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INTRODUCTION

Xavier Herbert: Forgotten or Repressed?

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Abstract

Xavier Herbert is one of Australia's outstanding novelists and one of the more controversial. In his time, he was also an outspoken public figure. Yet many young Australians today have not heard of the man or his novels. His key works *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) won major awards and were judged as highly significant on publication, yet there has been relatively little analysis of their impact. Although providing much material for Baz Luhrmann's blockbuster film *Australia* (2008), his works are rarely recommended as texts in school curricula or in universities. Gough Whitlam took a particular interest in the final draft of *Poor Fellow My Country*, describing it as a work of 'national significance' and ensuring the manuscript was sponsored to final publication. In 1976 Randolph Stow described it as 'THE Australian classic'. Yet, a search of the Australian Literature database will show that it is one of the most under-read and least taught works in the Australian literary canon.[1] In our view, an examination of his legacy is long overdue. This collection brings together new scholarship that explores the possible reasons for Herbert's eclipse within public recognition, from his exposure of unpalatable truths such as interracial intimacy, to his relationship with fame. This reevaluation gives new readings of the works of this important if not troublesome public intellectual and author.

Keywords

Xavier Herbert; Northern Territory; Australian literature; Aboriginal Australians; Australian masculinity

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Xavier Herbert was obsessed by an ambition—to write the great Australian novel. He wanted to capture the 'true spirit of the land'. To do so, he struggled through lengthy writing ordeals, self-imposed exile in the bush and personal uncertainty regarding his writing abilities.

In his portrayals of greed, racism and rapaciousness towards Aboriginal women and the land, there was little glitter, little out of which to mine national pride. He was a consummate self-stylist, who assumed the persona of the bushman crusader. As an activist, he sought to obtain work in government roles relating to Aboriginal 'protection', eventually obtained a job in this field, managing Darwin's Kahlin Compound with his wife, Sadie. He set up a mining enterprise, the Lucy Mine, south of Darwin with Val McGinness, a talented man of mixed Kungarakany and Irish descent upon whom Herbert based the character Prindy in *Poor Fellow My Country*. Later, Herbert relished the role of a public intellectual and radical nationalist. For those who knew him, his egotism and didacticism were hard to endure. But he was sincerely dedicated to exposing the violence and cruelty of Australia's northern frontiers. His later interest in exploring new ways of imagining a more mature Republic of Australia, independent from the British Crown, also stood out.

At the time of writing this introduction, it is sixty-nine years since Xavier Herbert won the Commonwealth sesquicentenary literary competition for his first novel, Capricornia, and forty-two years since his epic work *Poor Fellow My Country* won the Miles Franklin Award. *Poor Fellow My Country* is one of the longest novels ever written in English—at 850,000 words, it is second only to Samuel Richardson's eighteenth-century novel Clarissa and is one third longer than Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Herbert boasted that it was longer than the Bible. In 2015, the fortieth anniversary of *Poor Fellow My Country* winning the Miles Franklin Prize for Australian Literature, it seemed timely to reflect on Herbert's sometimes problematic but always memorable work. This special themed section of *Cultural Studies Review* is based largely upon the proceedings of a symposium convened by Liz Conor, Jeanine Leane and Ann McGrath and held at the National Library of Australia on 20 November 2015 to do this and, it was hoped, inspire further exploration of Herbert's work and legacy.[2] Before we introduce the excellent articles in this special edition, Ann McGrath will share some reminiscences about her first meetings with the intriguing man himself.

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It was 1981 when I first met Xavier Herbert, an author I greatly admired—both because of his activism and because his novels, in my view, potentially changed Australian consciousness about its colonising past and the plight of Aboriginal Australians today. So, I thought of Xavier as a great man. It started in 1977, when my doctoral supervisor John Hirst recommended I read *Capricornia*. I could learn much about the Northern Territory through his novels, John assured me, and indeed they were widely considered 'realistic' in the genre of social realism. Adding a sense of authenticity, *Capricornia* even contained a map of its novelistic landscape that provided an accurate geography but with places renamed via a cynical humour. No scholarly general history of the Northern Territory then existed; the study of what was to become known as Aboriginal history was still in its earliest days.

