

‘Something that makes us ponder’: A virtual book club in Central Queensland, 1928–38

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When considering the question of reading provision in remote regions, Australian historians have tended to focus on the challenge of distributing books and other reading matter affordably across vast and sparsely populated areas. In the back-blocks of Western Queensland between the wars, however, the problem of distribution had been addressed with some success: by mail orders to metropolitan book retailers, subsidised postal rates, local Schools of Arts libraries, the Workers’ Educational Association and, above all, the efficient operations of the Queensland Bush Book Club, which performed extraordinary feats of remote distribution throughout the interwar period.¹ Isolated booklovers could almost take for granted a steady — if somewhat limited and belated — supply of books to read. Two things they could not take for granted, however, were reliable, disinterested and informed advice about what books to choose (where choice was available) and — even more important — the opportunity to share their reading experiences with others. Walter Murdoch once said, ‘It is a basic fact that when you have read a book you want to talk about it.’² That may overstate the case a little, but there is no doubt that the desire to communicate the pleasures, occasional disappointments and sense of discovery in reading books — no matter how solitary the reading experience itself may have been — was and is very strong and widespread,³ and that single families or households did not then (and do not now) *necessarily* provide congenial environments for such ‘book talk’.

Letters were, of course, the traditional medium for cultivated intercourse of this kind, and literary letters continued to be exchanged — and infrequently preserved in archives — well into the twentieth century. But the cultural capital and writing ability needed to conduct mutually satisfying literary conversations by letter could only ever have been characteristics of a highly educated elite; it was hardly an operable model for mid-twentieth-century readers in general. In any case, such exchanges only involved two people at a time.⁴ For the stimulation of group discussion and debate, different arrangements had to be made. The solution that seemed to work well for Australia’s urban centres in the interwar years — the capital cities especially, but also many smaller provincial towns — was the ‘reading group’, a generic name for what were more often called ‘reading circles’ or ‘book clubs’ (the older ‘literary societies’ having become more interested in writers than readers by the 1920s). Many new reading groups emerged in the years after World War I,

and their focus was very much on face-to-face book talk in real time. That model was capable — at least in principle — of being modified and extended to cater for remote and isolated readers. In Western Australia in the late 1920s, for example, Walter Murdoch and J.K. Ewers started the Australian Reading Circle (ARC), an umbrella organisation which aimed to ‘seed’ and coordinate local reading circles nationally, much as the Australasian Home Reading Union had attempted to do some thirty years before.⁵ The ARC met with some success in Western Australia, but never extended much beyond its home state, and lasted there for considerably less than ten years.⁶

In Queensland, faced with challenges of distance and population distribution not dissimilar to those in Western Australia, a different strategy for promoting and enabling book-talk emerged: not a ‘real’ book club, but a ‘virtual’ one. I have chosen this term partly because it was not quite a book club in the usual sense (although that is what it was called), and partly because it foreshadowed, in some interesting respects, the virtuality of contemporary digital environments.

What follows is an illustrated account of its *gestation*, *flourishing* and *mutation* over a period from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, an account that will highlight — as those three italicised words suggest — the unusually ‘organic’ nature of its development. The purpose of this is to show how seamlessly, unobtrusively but effectively a discourse of books and reading arose out of, and was then sustained and fertilised by, an array of other discourses with no necessary literary dimension in themselves: discourses of nature and the physical environment, bush lore and bush humour, and the feminine sphere of home and family. The key contrast here is with the ‘real’ book-club — for example, the ARC in Western Australia, mentioned above — as a mechanism for generating and facilitating book-talk in regional and remote neighbourhoods. These may well have been successful when enough members turned up for worthwhile discussions to happen, though even then — and notwithstanding minutes and newsletters — the discussions themselves must effectively have lived and died in the circle’s meeting-rooms. Other newspaper initiatives, such as the ‘extract competitions’ and ‘favourite author plebiscites’ in Western Australia at the same time, gained wide participation but produced little discussion,⁷ and the book pages that appeared in most metropolitan and provincial newspapers were only very occasionally interactive, with letters to the editor sometimes flaring into brief debates on particular issues.

