

*'From Progress into Stand-still Days':
Literature, History and the Darling Downs*

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Geographically the Darling Downs is a series of rolling grassy plains which extend from the Great Dividing Range in the east through the Condamine River catchment area and westwards in the direction of the Darling River system in southern Queensland. It is one of the world's richest agricultural regions and its colonial history is dominated by the reluctant transition from a semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer people to the widely dispersed pastoral holdings of an invasive squattocracy and ultimately to agricultural development and closer settlement by smaller landholders. Its three main municipalities are Toowoomba on the escarpment of the Great Dividing Range in the north-east, Warwick in the south-east and Dalby in the west.¹

Information on the Indigenous inhabitants of this European division of space prior to the settler invasion is scant. Tindale describes four tribes – Barunggam, Jarowair, Giabul and Keinjan – who shared the Waka Waka language with tribal variations.² The Indigenous occupation of the region dates back some 40,000 years and the population at the time of white contact is thought to have numbered between 1,500 and 2,500. The Indigenous were a hunter-gatherer people who moved through their recognised tribal territories in small familial groups according to seasonal and cultural demands. They adapted their labour and technology so as to sustain 'a stable population in a balanced environment' and 'this allowed the development of increasingly complex social systems and cultural

traditions'.³ The invasion of the region by Europeans led to the violent dispossession of the Indigenous population. Today it is difficult to trace many traditional people in the region, although there remains a significant population of people of Indigenous descent.

Settler invaders and the industrious expectations of civilisation

The first white man to stumble across the Darling Downs was the explorer Allan Cunningham, who wandered through the area from June 1827. He returned the following year to find a pass through the range, Cunningham's Gap, which would link the region to Moreton Bay and the coast. In 1841 an aspiring squatter, Patrick Leslie, re-explored the Downs and claimed an extensive run on its south-eastern reach. Leslie was quickly followed by the Hodgsons, Campbells, Archers, Russells, Gores and Gammies, and together they founded a squatting dynasty that was to prosper up until the 1880s and 1890s, when the Selection Acts of 1862 and 1868 finally led to the development of smaller agricultural holdings and closer settlement.

Writing played its part in this invasion, as the intruders quickly brought the representational strategies of colonial dispossession to bear on the imaginative task of claiming their new-found place. The pioneering squatter Arthur Hodgson, for example, chose to represent himself in spatial command of a landscape that was divinely prepared for his industrious expectations:

I remember well how delighted I was to find myself, on the second day after leaving the sheep and drays, in a beautiful country, consisting of open Downs, with a stream intersecting them, and surrounded by park-like scenery. It was a pleasant feeling, that of galloping over new and untrodden soil, where no white man was to be seen; the poor black fellow, with his gins and picaninnies, the timid kangaroo, the fleet emu, and the prowling native dog, or jackal of Australia, were all that could be seen. They all fled at our approach, scarcely giving themselves time to consider what we could be; for many reasons we did not follow, but kept on the even tenor of our way, regarding the green sward and the deep-water holes as pleasant to look upon, and admirably calculated to refresh our sheep, horses, and bullocks.⁴

In one fell rhetorical swoop Hodgson consigned the Aboriginal people to the simple, knowable and apparently apolitical category of the natural, alongside the region's native flora and fauna. The Indigenous in Hodgson's memoir romantically embellish the entrance of a pioneer hero by representing an exotic uncivilised past that is carefully framed by his narrative in the historical moment of its colonial supersession.

The Indigenous inhabitants were not going to be conjured away from their traditional lands solely by the self-interested processes of colonial representation, however, and the squatters had to disperse the original owners by depriving them of their water supplies, thinning out the native fauna they depended on for food, and denying access to locations necessary to the practice of tribal customs and rituals. Aboriginal tribes defended their territory, culture and society with hit-and-run raids on shepherds and stock and this conflict enabled the intruders to openly organise more immediately violent methods of persuasion.⁵ Steele Rudd took up this subject in the 1920s in *The Romance of Runnibede*, an historical novel set on the Western Downs during the native resistance:

But the squatters there were in the Never-Never Land who nursed bitter grudges against the black people. It was difficult for them to keep their guns silent whenever they came in contact with any of them; and in retaliation the tribes attacked the lonely shepherds, and at times a homestead, fired the grasses, and speared the stock. These depredations were reported to the police, and at long intervals after their occurrences a body of mounted 'trackers,' [*sic*] would scour the country in search of the accused ones, and the accusations were mostly made wholesale. When they came across a tribe, or the remnant of one, that 'dropped their bundles and ran,' they judged them guilty, and would gallop rings round them, give any that looked dangerous a taste of shot, and head them all like cattle from that locality to some other corner in the Back of Beyond. Such official displays were called 'Dispersals by the Police,' and thereby many a pretty bush daisy bloomed on the innocent blood of the wild blacks.⁶

The guerilla war with the invading Europeans appears to have reached a climax in 1843 with what is now known as the Battle of One Tree Hill.⁷

James Arrowsmith showed the versatility of letters in the colonial situation by composing a mock heroic poem to celebrate the occasion:

Oh! 'twas glorious to see those free sons of the soil,
 Unfetter'd by garments, uninjured by toil,
 Streaming down to the valley – as shining and black
 As Newcastle coals shooting out of the sack.

Each warrior was greas'd from heel to the head;
 Each cobra was charcoal'd – each limb streaked with red;
 And plain might you see that each snake-eating elf
 Was inclined to think no table beer of himself.

They'd a forest of spears that would turn a man pale,
 Like a *cheveux-de-frize* on the wall of a gaol;
 And they bore in each girdle the swift boomerang,
 And a toothpick, the lugs of the whiteman to bang.

The war song was sung – the corroboree done,
 And they cried 'with the whitefellows let's have some fun.
 They have settled old Moppy – a life for a life –
 So death to the Croppy, and war to the knife.'⁸

'Arrowsmith' was the pseudonym for William Wilkes, a ticket-of-leave station hand based on a nearby run at Helidon. His mock epic uses a different rhetorical mode to Hodgson, but both narratives insist on the inconsequential nature of the Indigene. The satire denies native resistance the historical dignity of a military engagement. Without a war, invasion is settlement and the dispossessed natives cannot be entitled to the legal claims of their prior possession. As is always the case with the use of the satiric or ironic mode, however, an alternative view is there to be discerned by another readership in a different ideological climate.