I felt discomfort reading *Capricornia*. It struck me as so very masculinist in tone; its renditions of female characters were irritating. Its spare style and its apparent lack of emotion—even at the horror it was seeking to reveal about the Australian past—alienated me. I had trouble relating to its characters and plotline. It was the era of high 1970s feminism, with me busy reading writers like Doris Lessing and Kate Millett, which might explain something about my response. Once I became absorbed in *Capricornia*, however, I finished

it and immediately reread it. When I first arrived in the Northern Territory to undertake research, it proved a kind of conceptual and historical guidebook. It left an indelible imprint of the northern frontier as a place of cruelty, race and class division, pretension, snobbery, violence and hatred.

John Hirst disliked Herbert's other major Territory tome, *Poor Fellow My Country*; he thought it was waffly, too long and in need of a good edit. Capricornia, on the other hand, he enthused about as a gritty rendition of what the Northern Territory was actually like in the 1920s and 1930s, the same period covered by my doctorate on the topic of Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory cattle industry. But I loved *Poor Fellow My Country*. It drew me in much more quickly because it offered an immersion in and connection with a rich and exotic landscape of dramatic seasons that Aboriginal people knew so intimately. It seemed to promise a deeper appreciation of the north Australian environment, along with fictionalised engagement with Indigenous spirituality and culture.

To learn such things today, we would look to different sources; a supervisor would be more likely to recommend a text such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, another Miles Franklin winner. Both encapsulate the grand scenarios of a wild and multilayered landscape—one of epic geographic and temporal scale. And, as in *Poor Fellow My Country*, in *Carpentaria* nature and its spirits are actors as much as the humans. However, Wright draws upon a much deeper appreciation of Indigenous spirituality, belief and community politics that highlights the relative temporal insignificance of the European presence, its ill-informed responses to natural forces and its superficial historical periodisations. It is no longer possible to think of *Poor Fellow My Country* without thinking of *Carpentaria* too; they would provide a good comparative study for students.

But back to my story of meeting Xavier as a young woman in the 1980s. Upon my first trip to Darwin and the Top End for doctoral research, Herbert's novelistic imagination preceded and shaped my own interpretative vision. Darwin was still rebuilding from the cyclone that wiped out the city in December 1974. When I returned to Darwin to take up my first academic position as a lecturer at the Darwin Community College, I was excited to learn that Xavier Herbert would appear as a witness in a land claim in which I was appearing as an expert witness. Herbert was a famous Australian identity. His novels were well known. He was also a controversial public intellectual who often appeared on television arguing for the then radical causes of Aboriginal land rights, environmental conservation and the Australian Republic. I was and remain an admirer of the same causes. Xavier's presence at this historic Aboriginal land claim, the Finnis River Kungarakany claim, which was only the second NT land claim to be heard, was awe-inspiring. Here he was, a present witness to a cause that he had himself advocated for half a century. Herbert's arrival in Darwin was celebrated in a big story in the *Northern Territory News*. In the hearing, he was asked about his historical associations with the McGinness family, who were among the leading claimants.

As we were both appearing as witnesses on the same day, Xavier and I met at the modern city church in which the land claim was being heard, with members of the McGinness family in the audience. They had known and worked with Herbert as a young man; these were longstanding bonds. I had read about their mining enterprise in the archives. Someone introduced us or I introduced myself and Xavier Herbert invited me out to dinner. I suggested that I also invite Mickey Dewar (1956–2017), a history graduate from Melbourne University who was undertaking a Diploma of Education.

Over our meal, Xavier made a proposition for both of us to consider. His wife Sadie Herbert had died the previous year and he was bereft. He explained that he lacked a muse, which was essential to his ability to continue to write. In order to finish his planned last great novel—one that if I recall correctly would see Australia transformed and become a successful and fair republic, a 'True Commonwealth', he needed a helpmeet. This woman would be essential in enabling him to meet his last writing challenge. She would also gain the right to author his official biography. Did I really know what a 'muse' was? It sounded attractive in a way and unpleasantly subservient in another. So the deal was—you got to write his biography in exchange for looking after him in a devoted way—I gathered, to replicate the role that a 'traditional' wife was supposed to perform.[3] We were not given details.

My friend Mickey Dewar and myself were in our mid-twenties and Xavier was seventy-nine. Despite being a rabid feminist, I could not help but feel excited by the idea of writing the biography of the 'great man' I so admired. Mickey was also a fan. She was absolutely gorgeous, plus brilliantly flirtatious and sexy. As Herbert noted in a diary entry that I later read, I was dressed in a 'school marmish' way. Indeed, as an expert witness on history for the Finnis River Land claim, I was trying to look conservative and mature. For the court case, I dropped the tie-dyed hippy look in exchange for a very prim retro linen dress and jacket and placed my hair in a bun. I cannot remember what I wore out for the dinner, but do recall rising to this occasion, possibly adorned in my cream and maroon printed Indian harem pants.