The ways in which the Rockhampton initiative differed from all of these were many and varied, but they centred on a favourable combination of two things: a group ethos of considerable intensity that developed gradually over time, and that contained and reconciled a volatile mix of temperaments and values, and an anonymous literary editor — almost certainly Andrew Dunn Jr — whose tactfully supportive but firm style of moderation encouraged a lively, enjoyable, useful and above all *sustained* series of book conversations around Central and Western Queensland for several years. For this reason, I have felt it necessary to give a fairly full account of the style and ethos of some of those features in the two newspapers involved that preceded and accompanied the emergence of the Book Club proper in 1929, influencing its tone and even some of its topics, and sharing its particular brand of sociability.

The Capricornian was conceived and launched as a weekly newspaper in 1875 by Charles Hardie Buzacott, the owner of Rockhampton's morning daily, the *Morning Bulletin*.⁸ *The Cap*, as it came to be called, was designed to appeal to readers in the rural districts around Rockhampton, most of which were served by a weekly mail service. It contained all the *Bulletin*'s leading articles from the previous week plus a number of separate features specially aimed at its rural readers, of which the Book Club was certainly one. The paper was a good buy: 68 pages for 6d, at a time when the *Morning Bulletin* itself, which was at this time only six pages (except on Saturdays) was selling for 3d. At the end of 1929, the Bulletin Company bought up a rival weekly newspaper, *The Artesian*, and merged it with the *Capricornian*, giving birth to the *Central Queensland Herald*, a new weekly, still a thumping 68 pages for 6d, which retained most of the *Cap*'s special features — including the Book Club, the Women's Page ('Eve's Domain'), and a Natural Studies page — all in a slightly revamped form.

One feature that was missing from the new 1930 lineup was a popular column called 'Bush Philosophy', which had occupied up to two broadsheet pages of the *Capricornian* for the previous two and a half years, with an entertaining mix of questions, answers, opinions, tall tales, dry humour and a lot of Quite Interesting bits and pieces of bush lore — the whole somewhat reminiscent in tone and ethos of the famous 'Aboriginalities' page in the *Sydney Bulletin*. 'Bush Philosophy' was born in May 1927 out of an earlier feature by then called the 'Naturalists' Club', which itself had come into being only six months before when, in response to an editorial suggestion, several Rockhampton nature-lovers eagerly grasped the opportunity to contribute descriptive letters showing readers 'that [as 'J.A.D.' put it] many delightful spots exist in the Berserkers, facing Rockhampton, where one can study the flora and fauna to their heart's content.'⁹ 'Ceres', a nature-lover of the same ilk, also thought it a 'splendid idea', but warned that 'I have so many floral friends that I [shall] have to start a few months back to get them mentioned'.¹⁰ And she proceeded to do so.

The inaugural style of 'Our Naturalists' Club', as it was first called, projects a genteel and feminine ethos of gardening, bushwalking and bird-watching, similar to 'naturalist club' features appearing in several other Queensland newspapers at the same time, some of which were essentially meeting reports of actual clubs.¹¹ But within a few weeks a strange thing began to happen to the one in the *Cap*: the slightly cliquy possessive 'our' was dropped from the title, and the page itself was rapidly 'colonised' by contributions projecting a very different style and ethos: practical, sceptical and colloquial rather than earnest, appreciative and elevated; combative rather than cooperative; and more narrative and dialogical than descriptive and monological. The narrative turn first makes its presence felt in the bush yarns sent in by the only contributor I can identify with certainty — they nearly all use pen-names — and that is "Bill Bowyang", real name Alexander Vindex Vennard (1886–1947), a prolific bush poet, reciter and *raconteur*, and for 25 years the author of a regular column, 'On the Track', in the *North Queensland Register* (Townsville). Vennard lived mostly in Bowen and was described in later life as 'bedraggled [and] stout, [with] rugged features, huge hands and kindly grey eyes'.¹²