The white invaders may well have thought that they had vanquished the native population by the middle of the century, but the work of a later writer presented a very different view of the Indigenous tribes to the west of the Darling Downs. Alice Monkton Duncan-Kemp was born

in Charleville in 1901 and educated at Fairholme College in Toowoomba and All Hallows convent in Brisbane.⁹ Her association with the Channel Country of South-West Queensland is discussed more fully in Part 3 of this book, but from 1939 until her death in 1988 she lived in a number of places on the Darling Downs: Oakey (1939–47), Jondaryan (1947–50), Rosalie Plains (1959–62) and then Oakey again from 1962 on. Duncan-Kemp's five books published between 1933 and 1971 on her experiences and knowledge of the Indigenous tribes of south-west Queensland represent a remarkable personal account of the history and ethnography of these people and pointedly refute the imperialist accounts that disavow Indigenous claims to both the land and the sophisticated level of human culture deemed requisite for 'civilisation'.

By the 1850s, the declining Indigenous population on the Darling Downs was finding employment on the stations, as the gold rush and the end of convict transportation made white labour hard to come by. The settler population now numbered over 2,500 and the region was divided into forty-nine licensed squatting runs. In the early days of frontier society, life was organised around hard work in difficult conditions, and the cultivated pursuits and material possessions that marked class distinctions in the civilised world were in short supply.¹⁰ Many of the squatters had reasonable libraries and some sealed the walls of their early slab dwellings with pages from London magazines such as *Punch* and *The Illustrated London News*.¹¹ For many visitors and settlers on the Downs, however, the sign of successful settlement was the presence of a woman and the civilised appointments she brought to the home:

Why was [Mr W] so odd and untidy, so comfortless and careless? Not because he had not the means of being otherwise, for he possessed a fine run of goodly flock, but simply because he had *no wife* . . . On our journey we lunched at a house the very opposite of this in comfort, neatness, and really, we might say in elegance. A neat verandah ran round the building, interlaced with creepers, the passion flower and jessamine with a pretty terraced garden. Within, the apartments had the air of well furnished English drawing-rooms, and we were waited upon by a page in green broadcloth, variegated with buttons. This abode belonged to one of the earliest settlers on the downs; his

wife, whom we discovered . . . to be native, [born in Australia], was a lady-like person, pretty, lively, and accomplished, and doubtless to her taste he was indebted for so much comfort and elegance. It was quite a cottage ornée.¹²

The demise of the Indigene, the opening of transport routes down the range to Moreton Bay and the presence of a domestic life and its associated social practices indicated the coming of civilisation for the squatters. Their historical significance in the development of what became the state of Queensland is well documented in the first Queensland novel, Colin Munro's *Fern Vale, or the Queensland Squatter*, as well as in two historical works or memoirs, John Campbell's *The Early History of Queensland* (1875) and John Stuart Russell's *Genesis of Queensland* (1888). By the 1880s, however, a new and more formidable enemy was threatening to consign the great landholders themselves to the colonial past. The end of the century and the beginning of the next belonged to the small landholder.¹³

On our selections: the small landholders and the rise of a civic culture
 Australian colonial history is often written as a struggle to open up the large tracts of land occupied by squatters so that more modestly capitalised and smaller-scale agriculturalists could gain access. The dream of a prosperous democratic and liberal society was imagined by many as the spread of small landholders and their family-run properties. The shift from large-scale pastoral production to smaller-scale agricultural holdings was managed by a series of Selection Acts which were intended to convert the squatters' leases over to freehold and at the same time open up some of that land to a new generation of free selectors. A developing middle or merchant class in the emerging townships largely supported the associated shift from large-scale pastoralism to smaller-scale agriculture, for it inevitably led to closer settlement and a broader base for commercial opportunity.

Arthur Hoey Davis owes his substantial popular reputation to comic representations of the trials and tribulations of the small selector on the Darling Downs.¹⁴ Davis, who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Steele Rudd', was the son of a blacksmith who selected land at Emu Creek just

south of Toowoomba in 1870. He left school at the age of twelve in 1880 and spent the next five years working on properties in the area. In 1885 his mother used political connections to secure her son a public service place in Brisbane and the young man moved to the big city. In the 1890s Davis began to write his comic stories, which appeared in the *Sydney Bulletin* from 1895.¹⁵

With the assistance of A. G. Stephens, a Toowoomba-born writer, editor, publisher and critic who was the most influential man of letters in colonial Australia, he revised a number of stories so that they formed a connected sequence depicting the struggles of a family of rural peasants, the Rudds. *On Our Selection* was published in 1899 by the *Bulletin* book company, and Dad, Dave and 'Steele Rudd' were on the way to becoming national sensations. Rudd went on to publish more than twenty works of fiction and six plays, including ten books dealing with the gradual if often tragic success of the Rudd family. Dad and Dave Rudd also featured in a number of popular plays, three silent movies, four 'talkies' and a long-running radio series that became a national institution.

Davis's life and work is an exemplary instance of tensions and difficulties associated with the classification of regional writing. Memories of his rural youth sustained him in the early years of his successful public service career in Brisbane, until his success as a writer and growing connections with the Sydney literati saw him grow enamoured of the fashionable bohemianism of Sydney letters. Financial pressures ultimately saw his journey turn full circle, however, and in 1907 he returned to the Downs to farm a small property, without much success. It was an occupation for which the metropolitan man of letters was now ill-suited.¹⁶

Richard Fotheringham, Davis's biographer, has argued that in his stories Davis exposed the difficulties of selection life and its demeaning effect upon human character and behaviour in a way that undercut the grand democratic theories of liberal parliamentarians. The subtle use of wry humour sweetened the grim reality for those who would identify with the Rudd family, but it also enabled more sophisticated audiences to see them as figures of fun. There is a great deal in the Rudd formula that would prove illuminating for present-day politicians seeking to reconcile the differences between regional and metropolitan electorates. The comic predicaments, the indomitable spirit of Davis's bucolic characters, and the

gradual almost imperceptible improvement of their material conditions as Dad moves from impoverished selector and rural battler to a seat in Parliament, inevitably endorse the liberal endeavour of the pioneering myth. The wry tone of much of this work, however, opens it up to audiences with different regional and political affiliations.