Mickey had read *Poor Fellow My Country* five times—yes five times. As a dedicated Herbert fan, she was equally dizzy at this unexpected privilege of dining with Xavier.

When he put the muse/biography proposition to us, I was willing to think about it, albeit sceptically. I was a young PhD student, with much yet to do on my thesis, yet the idea of being the one to write the biography of a famous, still living, 'outback legend', Indigenous rights activist and patriotic reformer was exciting and tempting.

Mickey was much more sensible than me. Without much ado, as the dinner neared its end and the proposition was to be considered, she proclaimed: 'I'm not the one. I have already found my *great love*. I could not give myself *to you alone*.' Mickey was one for dramatic moments, and although taken by surprise I was much impressed by her decisiveness. Her great love was her college sweetheart David Ritchie, whom she later married. I prevaricated, we had letters going to and fro about my duties, and so the story goes on. While it is not relevant to our purpose here, I do promise to write up a longer story one day.

One of the reasons my younger self was fascinated by Xavier was because he seemed to embody 'the Australian legend'—the 'real bushman' that I had learnt about in Russel Ward's convincing study *The Australian Legend*, where Ward argued that the Australian character—which he envisaged as an exclusively white male character—had been formed by exposure to the Australian bush and frontier environment.[4] In order to understand Australian history better, I wanted to understand an exotic, probably dated, form of Australian masculinity. In Xavier's case, at least he had explicitly engaged with issues that Ward omitted—the colonising frontier—Aboriginal women, Aboriginal men and children. Having lived in the outback, having experienced and thought so deeply about Australia's social history and its natural environment, Xavier Hebert promised an embodiment of 'the real bushman' archetype, but a better one than Ward's because his vision did not exclude Aboriginal people or the violent colonising past. I later realised that his was a carefully self-constructed character that he enjoyed conveying to the public, especially urban audiences. He had exaggerated aspects of

his life story and was a difficult personality with rough edges, but he had been through some tough times, some in northern Australia.

The 1920s and 1930s, when Herbert wrote *Capricornia*, and the long period he took to complete *Poor Fellow My Country*, are now distant times—foreign countries that are culturally different from Australia today. Great changes have occurred in Indigenous rights, education and publishing. Land Rights came to the Northern Territory from 1976. Even the 1980s are distant times, with so little published and in the public realm on the history of Australian frontiers and Australian race relations. The significant journal *Aboriginal History* began to fill the gap in 1977. The Australian High Court's Mabo judgement only recognised native title in 1992, and the list goes on. In the 1980s, we could have only hoped for the wealth of novels, autobiographical and historical literature by Aboriginal authors that exist today. This special section on Xavier Herbert's writings promises to draw out the intersections, particularly of race and gender, writ large in his work and instate this author as indispensable to interrogating the twentieth-century northern frontier and the progress of the iconic movements of land rights and republicanism within its tumultuous cultural terrain.

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Liz Conor's article revisits the argument that for Xavier Herbert national belonging was intimately tied to interracial sexuality. 'Euraustralians' ('half-castes') were for Herbert a redemptive motif that could assuage the 'awful loneliness of the colonial born' by which he hinted at the spurious land claim of settler-colonials. Conor argues Herbert's exposure of the spectrum of interracial sex—from companionate marriage to casual prostitution to endemic sexual assault—in his novels *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country* was commensurate with the draconian administration of Aboriginal women's sexuality under the assimilation era in that it privileged white men's access within a racialised quartet of the national roundbed; where white men's sexual access to Aboriginal women was assured, while Aboriginal men prostituted their wives and white women looked on bitterly. In Conor's reading Herbert's deeply fraught masculinity was conveyed through a picaresque frontier manhood that expressed itself through this spectrum of relations with Aboriginal women and, unusually, through peddling their exotic sexual allure. His radical assertions of a Euraustralian or hybrid nation required Herbert to indulge in exoticising the women embodying the 'lean loins' from which he hoped it would spring. He was vitriolic about the white women, including wives, who interfered with white men's access to Aboriginal women's bodies. Conor examines how Herbert's utopian racial destinies depended on an unexamined sexual contract, a racialised quartet of heteronormativity which squared off an asymmetrical pact and thereby consigned an underclass of sexually available women to being 'black velvet'.

Jane Lydon focuses on developments in the nearly 40-year gap between the publication of Herbert's two major works. *Poor Fellow My Country* was not published until 37 years after *Capricornia*, but both were set in Australia's north during the 1930s. She focuses on one significant difference between the two novels: by 1975 the media and particularly photo-journalism had become a significant force for influencing public opinion. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's conception of a past condition, Lydon examines Herbert's narrative strategies and visual tropes, centring upon Prindy as vulnerable Aboriginal child, marking a sea change in perceptions of Aboriginal people and their place in Australian society during the first half of the twentieth century. The period is also marked by a radical shift toward the use of photography as a means of revealing the violation of human rights after World War II, which in turn influenced Aboriginal policy reform. Lydon examines a powerful episode when *Poor Fellow My Country's* 'half-caste' protagonist, a little boy named Prindy, and another child, are

arrested, chained by the neck and taken by train to 'Port Palmeston' (Darwin). However, his shrewd grandfather Jeremy Delacy—Herbert's alter ego—arranges for a reception by the press. As Dinny the policeman steps on to the platform, 'with the two chained children shackled to his wrist … Pop! Pop!—like little gunshots, but with the blaze of lightning—and again—Pop! Pop! Flash! Flash!—Everybody for the moment blinded and too astounded to speak.' Dinny's superior officer hisses at him:

> **'For chrissake, Dinny, what'd you have to do that for?' … Dinny said in a strangled voice, 'It was only for their protection, Sir … I didn't want 'em jumpin' out of the train.' 'And now you've got 'em jumpin' right into the front page of bloody *Truth* … "Police Brutality to Innocent Aboriginal Children" … you goddamn, bloody, stupid, bastard!'**

Lydon reviews Herbert's visual narrative strategies of re-enactment written in the past conditional, arguing *Poor Fellow My Country* is a textual re-enactment, set in Herbert's and the nation's past, yet coloured by more recent social changes that were facilitated and communicated through the camera's lens, and all within the context of debates about this key historical shift in visual culture and the growing impact of photography in human rights campaigns.

In Russell McDougall's article the meaning of 'genius' is traced through the life and works of Xavier Herbert. McDougall finds Herbert's relationship to genius was complex and changed over the course of his career both in his self-perception and the traits he attributed particularly to his 'half-caste' protagonists. Herbert subscribed to the romantic view that 'genius was "the central part of man" but it could be either enabled or disempowered by the 'mood of the world'. The mood of Australia, at the time he was writing, was 'hostile to the hermeneutic of imagination by which the world might be healed and reconciled'. Herbert racialised genius, imagining himself 'an Aboriginal genius trapped in a white man's body'. Herbert's idea of genius depended on love and only this love could, through the Creole Nation he envisaged, reconcile his 'True Commonwealth' to its racial difference. It was a nation 'spiritualised by the genius of love, which, as he saw it, was the Indigenous genius loci'. As a famous author, Herbert later injected himself with steroids, to keep up a vital masculinity into old age but also 'to maintain his creative vitality—his genius'. His sometimes aggressive behaviour at times alienated critics and readers, some of whom accused him of appropriation of Aboriginal literary property. McDougall offers another reading, however, in which Herbert's 'adaptation of Indigenous oral literature might also be seen as a strategy that seeks to reconcile two contradictory concepts, Indigenous authenticity and non-Indigenous originality'. McDougall argues Herbert devoted his life's work to exploring the interplay of prejudice and empathy, and to envisioning the emotional states and social destinies that would inevitably arise from 'the sacrifice of either one to the other'.

Ellen Smith engages with Herbert's first novel *Capricornia* and queries whether it reconciles a fierce nationalism with its critique of Australian greed and racism. Smith describes her article as a 'thought experiment' since there is no doubt *Capricornia* is a nationalist fiction, in line with traditional readings, but she finds this complex, multifarious and heteroglossic novel also exceeds and challenges the very possibility of coherent national space and a coherent national story. This essay finds many moments in Herbert's novel where the national is displaced by paying particular attention to its mapping of the seascapes and archipelagos off the north coast of 'Capricornia' along with its minor characters. Smith argues that *Capricornia*'s porous, indeterminate geographic imagination of the northern coast and islands undermines a bounded cohered national space, offering in its place a series of counter geographies that

displace nation with the notion of region. Through this 'critical cosmopolitanism' Smith is able to reread the novel's form, in particular, as more regional and cosmopolitan than nationalist. By also examining the role of minor characters she finds the novel's multiethnic and transnational cast often displace the central characters and plot, thereby also troubling the novel's assumed nationalism. Ultimately Smith problematises the novel's desire for a figure of nationalist autochthony and finds that in its critical remapping of Australia's north, Capricornia 'dislodges its own nationalist sermonising'.

Dan Tout writes on Australian cultural nationalism and the differences in approach adopted by Herbert and his publisher P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen on the goal of 'settler indigenisation'. Tout notes that the obituarising of 'dying race' theory was forced to undergo revision as the 'half-caste' population swelled interwar. Stephensen and Herbert both ardently advanced an anti-imperialist national-cultural independence from Britain. Yet Tout argues that in doing so 'they found themselves confronted by the prospect of a persistent Indigenous presence within the settler nation they sought to claim'. Stephensen subscribed to the 'Dark Caucasian' or 'Aryan Aborigines' vagary in order to retroactively construe a purity or racial origin shared from Indoeurope. Herbert instead celebrated the potentiality of 'Euraustralian' hybridity to overcome settlers' illegitimate status as 'alien' and 'invader'. Herbert's anti-imperialism was thus 'miscegenist' while Stephensen's was 'eugenicist'. Tout argues that despite their differences, Stephensen and Herbert both pushed for settler independence from the metropole, yet disavowed the colonising act and their own dual position as both coloniser and colonised. But ultimately, Tout argues, in this 'identificatory dialectic between settler and indigene', Aboriginal peoples' citizenship and national inclusion becomes 'subordinate to the purpose of settler indigenisation'.

These essays have drawn upon and significantly contribute to a growing body of Herbert scholarship. The networks in Australia's literary scene that surrounded Herbert's writings—particularly those relating to 'Inky' Stephensen and his National-Socialist sympathising *The Publicist*, along with Stephensen's involvement in the first Day of Mourning in 1938—are apocryphal and startling. This and the artful flair with which Herbert contrived his public persona, juxtaposed with the disconcerting sexual politics permeating in his life and writings, are confronting to today's reader. Yet Herbert created one of Australia's more compelling heuristics to grasp the complexity of intersections around race, gender and class in the tumultuous decades between the wars and after World War II. Born out of wedlock, Herbert mapped his deeply felt personal exile from legitimacy on to a prevailing national fixation to settle the question of settler belonging and the legitimacy of national identity. We thank the editors of *Cultural Studies Review*, Katrina Schlunke and Chris Healy, and also Ann Standish, for providing an esteemed forum to advance these original and diverse essays on this thorny, vexing, illuminating, intense and virtuosic author.[5]

About the authors

Liz Conor is an ARC Future Fellow at La Trobe University. She is author of *Skin Deep: Settler Impressions of Aboriginal Women* (2016) and *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (2004). She is co-editor of the scholarly journal *Aboriginal History* and former editor of *Metro Magazine* and *Australian Screen Education* and has edited a number of collections and published in a variety of print and digital platforms, scholarly and general, including a column at *New Matilda*.

Ann McGrath is the 2017 Kathleen Fitzpatrick Australian Laureate Fellow and Director of the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at the Australian National University. She has published numerous articles and books on gender, colonialism and most recently on deep history, and has developed museum exhibitions, digital histories, films and television programs. Her first book was *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (1987) and her most recent is *Illicit Love: Interracial Sex and Marriage in the United States and Australia* (2015), which won the 2016 NSW Premiers History Award, General Category.

Notes

1. See www.austlit.edu.au. Unfortunately, co-convenor Jeanine Leane was unable to participate in this volume, but in her informative and original keynote address presentation she explored possible reasons for this 'selective forgetting', with particular emphasis on Herbert's constructions of race relations on relatively early northern frontiers. Some of the points made in this introduction are drawn from her work.

2. See https://www.nla.gov.au/event/seminar-xavier-herbert. We thank the National Library of Australia, La Trobe University and the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at the Australian National University for supporting this initiative.

3. When I later tried to get more specific details it included secretarial duties such as answering the phone and all the other support and services a husband could apparently expect of a wife. Sex was optional but clearly on his mind.

4. Russel Ward, The Australian Legend, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1958.

5. We would also like to thank Alycia Nevalainen, who provided assistance with coordinating this special collection.

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