Rather than *describe* the habits of the scorpion, for example, 'Bowyang' tells the tale of a battle to the death he witnessed between a scorpion and a centipede (the scorpion won). He writes:

Whilst on the subject of scorpions I might state that until quite recently I had long been curious to ascertain what truth there was in the tradition that these creatures, when they see no way of escape, commit suicide. It is a popular article of faith, but I did not attach any credence to it until I gained proof positive by experiment. Having managed to catch a full-grown scorpion I placed it in the centre of a circle of live charcoal about a yard in diameter. It stood for a moment contemplating the ring of fire, and then ran round three times, evidently seeking an outlet. Finding that escape was impossible, it retreated to the centre, and then, with three blows of its tail, deliberately stabbed or stung itself in the head, dying almost immediately . . . Subsequently I saw the experiment repeated by a friend, with exactly the same results. But why the scorpions invariably follow the rules of running thrice round before committing the ‘happy despatch’ is a mystery.¹³

He ends his account, characteristically, on a practical note:

These creatures are very numerous just at present, owing to the heavy wet season we are experiencing, and many bush workers will probably be bitten by them.

The combativeness is supplied by others. On the same day ‘Curious’ hits back at ‘Saos’ in the midst of a disagreement about the movements of tree sap that raged for two months:

I asked ‘Saos’ for bread and he offered me straw (Cap. 10/2/27). He asks me whether the sap can keep on flowing upwards after it has reached the top of the tree! Well, as far as I can learn, the sap, after reaching the leaves, passes into the atmosphere as a vapour. This vapouring is not confined to trees either. He also says that in his opinion the sap goes back into the ground for storage. If this were so there is a big chance that it would get beyond the reach of the tree when wanted again in the spring, and trees are notoriously inept at grabbing moving or retreating objects.¹⁴

‘Gobo’ is equally crisp in his ridicule of a proposal by ‘Cat’s Whisker’ for a rubber ‘suit of armour’ as protection against the mosquito:

He is miles out, for the reason that the formic acid that every self-respecting mosquito and sandfly introduces into the wound, to discourage forgetfulness of his attentions, would soon eat through his vulcanised suit . . . If ‘Cat’s Whisker’ wants to surround himself with an air of sanctity that will defeat any mosquito attack, let him roll in a mixture of coal-tar, coke-breeze, and feathers. He will lose sight of his other troubles right away.¹⁵

Genteel descriptions of the wonders of the forest continue to appear in the column, but in diminishing numbers, and by May the masculine yarn-spinners, bush philosophers and rhetorical skirmishers have very largely crowded out the genteel female nature-lovers and rhapsodisers. Assigning genders to the two groups may seem gratuitous and a little offensive, given that the pen-names make it impossible to know who is who in most cases. But the constructed personas and styles of the contributions are in fact quite strongly and conventionally gendered, whatever the gender of the real individuals, and this gendering is an important part of the cultural meaning of the whole enterprise, as we shall see.

In May 1927, the Editor decided that a new and different kind of forum was needed to acknowledge and accommodate the kinds of activities already happening. This is how he put it:

Having served its purpose and brought many Queensland scribes together, it has been suggested by several of them that there are numbers of bush happenings and incidents which can hardly come under the category of natural studies. This probably is so, and to give wider scope to busy pens the column will in future be called ‘Bush Philosophy’. This throws it open to the numberless arguments which rage round bush camp-fires, and over back and side fences and other national institutions. There is no fee for joining the Council of Bush Philosophers, and we pay for anything published. The only suggestion offered is that any contributor who cannot stand being torn to shreds had better keep out.¹⁶