According to the historian Maurice French, the city of Toowoomba developed its sense of itself principally from Davis's descriptions and those of one other writer, the British expatriate poet George Essex Evans.¹⁷ Evans was born in London in 1863 and immigrated to Australia in 1881, where he worked as a farmer, a teacher, an editor, a journalist and a public servant. The poet spent most of his life on the Darling Downs, mixed extensively with the local people and became very involved in the cultural and political life of the region's premier city.

Evans is best known for his verse, but during his life he was an all-round and highly respected man of letters, with a wide range of talents and interests. In addition to poetry, he produced articles and short stories, wrote travel books for the Government Tourist and Intelligence Bureau, and became one of the founding members of the Austral Association for the advancement of art, science, music and literature, which drew thousands of people to its annual festivals in Toowoomba. Evans edited the agricultural section of *The Queenslander*, several issues of an illustrated journal *The Antipodean*, and still found the time to write some plays for the Brisbane theatre.¹⁸

The broad range of Essex Evans's literary production demonstrates his commitment to the civic function of culture. In his verse he celebrated the pioneers, public and political figures, and the natural beauty of the environment in a manner free from the misgivings that make Davis's work so interesting. Evans was an important public poet who did much to promote the cause of federation in Queensland – a cause which was notably unpopular in Toowoomba. In 1901 he won first prize in the New South Wales government's competition for a 'Commonwealth ode' – with a poem that had been seen and edited by Alfred Deakin prior to the competition. He was also, at the same time, an ardent supporter of the Empire, and his ode 'The Crown of Empire' was printed on white satin and presented by the then Australian prime minister Edmund Barton to King Edward VII on the occasion of the king's coronation.¹⁹ On

Evans's death in 1909, Alfred Deakin, one of his many political patrons, eulogised him in federal parliament as Australia's national poet.²⁰

Evans is a nineteenth-century imperial poet and his penchant for stirring the industrious spirit of the settler society through rhetorically grand invocations of the nation's destiny is a marked feature of his work. In poems such as 'Ode for Commonwealth Day', 'Australia', 'A Federal Song' and 'The Land of Dawning' he imagines Australia as a young virgin of immense resources waiting for the industrious enterprise of the newly arrived British race. Evans, like Hodgson and Arrowsmith before him, used literary culture to justify Indigenous dispossession and promote colonial expansion.²¹ His books of poetry include *The Repentance of Magdalene Despar and Other Poems* (1891), *Lorraine and Other Verses* (1898), *The Secret Key and Other Verses* (1906), and a memorial edition of the *Collected Verse* in 1928. As well as the civic celebrations of public men, national pioneers and state occasions, his oeuvre includes lyric celebrations of the natural environment, metaphysical speculations on standard Victorian themes such as love and duty and life and death, and a number of long romantic verse melodramas.²²

Evans's most frequently collected poems are 'An Australian Symphony' and 'The Women of the West'. The former reflects on the distinctive melancholic character of Australian literature, while the latter pays a popular tribute to the pioneer women who brought civilisation to the frontier:

For them no trumpet sounds the call, no poet plies his arts –
 They only hear the beating of their gallant loving hearts.
 But they have sung with silent lives the song all songs above –
 The holiness of sacrifice, the dignity of love.²³

Both poems give a good indication of the character of his small but continuing national reputation. His lyric celebrations of local beauty and civic virtue have led to ongoing local recognition. Evans and Davis continue to serve as prominent local markers of the significant contribution Toowoomba has made to Australian literary culture; and the chief vehicles of these ongoing reputations for the last seventy years are the annual 'pilgrimages' in honour of the two writers, which continue to be held by the Toowoomba Ladies' Literary Society.

*The Toowoomba Ladies' Literary Society and the civic function
of a literary past*

Founded in September 1913 by Lady Littleton Groom, the wife of the then federal member for the Darling Downs, Sir Littleton Ernest Groom, the Ladies' Literary Society was originally conceived as a self-improvement society for young women.²⁴ Since then it has emerged as the most important custodian of Toowoomba's literary heritage. The society was not responsible for the Essex Evans memorial that was built in Webb Park on the edge of the range in 1909 through public subscription, but since its inception it has established a plaque at the site of Essex Evans's home and erected commemorative cairns, plaques and founts to 'Steele Rudd' (1950), the critic A. G. Stephens (1967), the poet, essayist, editor and long-time president of the society, Margaret Curran (1963), and the poet, story writer, editor and long-time vice-president, Alice Guerin Crist. It also established literary pilgrimages to the memorials for Essex Evans (from 1929) and 'Steele Rudd' (from 1950).²⁵

A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place. The literary pilgrimage accordingly canonises the poet as a quasi-religious figure and establishes him or her as a source of moral, social, cultural and political authority. This shift in signification from religion to culture has its roots in the nineteenth century, and the Toowoomba Ladies' Literary Society's consecration of the poet has much in common with Thomas Carlyle's influential veneration of the poet as a visionary hero.²⁶ The 1918 editorial of the society's only venture into print, *The Lamp*, sets out the relationship between the poet and the Ladies' Literary Society, and that between the Society and the general citizenry of the region and the nation. The poet is represented as an inspired visionary who dispenses revelation to his or her less-inspired audience. This audience's ability to recognise a literary revelation when they see one sets them apart from the general populace and authorises their missionary role in the wider dissemination of 'the light . . . which has come to us through the great masters'.²⁷

The Ladies' Literary Society of Toowoomba received a great deal of support from the local newspaper, the *Toowoomba Chronicle*, which would publish the full text of the pilgrimage addresses for many years. Prominent civic figures such as politicians, teachers and businesspeople, many of them married to members of the Society, were also actively involved. In addition

to the pilgrimages, the Society held monthly meetings where talks were given on a variety of literary topics. The programs from the 1920s to the 1980s included discussions of 'Lady Macbeth', 'Poetry in its relation to life', 'Citizenship', 'Australian novelists', 'An introduction to modern literature', 'Russian literature before 1914', 'Shakespeare's country' and 'Ballads of the people'. In the early years there were debates on issues such as 'Do pictures tend to the improving of the ideals of a community' and 'Hero-Worship is beneficial to a Nation', as well as an essay competition for members on 'Notable Women'.²⁸ The Society was also instrumental in the erection of a memorial cairn to Steele Rudd, which was opened in 1950 by Margaret Curran, who was president of the Ladies' Literary Society for thirty years from 1933 to 1963.

