

***The Beachcomber's Wife* by Adrian Mitchell (Wakefield Press 2017)**

Nature writing sometimes seems to be an occupation exclusively for the solitary man. Perhaps it is an expression of a mythic frontier experience – a rugged individual proving themselves in the wilds and escaping the degenerative influence of the city, civilisation and domesticity. American nature writer Annie Dillard summed up this masculinised view in the 1970s: ‘It’s impossible to imagine another situation where you can’t write a book ‘cause you weren’t born with a penis. Except maybe *Life with my Penis.*’ Wives – being one or having one – just don’t seem to belong.

The enduring trope of the solitary man in the wilderness is largely a legacy of Henry Thoreau, who camped by himself on the edge of a lake at the bottom of Waldo Emerson’s garden and tried to live a self-sufficient life on the land, free of money, employment or female company. His resulting memoir, *Walden Pond*, has exerted a profound and lasting influence the nature writing ever since.

One nature writer who absorbed that influence was E.J. (Ted) Banfield, a Queensland turn-of-the-century journalist. After being diagnosed with tuberculosis and suffering a nervous collapse probably precipitated by overwork, Banfield sought to live the Thoreauvian dream by retreating to Dunk Island off the north Queensland coast. He lived here for 23 years, building his own house, growing fruit trees, tending cows and goats and fishing, and writing of his experiences in a series of books *Confessions of a Beachcomber* (1908), *My Tropic Isle* (1911) and *Tropic Days* (1918). He died here, of peritonitis, in 1923.

Banfield opens *Confessions* with an epigraph by Thoreau and confesses to being a ‘cheerful’ disciple. But the most notable Thoreauvian characteristic of Banfield’s books is not his documentation of household economies, his philosophical musings or his descriptions of nature, but his insistence on the solitary wilderness experience.

Unlike Thoreau, Banfield was not alone. He met his future wife, Bertha Golding, in England and married her in Townsville in 1886. Despite the difficulties caused by deafness, Bertha accompanied her husband on his retreat to Dunk Island. And yet she hardly rates a mention in Banfield’s accounts of his years on Dunk save a dedication ‘To my wife’ in *My Tropic Isle* and the ambiguous use of plural pronouns. Like Anne Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker’s Creek*, Banfield felt it necessary delete his domestic partner in order to conform to Thoreau’s solitary archetype.

Unlike either Dillard and Thoreau, Banfield did not have to manufacture the wildness or isolation of his experience. Dunk Island was genuinely remote. When Banfield became ill, there was no way of calling for assistance and when he died, Bertha was forced to wait for three days, before a boat came close enough to hail.

It is within the confines of these harrowing three days that Adrian Mitchell reflects on Bertha’s life and experiences. As she left no account in her own voice, Mitchell has, by necessity, imagined one. A fabrication, by his own admission, but ‘not falsification’ (176). In many ways, Mitchell is rewriting Banfield’s own words from the perspective of the invisible partner, perhaps building on the way that we become interwoven with our partner’s personalities and traits, mimicking their mannerisms and voicing their turns of phrase.

‘I catch myself sounding like him,’ says the wife (4).

And perhaps her husband returns the favour.

‘I find my words in amongst his, my observations. No acknowledgement; but there they are.’ (68).

Mitchell is listening to what’s missing from the text, reading it inside out as it were. There is no ‘factual’ way of reconstructing that which has not been recorded or documented, but an absence in a text leaves a particular shape, a shadow, and it is that blank, yet defined, space that Mitchell skilfully writes within.

Mitchell admits that his novel is a critique of Banfield. After all, leaving your wife entirely out of your shared life is, by anyone’s standards, a strange thing to do.

‘It is almost as though he was ashamed of me, or embarrassed by me. I didn’t suit his sense of himself, the one that fills his essays’ (68).

But if Mitchell’s reimagining is a critique, it is a warm and generous one, suffused with the kind of longheld affection that cushions the inevitable irritations and annoyances. And while the book re-examines Banfield’s world, it also echoes it, reinvigorating the depiction of the Dunk Island that Banfield loved, perhaps in a sharper, crisper, more incisive voice that modern readers will find more amenable than the original.

Such hybrid novels – ‘factions’ or reimagined histories – carry an inherent frustration with them. Despite the fact that we know they are novels, we instinctively trust them to be true. We suspend disbelief whenever we read fiction. We don’t read novels as fantasy – not even fantasy novels – we read them as a constructed ‘truth’, as an otherworldly reality. And so when fiction is attached to a known historical event or person, the line between truth and story becomes blurred. The reality of the otherworld bleeds into this world. The voice of Peter Carey’s imagined Ned Kelly now speaks for the historical character. Kate Grenville’s *Secret River* shifts our vision of Sydney’s early history. There is a legitimate basis for the tension between novelists and historians.

It is testimony to both Mitchell’s scholarship and skills as a novelist that I felt this book was Bertha’s account. Her voice, her character, her experience are so beautifully constructed that I was entirely persuaded of her authenticity. By drawing on Banfield’s own writing and historical analyses such as Michael Noonan’s *A Different Drummer*, Mitchell is able to reconstruct such a convincing and authentic narrative.

Bertha never wrote herself into Banfield’s story, but she did visualise herself into it. *Last Leaves of Dunk Island*, published after Banfield’s death by Bertha, included a series of plates, which reveal a smiling, round-faced woman, suggestive of a tolerant and easy-going nature. In the introduction he wrote, their friend Alec Chisholm expressed the sentiment that Banfield had not, that Banfield would never have, achieved the life he had without his ‘cultured, courageous, merry little woman.’

The Beachcomber’s Wife cannot be Bertha Banfield’s account of her adventures, but this written fictional account enriches our understanding of her life and gives her a place of her own alongside her husband. Perhaps future nature writers will feel less constrained by the Thoreauvian fantasy and recognise that women too can make their own trails into the wilderness, like Robyn Davidson, Kim Mahood or Eleanor Alliston, alone or with families. *The Beachcomber’s Wife* reminds us of a prolonged deafness to women in nature writing. Mitchell’s willingness to listen to a

long silent woman's voice not only rectifies an historic imbalance but, in the process, has produced a delightful and insightful novel of marriage, isolation, adventure and a life in nature.

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