To signify the shift of focus, the *Cap* provided an image straight out of Lawson or Furphy. Two men — mates, undoubtedly — sit around a bush campfire, smoking pipes, boiling a billy, and either yarning or arguing about the kinds of topics canvassed in the column (Figure 1). In this first column, ‘Matrix’ compares the tannin content of various tree barks, ‘Kobbi’ describes the self-seeding behaviour of mangroves, ‘Bill Bowyang’ challenges credulity with a quick half-dozen giant goanna stories and ‘Reefcomber’ expounds on the nature and surprising uses of the cuttlefish bone, capping it off with an anecdote about a diver escaping a shark by emulating the defensive strategy of the cuttlefish (expelling not ink but air).¹⁷

For the next two and a half years, some twenty to thirty Bush Philosophers (‘BPs’ as they liked to call themselves) contribute a cornucopia of bush lore in ‘pars’ of anything up to 500 words. The pars usually have a practical turn and a comical twist, and are always densely dialogical, with nearly every one responding to at least one and sometimes several earlier pars, often in a spirit of correction, qualification, rivalry, disagreement or insult. The ambience, while not exactly testosterone laden, is palpably male for the first year or so: the BPs sometimes refer to themselves as ‘an unruly tribe’. But the ‘men-only’ atmosphere was deceptive. ‘Priscilla’, a fettler’s wife from along the Port Darwin railway line, ‘makes her bow’ on 1 November 1928 as the first non-bloke to break cover, acknowledging that, as ‘a quiet, stay-at-home woman’, she may be a target ‘for some clever BPs to sharpen their wits upon’. She has taken the plunge, however, to proclaim the success, recently proven upon herself, of the ‘Bena Cut’, a supposedly effective Indian method of self-immunisation from scorpion stings:

How many of the BPs who read in the *Cap* (a year ago, maybe) of the Bena Cut for scorpion stings, tried it ! I did and the results justify the experiment. If you do not have any faith in its efficiency put one in your bed some damp night. I did not put one in mine, he (or she) just got there for fun, not knowing I was one of the immune ones. It stung alright, not once, but four or five times, as I shifted around trying to miss it and reach the floor, but when I got a light on the subject I relegated the killing to my bed-mate (as it is not lawful for an immune one to kill.) Said mate was grinning and suggested I better go and doctor myself, but it is a fact I had ceased to feel any effect and that was the end of it.¹⁸

Six months later, ‘Bunyip’, a self-described ‘wallaby-sizzler’ [drover] on an out-back station, confesses his own suspicion and that of a Women’s Page contributor

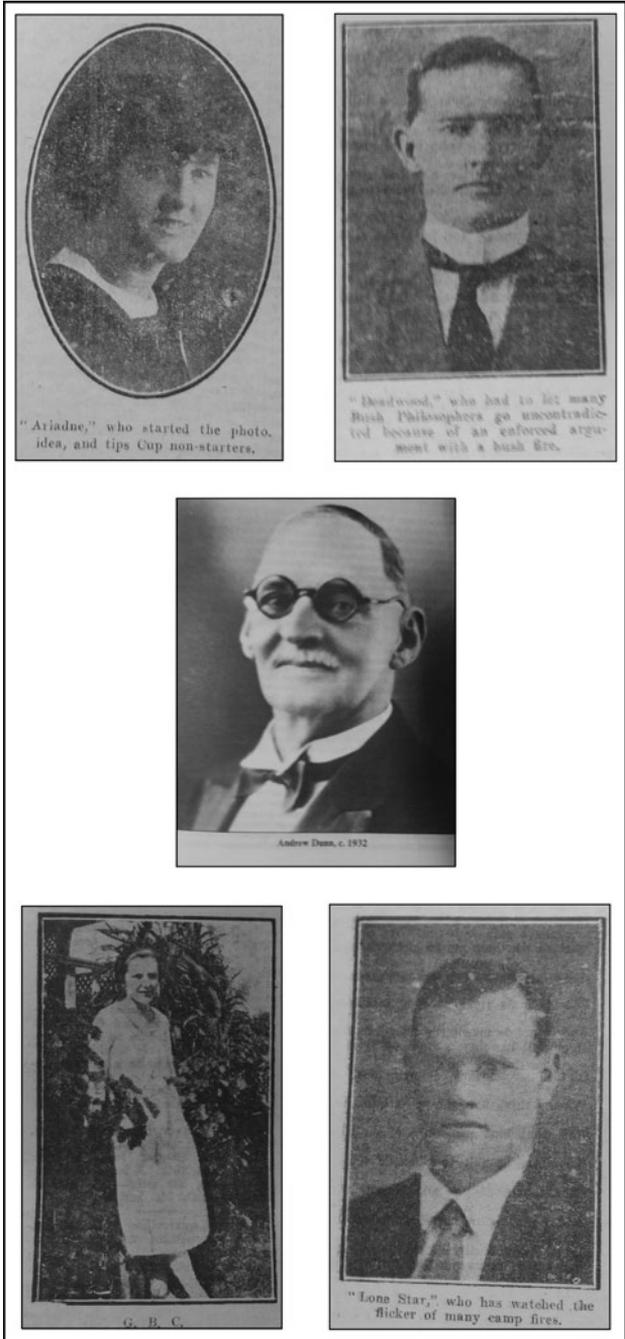


Figure 1.
Dunn and the bush philosophers.

of his acquaintance that as many as half the Bush Philosophers are in fact women, and town women at that, hiding behind genderless pen-names and initials!¹⁹

This apparently frivolous topic — the social and especially the gender identities of the regular contributors — becomes a constant theme for several months towards the middle of 1929, partly because the Editor of the *Capricornian* — who never identifies himself as anything but ‘Ed. Cap.’, but must have been Andrew Dunn Jr, the editor and proprietor of the *Morning Chronicle* at this time²⁰ — has suggested a face-to-face meeting, or ‘gathering’, of the BPs should take place at the *Bulletin* offices in Rockhampton during Carnival week in late June. The eagerness with which, as the weeks go by, one contributor after another reveals his (or perhaps her) excitement at the prospect of them meeting one another in the flesh is arresting in its frank intensity. A similar wave of excitement had occurred a year earlier, when a double-sized *Capricornian* ‘Gift Number’ had been produced and personal snapshots had been solicited and sent, but the proposed gathering lifts eager anticipation to even higher levels. Sometimes there is a mildly erotic tinge to it, but generally it expresses just the human curiosity of people living isolated lives about other people with whom they have been chatting or arguing for months or years. It is *Romeo and Juliet* in reverse: a Carnival at which masks are not put on but taken off — but not quite: Dunn was canny enough not to disable such an effective ‘desiring-machine’ permanently. His instructions for the meeting are explicit:

Divulging pen-names is strictly taboo, either by the owner or by anyone who may know that of someone else. Small artillery will not be admitted, and the presence of scribes [contributors] at the gathering will be interpreted to convey immunity to the bearers [subs and other *Cap* staff] against being ambushed. — Ed. Cap.²¹

Anonymity was not something the Editor instigated to titillate his contributors — but he probably did not mind that it did. Creating the conditions for an ethos of reciprocal personal interest and helpfulness was clearly part of the overall strategy. In a rare editorial statement in the special Gift Number just mentioned, he acknowledged that ‘the policy of getting our readers to . . . help write the *Capricornian*’ had been deliberately started two years before, since which time he had felt ‘the growing pulsations of an awakening paper’, such as ‘could only have come about through the spirit . . . breathed into it by an interchange of thought and experiences between writers from all corners of this great State’.²²

In fact, pen-names had already been used in the Naturalists’ Club, and also, importantly, in the women’s pages, where the number of contributors increased gradually over several months in 1928. ‘Eve’s Domain’ had evolved from a fragmentary collection of fashion, beauty and cookery columns into a single two-page spread publishing about thirty separate pen-named pars a week, dealing with an ever-wider range of women’s experiences and challenges. It was a remarkably durable feature of the *Cap* and, like the Book Club, was retained and strengthened after the transition to the *Central Queensland Herald* in 1930. The pen-names had a more serious function in the ‘Domain’, however. As discussions there began to involve sensitive issues of marriage and family life, anonymity was important — and indeed fiercely protected by several regular contributors when jovial threats of disclosure were made by male interlopers or their female proxies in the early 1930s.

But to return to ‘Bush Philosophy’: In the same issue (3 January 1929), in which ‘Priscilla’ made her nervous debut as a martyr for toxicology, a regular scribe, ‘Aussie’, expressed curiosity about the nature and extent of other people’s reading, prompting him to suggest ‘a sort of talk about books with my brother scribes’. Having been mightily impressed by the wise observations on the good life to be found in *We of the Never-Never* by Mrs Aeneas (Jeannie) Gunn, he ‘kicks off’ the proposed conversation by quoting, and elaborating on, one such gem, and invites others to respond with their reflections on some of the ‘many other books which contain ideas affording help to those who are battling through life’. Ed. Cap. comments at the end of this par: ‘There seems to be the germ of an idea here, so let’s hear from the Tribe.’ And so it was that the ‘Book Club’ was begotten in the womb of ‘Bush Philosophy’, and after a six-month gestation came to birth in July, with no great fanfare, as a kind of annex to its parent column. This was also how it presented itself until the parent disappeared with the birth of the *Central Queensland Herald* in January 1930, leaving the child to inherit the page.

The praise of Jeannie Gunn sparked a discussion ‘thread’ about the merits and faults of *We of the Never-Never* that extended for over a year (before and after the transition), with the more disparaging comments on its style, tone and authenticity emerging tentatively as people summoned the courage to disagree with ‘Aussie’ and his cohorts. The discussion of Katharine Susannah Prichard’s new novel *Coonardoo*, however, was more robust from the start. The book deals frankly and sympathetically with the then-taboo subject of a white station-owner’s sexual relationship with an Aboriginal woman, and several readers made no bones about their disapproval of it. ‘CC’ wrote in April 1929:

I agree with the tribal sages who consider that *Coonardoo* and stories of that ilk are not to be commended for outback readers. Personally, though I have the greatest admiration for Mrs Prichard’s clear-cut style, I do not admire her story. It leaves an unpleasant impression in one’s mind. What bush people need in the way of reading matter is something to teach them to find more interest in their own surroundings, or else help to temporary forgetfulness of them.²³

CC’s pronouncements did not meet with universal agreement, but they received plenty of initial support. ‘Nada’ wrote:

I agree that ‘Coonardoo’ is not in any way a pleasant story, though powerful enough, and I personally am sorry it has been so much advertised, as I think it will give people a wrong impression of our distant cattle stations and their owners.²⁴

‘J.M.G.’ thought it unlikely that such impressions would be given, and thought the ‘stark realism’ of the depiction of outback life was ‘one of the best recommendations the book could have’.²⁵ Others also rallied to the book’s defence, and the debate continued, with some two dozen postings, for a further nine months.

Other contemporary Australian writers (Lawson, Steele Rudd, Vance Palmer) are also discussed, but in fact most of the space of the Book Club, both before and after the merger, is devoted — often defiantly — to international books and authors: British, American, French, German, Canadian and Scandinavian authors, past and present, classic and popular. Shakespeare, Dickens, George Eliot, Ruskin, Gibbon and Anatole France rub shoulders with Edgar Wallace, Gabriel Sabatini,

Jeffery Farnol, Warwick Deeping and Mazo de la Roche. One novel that generated an even longer debate than *Coonardoo* was *All Quiet on the Western Front* by the German soldier-author Erich Maria Remarque, where the main point at issue was the legacy of the war, and whether sympathy for the sufferings of German soldiers could be reconciled with a proper respect for Australia's own wartime heroism and sacrifice. Not everyone thought it could. 'Rollo Bunting' made no bones about it: it was 'quite right' to ban the book, and he vowed that 'when I have 6/6, the price of "All Quiet on the Western Front," I shall give it to some poor, nerve-wrecked Digger, who helped to make it quiet.' The disagreement was argued out in the *Capricornian* from August to December 1929, continuing in the *Central Queensland Herald* