifty years ago, Herbert's portrayal of the Northern Territory has influenced, and often actually shaped the image many Australians have of the North: namely, a citizenry gone troppo; a rigid, hypocritical government bureaucracy; heat, haze, humidity; and kites hawks everywhere in the Dry. I've recently spent three years in Darwin and can testify to the broad accuracy of Herbert's picture, even in today's Top End.

Virtually all the literary critics who have passed judgement on Herbert's two Territory novels propose *Capricornia* as the superior work. Certainly it is the tighter novel, thankfully free of the pedantry characterizing the lofty pronouncements of *Poor Fellow's* principal character, Jeremy Delacy. But in one respect, at least, *Poor Fellow My Country* finishes lengths in front of its more acclaimed stablemate - namely, the attention it gives to the sport of kings, this country's national past time. Horse racing.

Early on in *Poor Fellow My Country*, the omniscient narrator caustically refers to horse racing as the "chief interest of the so-called Nation of Australia".³ To his credit, author Herbert gives due recognition - and space - to the prevailing passion of his countrymen, focussing on those of his brethren in the North. He

observes with a keen, and not always sympathetic eye. The Beatrice River Races, a recurring motif in *Poor Fellow My Country*, takes place annually. Locals attend the meeting almost to a man, and woman, travelling from all parts of the Territory. As Herbert puts it:

...Bushies and Townies came to mingle in circumstances that enabled them to speak to themselves as Northerners, to join in ways comprehensible to all, the excitement of the race track, the *bonhomie* of the booze, the fraternal cavorting on the dance floor after the clod-hopping of their forebears...⁴

A little later, he elaborates:

The spirit prevailing during the Races, from the moment the mob poured itself out of the trains (such being the way the alcoholic detrainments were described) on the Wednesday afternoon to that when, by those responsible for getting them home again, they were poured back on, was surely as near to Carnival, in its true sense of behaviour with riotous excess, as was possible in a community predominantly Anglo-Celtic...⁵

Herbert's Territory race-meeting is a truly egalitarian festivity. Owners of the solid-hoofed quadruped parade are not always toffs. They can be, like the 1936 Cup-winner Piggy Trotters, obese, unsophisticated "gin-jockeys"; they're sometimes miners in town for a once-a-year binge, like the Knowles boys, Nobby and Nugget; they might be silvertails, like Lord Alfred Vaisey, indeed, they might even be of much-maligned "Celestial persuasion." On these few days each year, black, white, tawny, rich and poor meet as near-equals.

For those familiar with the nuances of the Australian turf, the punters of *Poor Fellow My Country* will strike a familiar chord. During the day, we are told, everyone "just boozed and ate and boozed again," so when the Cup favourite is beaten, irate punters jostle its connections, snarling abuse. By meeting's end, of course, all is forgotten and a "wild townward rush" ensues, the mob searching for further quantities of liquid refreshment. Proceedings conclude, the narrator sardonically records, "in a grand booze up on Saturday night."⁶ Herbert's fictional presentation of racing in the Northern Territory has a factual base. The Sport of Kings in the early decades of continuous white settlement in the North, the formative, pioneering years 1870 to 1900, was a wild and woolley affair. Bulging attendances, a motley race crowd,

eccentric behaviour, comical happenings, riotous excess and a conspicuous surfeit of alcohol. On only one point can Herbert be faulted and that a sin omission. He fails to give due recognition to the seamier side of racing, that side which has had the Right Hon. Russ Hinze and the now infamous Fine Cotton in the news these past months. The seedier, dishonest side of the turf escapes mention simply because, as Herbert's account indicates, he himself was no punter. In *Poor Fellow My Country*, Herbert fails to discriminate between odds on and odds against; he is an observer of Territory manners, not a student of the turf. No Johnny Tap, or an Ian Craig, and certainly not a Hollywood George Edser.

II

The earliest accounts of pioneering life in the Northern Territory endorse Herbert's decision to highlight the popularity of the annual Beatrice River Cup meeting in his novel. In the first year of white settlement in the Darwin area, 1870, races were being held at Fannie Bay, suburban site of the present-day track. Mrs. Dominic D. Daly - nee Harriet Douglas - daughter of an early Government Resident in the Territory, Captain Bloomfield Douglas, blissfully recalls the delights of her Top End youth, with its picnic races by the sea, in her book, *Digging, Squatting and Pioneering Life* (1886). A specially selected escort of local Larrakiah aboriginals accompanied the cavalcade of government families, officials and soldiers the couple of miles to Fannie Bay. "The provisions were packed", Daly reminisces,

...over night and sent down by boat, in charge of the steward of the [ship] *Gulnare* or some person specially told off for the purpose. When the party arrived at their destination, the horses were unsaddled and unharnessed, and the business of the day began. A tent was pitched, and dinner served inside it. And then horse races took place. These were sometimes very amusing and caused no end of excitement. Willy was one of the jockeys, we found some others amongst the camp boys, and any deficiencies were supplied by putting up a black boy or two. They "stuck on" fairly well, but sometimes these dusky jockeys fell off during the race. However, they never seemed the least bit disconcerted by their accidents, but got up shaking the sand out of their shaggy black locks, and went off in search of their horses, bringing them in long after the race was over.

It's perhaps worth mentioning in passing that so quickly did these "dusky jockeys" take to riding that in the early 1890s it was necessary for the Katherine River Turf Club to decree that black or brindle riders could only participate in specially designated aboriginal races.

Obviously the Fannie Bay gatherings in 1870 were more picnic than races. The gentry at play. Within half a dozen years, however, fully organized public meetings were being held in Darwin, then named Palmerston, and the big goldmining town about one hundred and fifty miles down the track, Pine Creek. From the outset these meetings attracted just about the entire town population, and more. The only Territory newspaper of the period, the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* proudly recorded the first Prince of Wales' birthday holiday meeting, of November, 1875, this way:

A week or two ago...a few Palmerstonians, in whom the love of sport has not completely died out - although so far from Randwick, from Flemington, and from the pretty course of Adelaide - mooted the desirability of a day's racing, as a change to our usual dull and desultory way of wasting a general holiday when it comes. It was no sooner mentioned than the public came forward liberally with their money.... The whole of Palmerston, and a great many from [nearby] Southport were on the course....⁸

Eighteen months later, in April, 1877, not even the "build-down" humidity deterred the populace from trekking from town to the Fannie Bay track. "Wanderer", the *N.T. Times* correspondent, drew attention to the vigorous commitment of Palmerston's horse-loving community. April is a cruel month:

The road to the races is in most countries the best part of the fun, but here, owing to ninetenths of the population being in a happy state of impecuniosity, force of circumstances compelled them to ride "Shank's mare"; and as under a tropical sun this world-renowned steed is not very festive, the fun on the road was simply "nil".⁹

Neither hardships nor financial distress, it seems, could deter the committed Territorian determined to have a small wager. When official race-meetings began at Pine Creek, on Saturday, January 8, 1876 (an ill-chosen month, it should be pointed out, being smack in the middle of the Wet season) the weather was thankfully pleasant, and everyone was there. Likewise the first annual

Macdonnell Range Races at Alice Springs, on January 9, 1886. In fact, Lorraine Dale, in her *Bulldust and Bough Shades - over 100 years of history and horse racing in 'The Alice'* (1981), records that "Almost the entire population of Central Australia at the turn of the century had more than a passing interest in racing..."¹⁰ Station meetings, a great tradition in the Territory, were necessarily smaller, but patronized with equal fervour. Lady Apsley, in her non-fiction account of a few months in the Territory in the 1920s, *The Amateur Settlers* (1926), mentions the meeting held by a Mr. Graham, station owner at that time of the Victoria River Downs -- that extraordinary property near Timber Creek which at one time this century was the largest in the world. The one they called 'the Big Run'. When Mr. Graham held his two-day meeting on his private racecourse, people came from anything up to five hundred miles away just to say they'd been there.¹¹

Territory races, Xavier Herbert correctly suggests, were hugely popular. The literature also bears out the egalitarian nature of these meetings. Punters of all size, shape and colour; owners scarcely different. The Goldfields Race Meeting at Pine Creek, in June, 1892, was held in real heat-wave conditions, despite the month. The Goldfields correspondent records that "...a great muster of the surrounding population, white, yellow and black, risked a choking from [the sun and dust]."¹² An even more disparate clientele patronized the major meeting on the Territory racing calendar: the annual Palmerston Cup. In 1896, for example, the *N.T. Times* report mentions a "gathering...running from the sable aboriginal through various stages of Jap, Chow, Malay, Cingalese, up to the sport-loving Britisher and colonial -- a gathering very characteristic of the land we live in..."¹³ The Cup meeting two years later confirms the typical assemblage -- embracing, suggested the *N.T. Times* reporter, "liberal sprinklings of Chow, Jap, Malay, Aborigine and Caucasian."¹⁴ From this evidence it appears highly unlikely that Humphrey McQueen's reworking of the Legend in *A New Britannia* (1970) will be weakened by an analysis of the North during the 1890s. Racism thrived.

The population diversity was not limited to the punting fraternity; it included the owners themselves. A colourful array of eccentrics. To choose the best example, perhaps the most con-

sistently successful owner/jockey at the Palmerston Cup meetings during the period was the legendary Paddy Cahill. Of all the buffalo shooters who worked the Territory in the nineteenth century, Cahill was the best. Banjo Patterson, in a *Bulletin* article based on his short stay in the North towards the end of 1898, immortalized Cahill when he wrote:

He is popularly reported to pursue the infuriated buffalo at full gallop, standing on his saddle, and dressed in a towel and diamond ring, and yelling like a wide Indian.¹⁵

Cahill was the consummate buffalo-hunter; he was also a fine rider, trainer and judge of a race-horse. Often he returned to his Oenpelli property, near what is now the Kakadu National Park, as the big stakes winner at either the Palmerston or Pine Creek Cup meetings. But he had his priorities. If it was a choice between the temporary delight of cleaning up the Townies' horses or one's vocation, then the latter had to take precedence, as the report of the Goldfields Turf Cup meeting of 1894 indicates:

...it is to be regretted that so good a flyer as St. Lawrence should be kept out of racing.... It suits his owner [Paddy Cahill], however, to keep him at the buffalo hunting business, at which he is a genius; and we are told that Paddy Cahill on St. Lawrence after buffalo is far more inspiring than any horse act gammon in a Wild West show. All that Paddy does is to stick to the pig-skin and shoot at the proper time.... St. Lawrence appears to enter into the sport with as much zest as his master....

Cahill was different, yet by no means the most eccentric of those early owners of horse flesh. That title probably belongs to Paddy Lennie, an Irishman from the remote Barkly Tablelands, who took a small team of horses to a Borroloola race meeting in the 1880s. William Linklater, alias Billy Miller, a stockman-cum-goldminer-and-pearler who attended the meeting, tells the story in his book, *Gather No Moss* (1968). Apparently Paddy, violating the spirit of the white man's code, determined to enter his horse in the coveted Lady's Bracelet Stakes in the name of - St. Peter, saves us!! - his aboriginal mistress, Ranken Mary Anne, belle of the Ranken River. Inevitably, the club secretary refused Paddy's nomination, so the two of them got stuck into it. The secretary eventually compromised; if the other committee members agreed to the nomination, it was okay with him. Paddy immediately proceeded

to canvas each of the other members. A refusal meant another brawl. Several fights later, the committee unanimously, *unanimously* accepted Ranken Mary Anne's bay mare into the Lady's Bracelet. The story doesn't have a happy ending; rather, an ending that would have brought a satisfied smile to old Xavier's face. The horse came last, and Paddy got blind drunk. ¹⁷

Another unlikely horse-owner at the very same Borrooloola meeting, Alick Wilson, couldn't get a mount for his horse, "The Iguana", in the Maude Plate. Now, a Maiden at Borrooloola in the 1880s was not a crack event. A bush donkey, if it got out of the boxes well, would at least fill a place. Yet, as Alick went searching for a hoop for Iguana, each jockey he asked replied that he had come to ride horses, not reptiles. The joke went down like a lead balloon, and at least one personally insulted owner left the Borrooloola track that afternoon. ¹⁸

The patrons of a Territory racecourse in the nineteenth century were a weird mob at the best of times; even worse with a few grogs under the belt. As a perusal of the available literature indicates, on this point Xavier Herbert's observations hit the mark with telling accuracy. We have no reason to disbelieve Mrs. Daly's fond memories of the village-green lifestyle of the landed gentry in Darwin in 1870. But we do know the typical Territorian's attitude to a good day "at the sports" altered with almost indecent haste as the population grew rapidly over the next three decades. William Linklater, summing up the Katherine River Turf Club's annual meeting in 1895, concludes that those "who like to see a racecourse become a pandemonium, who think the whole affair incomplete without several fights on the ground, innumerable sore heads the next day, must have come away disappointed..."¹⁹ Linklater condemns by implication. The Katherine Club, he seems to inadvertently suggest, defied the odds in holding an orderly meeting.

How many Territory racecourses did lapse into pandemonium? The literature would suggest, a significant number. Numerous meetings were formulated in grog, and ended, with grog. Again, Borrooloola is an instructive example, a town reputedly of "liquor, learning and lawlessness."²⁰ The "learning", incidentally, because the town, through a curious set of circumstances, received a Carnegie grant of books - a library which was housed for many years

in the local gaol. That great Territorian Bill Harney is said to have had a Carnegie education, the happy by-product of his stint behind bars stemming from a cattle-duffing charge. But this is to digress... booze and Borroloola. Even the prim, proper and decidedly naive Mrs. Daly suggests that, in the mid 1880s, Borroloola "was quite as wild and lawless as California in the days of the Judge Lynch and 'vigilance committees. '"²¹

Race meetings in the town at this time were flooded with liquor, much of it of dubious quality. William Linklater himself did a spot of horse training in the area in the 1880s and thought nothing of paying his apprentices in whisky.²² More gravely, for the local who liked his drop, when the acceptable alcohol ran out, many punters had recourse to the mobile grog shops. Not recommended. Alfred Searcy, the Sub-collector of Customs in the Northern Territory from 1882 to 1896, paid a visit by boat to Borroloola and the Macarthur River in 1886. He paled, understandably, at the drinking habits of some of the local citizens. In his excellent account of his experiences, a book called *In Australian Tropics* (1909), Searcy takes up the story:

Two men, with a van and pair of horses, a rum and whisky cask, and some chemicals, 'would travel through the country, visiting the stations and cattle camps, and sell the vile compound. They would also gamble and indulge in any little villainy that would rake in dollars. They were never known to run short of grog, yet they never received any. They manufactured it themselves at great profit, but at the cost of many lives. As can be imagined, great spees and drunks often eventuated, especially at race-meetings. It would be drink, drink, for days, perhaps weeks, until every drop of intoxicating liquor was consumed. The after effects would be terrible. Recourse would then be had to every imaginable drink, such as Worcester Sauce, Friar's Balsam, Pain Killer, until that supply was exhausted. Some of the poor fellows would finish up in delirium tremens, with others bordering on them. Men in their sane moments would tie themselves up to a tree at night, others would hopple themselves, fearing that they would wander in their mad moments into the bush and be lost.'²³

The plight of the Borroloola drinker/punter was not an easy one. When Searcy returned to the community some two years later for the New Year 1888 celebrations, he perceived little change in the community's behaviour and habits. The only thing left was a quarter of a ton of flour. Evidently the "New Year Races and other contingent festivities had lasted three weeks - a good explanation for

the dearth of liquids."²⁴

With alcohol so readily available, much of it of suspect quality and probably sold at about body temperature, little wonder that race-course proceedings often degenerated into a pandemonium. The chance of a chaotic meeting could only have been enhanced by the curious variety of racing events, at best a bizarre conglomeration, along with the atmosphere and the rough-and-ready attitude of organizers. As an example, for the Goldfields Cup Meeting of 1894, the township of Pine Creek welcomed

one amiable spirit...who is desirous to gain renown by shooting water melons off the head of anyone that likes such exciting revolver practice. Up to date the festive fruit is still unriddled, but there is no accounting²⁵ for what may happen when race day is within cooee.

As a prospective money-spinner for the avid form student, many Territory meetings could only be labelled nightmares. Take, for example, the prospects of your average punter, the late Frank Kennedy's "little punter", attending the sixth annual Palmerston Cup meeting at Fannie Bay on a fine and warm Saturday, August 4, 1888. Centenary year. A big crowd, great day, track fast. An eight-race programme; the first race, the Handicap Hurdles.' It would have been more accurate to call it the Handicapped Hurdles. The disenchanted *N.T. Times* correspondent, who obviously did his dough, reported the event this way:

Whether it was that the horses had never been schooled over the course, or that they would not jump hurdles without wings, we do not know, but the race was a complete farce, and at one time it seemed as if they would never pass the first hurdle, for they refused repeatedly, till Silver broke through it, then Morathella jumped the break, and went ahead all right till he got tangled up in the fourth hurdle, and fell, but took the rest all right, and came in alone. Silver and Joker refused, and ran past all the jumps, up the straight, (half a mile), when they were withdrawn.²⁶

In the second race, "Morathella" had another dash, only to come second. His rider protested against the first horse, "Our Boy", on the ground that it had already won public money under *another* name. This was admitted, but the stewards dismissed the protest because the sum won amounted to only ten pounds - a decision scarcely guaranteed to win public confidence. And if that wasn't bad enough

try the second last race on the programme, the Forced Handicap of a mile-and-a-half. Seven horses were entered, five scratched late, and good old "Morathella", the sixth horse, delayed on appearance at scale. This resulted in a walk over to "Joker", the horse which displayed a marked dislike for hurdling in the first event. An objection was raised amongst the stewards against "Joker's" connections receiving the prize-money because he'd been pulled in the Hurdles event. However, as the *Times* correspondent reported it, "after some desultory argument, the objection was not upheld".

The average punter's cause was further aggravated by the baffling variety of events which regularly confronted him. Most meetings had a Chinese event, for example. At the 1899 Palmerston Cup meeting, Mr. Ah Duck's "Polly" beat Wong Ting's "Darkie", with G. Tye's "Jack" third (all of them draught horses) in a time of just *thirty-five minutes*.²⁷ Chinese races generally posed a form problem, yet they were understandably popular. After you'd got your bet on and watched the starter despatch the field, you had ample time to down a few beers, grab a bite to eat, have a relaxed piddle, and still wander off to the finishing post to peruse your fancy's finishing burst. In such races, winning margins were often decidedly clear cut. Mr. Ah Qui's horse, "Bog-trotter", won the Chinese race at the 1882 Port Darwin Camp Races. Official margin? Half a mile. "Bog-trotter" trounced Ah Sup's "Ringtail Roarer".²⁸ One can't help thinking that some of Mr. Sup's white companions had some part in Anglo-Saxonizing his name.

The punter's lot, difficult enough with the problems posed by the idiosyncratic events, was really an intolerable one when, as regularly occurred, horses bolted off into the bush or jockeys declared a late overweight. At the Pine Creek Goldfield Races, held in July, 1893, the jockey of one horse in the Flying Handicap declared himself a subtle twenty-five pounds overweight. The horse won. Little wonder, then, that Territory punters despaired of trying to make sense of the form.

In the depression years of the early 1890s, a new trend begins to emerge in the turf columns of the *N.T. Times and Gazette* - recourse to the inspired subconscious. Understandably intimidated punters dispensed with form-guides; dreams assumed a new status. For the 1893 Cup meeting, the *N.T. Times* gave prominence to the selections

of one "racy dreamer", and the following year the turf column suggested that:

Dreamers have been hard at it for more than a week past
endeavouring to summon up from the depths of nowhere
in particular a reliable solution to the racing problem
of the day.²⁹

The next year, 1895, a pundit using the name "sporting dreamer" gained considerable publicity; this culminated in the publication, on August 9, of the Cup deliberations on the eleven-horse field of "racy poet":

I was dreaming, I was dreaming,
And I thought 'twas but a dream,
Till I saw the horses flashing past
And heard the people scream
Then I knew that I was waking
For the gay and handsome throng
Were paying out and taking
On the winner, named Quondong.

Oft I dreamt. Once in my slumbers
I did name them, one, two, three,
And I placed the winning numbers,
Explosion, Quondong, Rapparee!
Then the fickle spirit moved me
Once again -- annoying jester! --
Till the Clerk led up the winner
In the Queenslander, Sylvester.

Anon I dreamt that Village Lad
Had victimised the lot;
And in their turn old Cornish,
Irrewa, Meta, "raked the pot."
In short, I dreamt that every horse
Had won the cov'ted Cup;
And since my dreams perplex me so
I give the problem up.

Nocturnal slumber had apparently proved just as unreliable, for Mr. "Racy Poet", as form deliberations.

III

Xavier Herbert's portrayal of racing in the Northern Territory does capture the spirit of the enterprise. His one weakness is his failure to give due attention to the seamier side of the sport of

kings: catastrophic betting losses, pulled horses and rigged events. In its very first year of publication, the *N.T. Times* attempted to expose the evils of gambling by publishing a story entitled "The Gambler's Fate". A familiar scenario. Mr. Porter, an English gentleman in the reign of Queen Anne, gambles away his large Northumberland estate. Not to be discouraged, he tries one more time, risking all his earthly possessions - carriage and horses, trinkets, loose money, townhouse, furniture - on the throw of a dice. Literally, all or nothing. He loses and is consequently beggared. Circumstances force him to take up an obscure lodging. One day a friend, recognizing him despite his miserable condition, gives him ten guineas. This prompts the ex-gentleman to return to the gambling houses, whereupon he turns the ten into twenty thousand pounds. But, alas, and be this a lesson to all gamblers, the article concludes in sombre strain:

Returning the next night, he lost it all, was once more penniless, and after subsisting many years in abject penury, died, a ragged beggar, at a penny lodging-house in St. Giles's.³⁰

Conscious of his role as one of the guardians of public morals, the *Times* editor reinforced the message in an editorial, dated December 5, 1873, which compared the manliness of rowing to the sedentariness of the turf, concluding with the observation that horse racing:

has been denounced from the pulpit, and condemned by many for the licence it gives to knaves to entrap the unwary, and the gambling properties it engenders.

The progress of Territory racing over the next decade indicates that their fears were well-founded. Racecourses in the north inevitably had their fair share of "knaves". As early as November, 1876, only a handful of years after Mrs. Daly's picnics, a correspondent calling himself 'Very Akward', obviously a chagrined punter, wrote to the *Times* complaining bitterly about the practice of restraining horses:

Sir - In a small settlement...excitement such as a fair competition between horses well trained and fairly run is welcomed. And like Englishmen in every part of the world, we have shown our *penchant* for horse flesh... [However] it is well known that one competitor [last Thursday] had made arrangements. That in the first race *his* horse should be pulled,

and that in the second Mr. X's horse should be pulled. Indeed, Mr. A confessed having so arranged the race... Mr. A. might not, perhaps, know how he was debasing himself, but had this happened at an *English* race meeting... he would have been hooted and hissed off the course, and would have considered himself lucky if he had escaped without bodily injury.³¹

"Very Akward's" letter, admirable though the sentiments contained in it are, had about as much chance of stopping the practice of pulling horses as the author has of beating *Razor Sharp* down the Flemington straight six. "Fixing" races in the Northern Territory continued unabated. At the Palmerston Cup Meeting in 1883, for example, the *Times* reporter suggested that there was "evidently a feeling abroad that the races were cut and dried to suit owners betting books, and consequently but little speculation was indulged in..."³² Throughout the 1880s, in fact, meetings were marked either by little betting, because of punters' suspicions, or unpopular "boil-overs", such as those occurring at the Alice Springs Christmas/New Year Meeting in 1887, when in most instances the "'favourites' disappointed their luckless backers."³³ It was the same at the Palmerston Cup Meetings of 1887 and 1888 and the McDonnell Ranges Turf Club meeting in April, 1888.

Criticism of this parlous state of affairs grew to such an extent that the N.T. Turf Club in Palmerston, per medium of the *N.T. Times* track reporter, felt obliged to publicly respond; hence, the obvious defensive tone of the racing column published in the *Times* on August 15, 1890, which attempted to use attack as its only means of defence:

Tinkering cacklers and petty obstructionists did their best to introduce bad feeling where none but good humour should prevail. Mean-spirited nobodies shrugged their shoulders at the mention of horse-racing, and endeavoured by all the arts of a pettifogging nature to throw obstacles in the way, and generally bring the Club into disrepute as a community of men whose object was to give colour to a pack of blacklegs.

These belligerent cries of innocence fell on the deaf ears of punters, however, because seamy dealings simply refused to go away. Six years later the *Times* once again defended the racing establishment view, maintaining that the claim that "certain fishy transactions" had taken place at the recent Cup meeting was false. There was "not the slightest suspicion of anything crokked."³⁴

IV

Xavier Herbert's magnum opus - *Poor Fellow My Country* - is set in the Northern Territory in the 1930s and 1940s. His fictional race-course at Beatrice River accurately represents its non-fiction counterparts at Palmerston, Pine Creek, Katherine, the Alice and Borroloola -- though of a slightly earlier era, a *Capricornia* era. As the twentieth century progressed, the Territory was pulled along by the dusty coat tails, screaming and kicking. It got, as Mark Twain would have it, "sort of civilized".

The demeanour of punters improved, though as late as the 1960s it was standard practice for police at the annual "ABC" races at Brunette Downs to cool off drunks by shoving the thirstiest of them into a truck, driving a few miles into the scrub, removing their boots, and leaving them to their own devices. As a deterrent, it had a remarkable success rate.

Racing these days in the Territory is about as (dis)honest and orderly as any of the southern states. Pandemonium is primarily the preserve of the politicians, who some would argue belong in the bygone days of Borroloola.

NOTES:

1. David Richards, "The Last Words of Xavier Herbert", *National Times*, 18-24 January, 1985, p.29.
2. Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia* (Sydney: 1938; Repr. New York: 1943); *Poor Fellow My Country* (Sydney: 1975).
3. *Poor Fellow My Country*, p.87.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.68.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.103, 93, 67.
7. Mrs. Dominic D. Daly, *Digging, Squatting and Pioneering Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia* (London: 1887), p.63.
8. *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* (hereafter *N.T. Times*) 13 November 1875.

9. *Ibid.*, 28 April 1877.
10. Lorraine Dale, *Bulldust & Bough Shades - over 100 years of history and horse racing in "the Alice"* (Alice Springs: 1981), p.7.
11. Lord and Lady Apsley, *The Amateur Settlers* (London: 1926), pp. 99-100.
12. *N.T. Times*, 24 June 1892.
13. *Ibid.*, 14 August 1896.
14. *Ibid.*, 12 August 1898.
15. A.B. Paterson, "The Cycloon, Paddy Cahill, and the G.R.", *Bulletin*, 31 December 1898.
16. *N.T. Times*, 25 May 1894.
17. William Linklater & Lynda Tapp, *Gather No Moss* (Melbourne: 1968) pp.85-6.
18. *Ibid.*, pp.86-7.
19. *Ibid.*, p.116. See also *N.T. Times*, 31 May 1895.
20. Linklater and Tapp, *op.cit.*, p.83.
21. Daly, *op.cit.*, p.84.
22. Linklater & Tapp, *op.cit.*, p.83.
23. Alfred Searcy, *In Australian Tropics* (London: 1909), pp.153-4.
24. *Ibid.*, p.169.
25. *N.T. Times*, *op.cit.*, 15 June 1894.
26. *Ibid.*, 11 August 1888.
27. *Ibid.*, 18 August 1899.
28. *Ibid.*, 3 June 1882.
29. *Ibid.*, 3 August 1894.
30. *Ibid.*, 28 November 1873.
31. *Ibid.*, 11 November 1876.
32. *Ibid.*, 4 August 1883.
33. *Ibid.*, 8 January 1887.
34. *Ibid.*, 21 August 1896.