Literature and its associated characters, geographies and monuments comprise a kind of historical architecture that cultivates a civilised sensibility within the municipal space. Toowoomba is civilised by the monuments: they continually prompt the 'careless passer by' to rehearse a set of ethical values which they serve to evoke and concretise; and a proper respect and attention to literature fulfils much the same function. As the chief custodian of the literary culture of the city, the Ladies' Literary Society was (and to some extent remains) an important part of the local imagination.

The Society not only encouraged an informed appreciation and promotion of literature; a number of members over the years have also been active writers in professional contexts and through local writing groups. Curran and the long term vice-president, Alice Guerin Crist, both earned a living as professional writers and editors, and both, in their time, carried on Essex Evans's work as public poets committed to active participation in the civic life of the city.²⁹

Alice Guerin Crist immigrated with her family to Australia from Ireland at the age of two in 1878. Her father was a teacher and she spent her childhood in a number of small South-East Queensland rural schools. In 1896 she accepted an appointment of her own to the Blackall Range State School near Landsborough, but after a transfer to West Haldon the following year she was rather unfairly dismissed from service. Crist returned to her family at Douglas on the Darling Downs and in 1902 married a German immigrant farmer, Joseph Crist. The Crists moved to

an isolated property at Rosenberg near Bundaberg in 1910, but returned to Toowoomba in 1913.³⁰

Despite significant periods when she had to concentrate on farm work and the care of her children, Crist was able to pursue a remarkably active literary career. She was a prolific writer of verse and short fiction and published widely in Australian newspapers, including the *Sydney Bulletin*, the *Worker* and *Steele Rudd's Magazine*. Crist's devout Irish Catholicism was associated with democratic politics, and in 1902 she became a member of the Socialistic Democratic Vanguard. At about this time she became friendly with another poet and schoolteacher, Mary Gilmore, who published her work in the women's page of the *Worker*. Crist tended to write about her rural and domestic experiences and frequently celebrated the natural beauty of the bush and the virtues and struggles of Irish-Australian pioneers. There is also a marked Celtic influence in several of her poems: in the theme of homesickness for Ireland, and in the sprites and faeries which populate the bottom of the garden in her nature poetry and verses for children. Crist's youngest brother, Felician, was killed at Passchendaele in 1917, and she contributed Anzac Day poems to the *Toowoomba Chronicle* and other occasional verse for many years.

From 1920 Crist made a determined effort to derive an income from her writing. The *Catholic Advocate* began to pay her for rural and religious poems and stories, and in 1927 she published her first collection of verse, *When Rody Came to Ironbark and Other Verses*. The Catholic publisher Pellegrini brought out a collection of her religious poems entitled *Eucharist Lilies and Other Verses* in 1929. From 1930, as editor of the Children's Page of the *Catholic Advocate*, she used this useful and flexible instrument to stimulate the imaginations of Queensland's Catholic children. Her page in the *Advocate*, like her verse, was an inventive mix of Catholic Irish-Australian nationalism, domestic virtue and environmental appreciation, and she encouraged correspondents. In 1935 she was awarded the King's Jubilee Medal for her contribution to Australian literature and in 1936 she received a Commemoration Medal for the coronation of George VI.

When Rody Came to Ironbark and Other Verses is a representative selection of Crist's more secular work. 'The Way of the Bush' combines her

religious sensibility and bush experience in a celebration of the ethical character of a pioneering community:

A night of storm and wind and rain,
Tall trees bowing beneath the blast
That shakes and rattles the window-pane,
And a thunderous roar as the creek goes past.

Inside there are pictures and flowers and books,
And a slim girl-wife with shingled hair;
The lamplight glimmers on cosy nooks,
And Desmond Keane in his easy chair

Thanks God for home and the day's toil o'er . . .

It is not long before a neighbor in need comes to leave his children while he rushes to the hospital to comfort his ailing wife: 'For this is the way of the bush . . . neighbourly service prompt at need'. Keane helps his neighbour through the storm to his wife, the children are well looked after by his own partner, and the entire community rallies around in support:

Courage and patience and sturdy toil
And kindness unstinted in others' needs –
How the God that made them must love them all!
For the 'way of the bush' is His way indeed.³¹

Go It! Brothers! was dedicated to the work of the Christian Brothers of Australia. It was initially published serially in the *Catholic Advocate* and then issued as a novel in 1932. It is a series of idealised and moralistic accounts of the education of boys at St Mary's School in Toowoomba. Regular sporting contests with their honourable rivals from the Grammar School provide opportunities for affirming Catholic ideology – for 'Brother Moyland . . . had trained them perfectly not only in football but in all the ethics of manly sport . . .'³²

Crist's friend and colleague Margaret Curran was born at Colinton near Esk in 1887 and was educated at the Ipswich Convent. She worked

as an editor and journalist for *Steering Wheel*, was a sub-editor for the *Toowoomba Chronicle*, and for forty-five years edited *The Country Woman* and *Producer's Review*. In 1928 she published a small collection of poetry with Carter Watson in Brisbane, *The Wind Blows High and Low and Other Verses*. Her oeuvre is similar though much smaller than Crist's and suggests a shared perception of the subjects and occasions suitable for a female poet. *The Wind Blows High and Low and Other Verses* includes a number of occasional poems in commemoration of Anzac Day, a tribute on the death of Henry Lawson, some nature lyrics, a number of Irish poems, some Catholic religious verse, and a few interesting poems on women and work.

The work of balancing literary activity and domestic responsibility provides the occasion for 'Buying Fish'. In this poem the narrator's daughter interrupts her distracted mother's literary work to send her along to the shop to buy some fish for lunch for her husband and son:

Now you needn't sigh like that,
 Or put a martyr-look in those dear eyes,
 Nor glance with longing at your half-done 'pome.'
 Men must be fed, though rhyme and scansion wait,
 And editors bereave themselves of hair,
 Waiting for copy.³³

On the way the dreamy narrator is captivated by the natural beauty of Toowoomba and when she returns it is with a bunch of violets, copies of 'Hazlitt on Shakespeare' and 'Zimmerman on Solitude', but no fish. Curran's poems on the domestic circumstances of her literary production are interesting for their glimpses of a woman's writing career in a regional city. 'Anzac Eve', on the other hand, suggests the emotional consolation which the poet found in her personal involvement in the civic promotion of literature and an associated patriotic consciousness. The poem is set around Toowoomba's striking monument to the local men who fell in the First World War, known locally as the Mothers' Memorial:

Just then the city lights shone out:
 Each name shone forth as brightest gold;

A strange, sweet perfume played about
 And in my heart crept peace, untold . . .
 I felt . . . warm hands . . . upon my own . . .
 My son kept tryst . . . at the Grey Stone.³⁴

The monument, the lights of the city, the evening perfume, patriotism and religious faith come together in an experience of place which consoles the mother for her loss and redeems the son's sacrifice. 'Anzac Eve' provides a nice foil for the civic work undertaken by Curran during her long involvement with the Ladies' Literary Society.

Local girls made good: the expatriate careers of two women writers

The resident careers of Crist and Curran between the wars make interesting comparisons with the expatriate careers of two women prose writers who spent some of their youth in Toowoomba. Dorothy Cottrell and Margaret Trist spent most of their lives in metropolitan centres, but the Darling Downs continued to play an important role in their creative imaginations.

Dorothy Cottrell was born Dorothy Wilkinson in Picton, New South Wales, in 1902. She contracted poliomyelitis at the age of five and spent the remainder of her life in a wheelchair. She grew up partly in Sydney, partly on South-West Queensland stations owned by her mother's family, and also spent time with her grandmother in 'Simla', a large house on the eastern escarpment in Toowoomba. In 1922 she secretly married Walter Mackenzie Cottrell. After periods on Dunk Island the couple returned in 1924 to Cottrell's uncle's property, 'Ularunda', near Morven.³⁵ It was here between 1924 and 1927 that Cottrell wrote her first novel, *The Singing Gold*, which was published in America by the *Ladies Home Journal* and then Houghton and Mifflin, followed by Hodder and Stoughton in Britain. Angus & Robertson did not publish an Australian edition until 1956. *The Singing Gold* is a loosely autobiographical *Bildungsroman* narrated in the first person by the heroine, Joan Whatmore. Joan is inspired by her intimate connections with the natural geography of South-West Queensland, and the plot of the novel follows some of the events in the author's own life. In the novel, however, it is her husband's death in Sydney that precipitates the heroine's return to the family property where

she gives birth to twins. The deaths of her husband, her mother and her dog in quick succession, and the ageing of her father, precipitate a crisis exacerbated by the difficulties experienced by a woman in running the family property. Joan is ultimately redeemed by her love for a childhood friend who returns from the war and subsequent adventures to complete the young family. Jerry shares Joan's connection with the rural environment and their union is consecrated by a journey to the Gulf Country to hear the larks, 'the singing gold', often referred to in her father's stories. 'The Singing Gold' is a principal motif of the novel and suggests the fragility of beauty and sensibility and its need for masculine protection. The narrator's curiously whimsical, almost naive attitude to events robs many of the narrative's tragic turns of their existential horror, and the conventional romantic ending would now fail to satisfy some audiences.

The Singing Gold represents some interesting attitudes to Islanders, Aborigines and migrant servants. When Joan's unmarried Aunt Austace visits in search of a violent husband who has deserted his wife, for example, the two characters are drawn into an argument that ends with Joan being dispatched to her grandmother's house in Toowoomba, and an education deemed more appropriate to her class position. Aunt Austace is a religious hypocrite who uses her community work to bully people into compliance with her prescriptive code of morality. Her criticism of Aborigines and socialists, however, is not allowed to pass unchallenged by the spirited fourteen-year-old heroine: 'What right have you to condemn those who differ from your class-bound opinions? To assume that you speak with the voice of God? To . . . to . . . to go jamming nice comfortable little brown babies into ugly slips, just because *you* like them . . .'³⁶

Dorothy Cottrell is an unfairly neglected writer who has probably suffered for the sin of expatriatism. Soon after writing *The Singing Gold* she moved to the United States, and in 1930 published a second novel under the title of *Tharlane* in the United States and *Earth Battle* in Britain (discussed in Part 3 of this book by Robyn Trotter and Belinda McKay). Cottrell then worked to break into journalism and she published stories and articles on Australian, American and Caribbean topics in British and American journals such as *Liberty*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1934 she published a small book, *Winks: His Book*, about the adventures of a small terrier, and followed this up in

1936 with *Wilderness Orphan*, another children's story about the 'life and adventures of Chut the kangaroo'. *Wilderness Orphan* later formed the basis for Ken Hall's film *Orphan of the Wilderness*, which was also shown in Britain and the United States. In 1954 Cottrell published *The Silent Reefs*, an adventure mystery novel set in the Caribbean.

Margaret Trist was born Margaret Beth Lucas in Dalby on 27 November 1914, and was educated at a small convent school there. On leaving school she moved to Sydney where she married Frank Trist at the age of nineteen. Trist spent most of the remainder of her life in Sydney, apart from a small period in the early years of the war when she and her husband lived in Blaxland in the Blue Mountains. Despite publishing all of her literary work while in Sydney, she deserves to be included in any account of Darling Downs writing. The key to many of the characters of her novels and short stories is often to be found in their rural past, and Trist makes frequent use of her own upbringing in Dalby.

Her first two collections of short stories, *In the Sun* (1943) and *What Else Is There* (1946), were appreciated for their 'quiet strength and serenity', but her concentration on 'ordinary people in ordinary places and situations on the land' was seen as limiting.³⁷ 'She shows the minds of her characters cleverly' but 'they are very often minds which are mediocre and indistinguishable from dozens of other minds'.³⁸ The recurrent theme in Trist's fiction is a bittersweet experience of local place. The local provides a community that can offer a sense of belonging, particularly to older people, but the familiar codes of accepted behaviour and vocation that come with it tend to stifle those who yearn for a more satisfying life in keeping with the deep instinctive drives and urges of the human psyche.

Trist's first novel, *Now that We're Laughing* (1945), is set in the Blue Mountains and uses a romantic triangle to examine the class structure and moral codes of a small provincial community. Jimmy Blair, the only child in the most well-to-do family in Upper Glen, is on leave from the RAAF. He spends most of the narrative trying to seduce Sheila Carlingford, a modest lower-middle-class girl from a respectable but unpretentious family. Jimmy is more interested in sex than a relationship, and yet he prefers Sheila's feminine restraint to the sexually interested Joyce Henderson, who belongs to a sprawling lower-class family of sexually active girls. Trist explores the

tensions between an instinctive sexual desire and the repressive expectations of the moral classes, and these tensions are interestingly inflected by the different social expectations associated with gendered identities. The interest in sex and marriage continues in *Daddy* (1947), whose pathetic hero, Robert Lloyd, is a minor poet and *littérateur* with bohemian ambitions, who has clandestine affairs while his naïve but good-natured wife looks after their home in the northern suburbs of Sydney. Trist's narrative tone is light, humorous and uncensorious and she derives her social comedy from the incompatibilities between respectable moral codes, sexual desire and human fulfilment.

Morning in Queensland (1958), Trist's last novel, is considered her best. In it she returns to her own childhood on the black soil plains of the Darling Downs in the years between the wars. The novel is a *Bildungsroman* that deals with the growth from infancy to adolescence of Tansy. Tansy's early experience of landscape and the rich characters of her extended family are fulfilling, but as she matures she discovers a family history of conflict and acrimony, which she associates with the oppressive conformism of a small Darling Downs community. In the conclusion to the novel the heroine leaves her mother and sister behind and boards a train to Sydney:

Soon, behind her lay her own town, Meredith and Marny alone in the small house on Palm-grove Street. Behind lay Land's End, where the walls still whispered old stories to those who wished to hear. Behind lay Granny and Grand-dad and the Sawpit Tree. Behind lay Grandfather, sleeping peacefully in the grave from which one could see the blue line of hills, and over which blew the free wind from the plain. Behind lay her childhood . . . From now on she would cross any border which she wanted to cross.³⁹

*Authentic individuals and parochial communities:
three postwar expatriate poets*

The lure of an authentic identity associated with a childhood experience of a local place, and the corresponding threat of the narrow-minded parochialism that comes from a static culture, continue as themes in

postwar poetry. David Rowbotham develops a clearly affirming interest in the numinous potential of a local life within a regional landscape and community in his early volumes of verse. Born into a family of bootmakers in Toowoomba in 1924, he attended Toowoomba Grammar, worked as a clerk in the Toowoomba foundry, won a teacher's scholarship which took him to Brisbane, and then taught in western Queensland. He served as a wireless operator in the RAAF during the war and then spent some time working on the land. He studied at the University of Queensland, where he won the Ford Memorial Medal for poetry, and later at Sydney University, where he picked up the Henry Lawson prize for poetry. After a trip to Europe in 1951 he returned to Toowoomba and a journalist's position on the *Toowoomba Chronicle*. From 1955 to 1964 he worked for Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*, and after five not especially happy years as a senior tutor in the University of Queensland English Department, he returned to the *Courier-Mail* in 1969 as chief literary and theatre critic. In 1980 he became literary editor, a post he held until his retirement.

Rowbotham's poetry appeared in newspapers from the mid-1940s, and in the early 1950s Douglas Stewart published his work in the Red Page of the *Bulletin*. He was also represented in Angus & Robertson's *Australian Poetry* (1953), George Mackaness's *Poets of Australia* and several of the 'Jindyworobak' anthologies. His first collection, *Ploughman and Poet*, appeared in 1954, and several further collections followed, including *Inland* (1958), *All the Room* (1964), *Bungalow and Hurricane* (1967), *The Makers of the Ark* (1970), *The Pen of Feathers* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1975) and *Maydays* (1980). He also published a collection of prose sketches and short stories, *Town and City* (1956), and a novel, *The Man in the Jungle* (1964).

Ploughman and Poet is a series of lyrics that explore the relationship between the settler farmer (the poet) and his adopted geography. The title comes from the final stanza of the opening poem, 'For the Darling Downs':

O territory of dreams, O love that is old,
 Ploughman and poet share your heart of gold
 In winsome flashes only; but with hopes and fears
 Both draw seeking furrows down the years.⁴⁰

A number of the poems seek, almost Les Murray-like, to represent the complex, troubled and yet numinous intimacy that characterises localised settler cultures and their rural geographies, as in 'Old Peter' for example:

When cattle in the casual hills call dumbly
 Through the trees and with awkward shuffles humbly seek
 The valley in the afternoon, he counts
 Their silhouettes against the gully twilights,
 Follows them along the track and sees
 Them through the sliprails; with a captured gesture
 Of brown hands slaps them into clicking bails
 And talks of bitter seasons he remembers,
 Of death and dust, of sharp bone breaking the hide,
 And crows encircling desolation. Beyond
 These silky-oaks he built his first defence
 Against a wilderness, and deigned to stay;
 Mastered his span of earth in a way and rode
 The hills till the land gave up its secrets, harshly,
 And the farm was won.⁴¹

In poems such as 'Hometown', 'The Farmer's Wife' and 'Kitchen', Rowbotham explores the spiritual associations of quotidian, domestic and local cultural practices. In 'The Farmer's Wife' he writes: 'I will never make a poem / As the farmer's wife made tea'. The making of the tea is both a simple domestic ritual and a social function and it is the poet's consciousness of this local artefact which reveals his poetic sensibility:

I shall never set soft magic
 In my moment, like this wife;
 From the farmland cup she gave me
 I drank all time and life.⁴²

Singing the local place affirms the subject's intimate connections with a 'natural' cultural order, and this represents the full presence of an authentic identity that offers spiritual fulfilment as a compensation for mortality. And yet the desire for a full natural presence itself signifies a characteristic

sense of alienation. This note of 'desolation', as John Strugnell has pointed out, is subtly present in a number of poems that deal with the themes of change, experience and the passing of a traditional way of life.⁴³ Toowoomba and the Darling Downs seem to operate as the spirit-place that grounds a poet who must now sally out and meet a wider world:

Dogs thrive, and boyhood's school needs painted rooms,
And small-town culture fashionably booms
When tenors or pianists challenge provincial ways
And step from Progress into stand-still days.

Oh, somebody keep this hometown not unchanging
But ever memorable, that when the heart is ranging
Beyond its citizenship and the old-pensioners,
The droll and the dear may make eminent the years.⁴⁴

David Malouf describes Rowbotham's early work as 'subject poetry', that is, poetry which describes a particular subject such as 'birds, plants, trees, animals . . . or landscape', as distinct from poetry that dramatises the first person pronoun.⁴⁵ Such self-dramatising poetry is, according to Malouf, characteristic of a transformation in the Australian poetic tradition from around the late 1960s. This transformation significantly influenced Rowbotham's later work. His second volume, *Inland*, makes more explicit use of landscape as a metaphor for the poet's interiority. Rowbotham left the *Toowoomba Chronicle* for the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* in 1956 and his third volume, *All the Room*, is much more concerned with the alienating effects of the modern world. It is indicative of the tensions between the metropolitan and the local that the interest in a localised cultural geography which marks the early work is gradually superseded by an increasing interest in the vocation of poetry.⁴⁶

Rowbotham's transition from a regional city to a capital city is reversed by Bruce Dawe's movement from Melbourne to Toowoomba. Dawe was born in Geelong on 15 February 1930, left school at sixteen, and after a series of odd jobs returned to night school to matriculate. He received a teaching scholarship and attended Melbourne University for a year, during which he met a number of emerging Victorian poets

and converted to Catholicism. After failing the end-of-year exams, he returned to odd jobs and worked for some time as a postman. In 1959 he joined the RAAF and four years later was posted to Harristown, Toowoomba, where he met his wife, Gloria. By this time Dawe had already published his first book of poems, *No Fixed Address* (1962).⁴⁷ In 1968, after a brief stint in Malaysia and then Melbourne, he resigned from the RAAF and returned to Toowoomba, where he lived until moving to Caloundra in 2000. Initially he held a teaching appointment at Downlands College, but by 1972 he had been appointed to a lectureship in English at the then Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (now the University of Southern Queensland), the institution that nominated him as an Emeritus Professor on his retirement in 1993.

Dawe's formative influences are not, like Rowbotham's, the suggestive geographies of the Darling Downs. Dawe adapted a number of the themes and strategies of the New American Poetry in turning to vernacular idioms to represent the perplexities of everyday life for ordinary Australians.⁴⁸ He was also heavily influenced by Catholic anti-communism, and the abuse of power and language is a frequent target of his satirical verse. Dawe often adopts the mantle of a public poet, passing comment on topical events within the public sphere. Unlike Essex Evans, however, his public poetry is more often than not a protest against the expediency and hypocrisy of institutions and their public representatives. A strong social conscience and a related interest in the spiritual potential of ordinary suburban life are hallmarks of his work.

As an itinerant who ultimately found home and family in a regional culture Dawe is an interesting figure to examine in a regional history. The importance of location to a fulfilling family life is implicit in 'Drifters', a poem inspired by the poet's itinerant childhood:

One day soon he'll tell her it's time to start packing,
 And the kids will yell "Truly?" and get wildly excited for no reason,
 And the brown kelpie pup will start dashing about, tripping every-
 one up,
 And she'll go out to the vegetable-patch and pick all the green toma-
 atoes from the vines,
 And notice how the oldest girl is close to tears . . .⁴⁹

And yet he is wary of the narrow parochialism and insularity of a torpid stay-at-home culture. The stasis that characterises the city of Toowoomba held some appeal for a nostalgic Rowbotham, but for Dawe it represents a complacent regionalism:

You can smell the peace up here.
The proportion, the narrowness.
Traitor, traitor whines the piano-wire voice
As you swing past the Welcome sign

To find nothing is changed . . .

This is a city which is all *present*:
It moves, but oh so slowly
You would have to sleep years,
Waking suddenly once in a decade
To surprise it in the act of change.

Saturday night, in the main street kerb,
The angle-parked cars are full of watchers,
their feet on invisible accelerators,
Going nowhere, *fast*.⁵⁰

The ambivalent character of the regional city is imagined in another poem through ruminations on a recognisably Toowoomban experience of fog. The thick blanket that regularly blurs the mountain city is an excuse to snuggle up close with self and family in a cosy appreciation of domestic security. Yet as the fog lifts, it prompts 'wonder / about the farther view'. For some 'the fog is not our comfort' and 'what it conceals, now shambling / forward into our snug history / will prove on closer acquaintance not to have/our welfare . . . at heart at all'.⁵¹

The local fog metaphor can be read facetiously as a prophetic allusion to the controversial policies and pronouncements of Queensland premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, who seemed to personify the pernicious effects of regional parochialism for Dawe during the 1970s. 'The Vision Splendid' is a satiric monologue in which the self-righteous

politician surveys his state from the vantage of the parliamentary annex:

the city smokes like a plain, mica-points
of late sunlight run glittering like sparks in the stubble
O Jerusalem, Jerusalem I have been firm and just
as these things are understood in the assembly,
crushing the ungodly . . .⁵²

Self-righteous religious dogmatism and an associated social and political complacency are characteristic of Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland in general and of the range city of Toowoomba in particular. The theme is taken up again in 'On Bad Days' with a telling note of personal exasperation and a wry conclusive switchback on the Christian fundamentalists. The small town paper, the small crowd that turns up to a civil liberties protest and the epidemic of charismatic churches are all indicative of the 'totalitarianism of the banal', 'the condominium of the crackpot', 'the averted gaze' and 'the resolutely buried head' which characterise this 'small city' in which the poet has 'been chosen / to spend what is laughingly called my life'. The poem concludes with an ironic word from Christ, which makes a nice riposte to those settlers who imagined the place as God's country: 'I go to church, and a cramped Saviour / winces on His cross, saying, *When I first came here, / I admit, I was hopeful, too . . .*'⁵³

Dawe's adopted city nevertheless remains capable of feeding his interest in the numinous possibilities of the urban moment. In 'Today', for example, a day spent visiting the prize gardens during Toowoomba's famous Carnival of Flowers prompts the realisation that the present might offer a fulfilling moment as rich as any that might lie in a far-off future.⁵⁴ Dawe clearly missed the less-ordered working-class suburbs of Melbourne from which he drew the inspiration for many of his earlier poems, and this sense of nostalgia for the great metropolis is not quite put to rest by a whimsical poem, 'The Affair'. The poet's feelings for the Victorian capital are explored through the metaphor of a failed fling with an older woman: 'Twelve years down the line, / what's left of our love? Very little. Only in dreams / do I wake up and say: "I can afford you now! / I'm on my way! I'm on my way!"⁵⁵ (Lest it be thought that

such a poem indicates that perhaps the mountain city was growing on the expatriate Victorian, it is best to keep in mind that, while 'The Affair' was cut from the next edition of *Sometimes Gladness*, 'On Bad Days' and 'Provincial City' were retained.)

The poetry of Jean Kent also remembers the Darling Downs as the intriguing landscape of childhood; but in evoking it she also reveals something of its gendered character. Kent was born at Chinchilla in 1951 and educated at the Glennie Memorial School in Toowoomba in the mid- to late 1960s. She spent her youth in and around the Darling Downs before taking a degree in psychology from the University of Queensland and moving further afield. Like Dawe, Kent likes to use domestic metaphors to suggest the paradoxes and significance of ordinary human life. She might also be compared with Rowbotham, however, for her tendency to revisit the familial relationships of her youth in association with a richly remembered experience of vernacular architecture and local geography. After describing her father's characteristic location on the verandah of the family home, for example, she later broadens the significance of the house into a more general metaphor for the laconic subjectivities of rural people:

This is the country
Where feelings stay unspoken.
In the home paddock of the head,
Harvesting is private. Between the ripening
Thoughts and the reality of speech,
there is always this silence
this space between warzones
bordering us as the verandah
boards the deep space
between the heart of the house
and the world.⁵⁶

The Darling Downs is a place frequently recollected in Kent's poetry. It functions as a linguistic, symbolic, historical and geographical location with which the poet attempts to imagine the limits and potentialities of subjectivity. Sometimes the region is recollected through the memories

of early childhood as a comfortable but limited world that has the potential to somehow confine personal development. In 'From the Bottom of the Range, the View' the poet recalls climbing to the top of the Moreton Bay fig trees where she could imagine herself as an explorer in quest of a view beyond the horizon: "How far can you see?" the children ask, "How far?" / But always the mountain was in the way. The Great Divide.' The scene shifts to the property of her grandparents on the other side of the range, but the question remains the same:

(How far can you see? How far?)
But always . . . the same smalltown reply:

I can see Toowoomba. I can see the Range. And here
on the other side of the creek in 1963
Old Jack behind a draughthorse
is ploughing a paddock
for potatoes.⁵⁷

When the poet remembers adolescence and school in Toowoomba, it is to recall the impulse to escape in search of wider horizons and the fulfilment of her adult potential. 'In a Provincial City, Cycling to School' shows an appreciation of Dawe's 'Two Ways of Considering Fog':

Cycling to school, I disappear in fog.
My home vanishes behind me,
rapt in a monstrous hug. I grow old
passing houses where children I knew once
are leaving now for jobs.

The children go to the unrewarding jobs typical of small towns: jobs in the foundry, where David Rowbotham worked for a time as a frustrated clerk, or jobs 'selling shoes in Pigotts'. When the cyclist passes the 'house of the girls / whose mother died' the fog becomes 'shrouds of white' to which the city now summons them. The cyclist is brought 'back to earth' by her arrival at school and this prompts a summative statement grounded once again by a geographical image and the concluding line of Dawe's 'Provincial City':

Down the length of this country like a zip
Connecting inland to coast, mountains lie –
And we are locked in the neat teeth, in this city
Going nowhere, fast. As the morning rises I walk,
weighted, through my dreams of leaving. White fog
slowly unwraps.⁵⁸

As with the verse of Dawe, however, it is Kent's facility for revealing 'the spiritual and regenerative qualities that infuse everyday objects and experiences' that enable her to discern the recuperative powers of an identity grounded in a regional geography.⁵⁹ In 'A Dream of Refuge', for example, the 'grandparents' house floats like a ferry' which draws the poet, a 'tired board rider', to 'broad, dry decks'. The poet's experience of her grandparents' house is mediated by memories of 'my family in gentle battle' and the consoling effects of the familial emplacement in a house set in its landscape exists in a suggestive tension with the realisation that refuge is not a long-term proposition, and sentimental nostalgia can erase the struggles that are a part of every local history. The verandah returns as a liminal motif that holds the pros and cons of located-ness in a productive, even numinous, tension:

On distant mirages, my grandparents' house
Floats. It appears beside me
While I'm balancing oddly,
Teetering between turns in my life.
Beyond a window, its bottom tier hitched
Like a skirt at a beach, this verandah waits.
Pretending no absence, resting on this reef,
Will I find at last my life floating out
Like a dream just this side of sleeping?
Here between the house and the world:
A space, stripped, open to air
A room, rippled above and below
A home like a safe, dry hollow in the heart
Of an ocean. Here even the peripatetic moon

Pauses. On this lingering ledge of light
I wait, believing the tide will turn.⁶⁰

Conclusion

A snapshot of the contemporary writing scene in Toowoomba and on the Darling Downs would reveal some significant established expatriate Toowoomban writers, a few well-published local writers active in different forms and styles, and a number of amateur or semi-professional writers often associated with one of a number of important literary societies or writers' groups. These writers' groups and societies frequently run developmental workshops and promotional activities and regularly publish local anthologies, such as *Downs Voices* and *Voices of the Downs*, often with state government support. The journal of rural arts, *Coppertales*, produced annually by the University of Southern Queensland, also regularly features local writers and critical studies of works from the past. One only has to look at J. L. Blyth and P. T. McNally's bibliography of Darling Downs writing to see that these different and yet communicating levels of literary activity have been an historical feature of the region since the late 1800s.

The importance of rural culture to the development of the colonial enterprise once enabled the writing of the Darling Downs to be seen as central to a national culture. If there is now a temptation to downplay the significance of regional literary culture, it is salutary to remember that even today two of the more promising young Queensland writers have their roots, or still live and work, in the Darling Downs. Andrew McGahan grew up in Dalby before venturing to the Big Smoke in search of a vocation. The initial reception of *Praise* (1992) made much of his rural beginnings, before perspectives on his work were swamped by the urban grunge phenomenon. More recently, McGahan has returned to his origins in *The White Earth*, which was published in 2004 and is therefore outside the time frame of this literary history. A winner of the Miles Franklin award, *The White Earth* is now the single most important literary work about the region, and draws extensively on the work of historian Maurice French, professor of history at the University of Southern Queensland.⁶¹ Jillian Watkinson, who works in a drop-in centre in central Toowoomba, won the Queensland Premier's Prize for an

emerging Queensland writer. Watkinson's novel *The Architect* (2000) is a self-consciously cosmopolitan narrative but, like the work of McGahan and indeed many of the writers of or from the Downs, it returns to rural Australia in search of a key to the personal mysteries that obsess the metropolis.⁶²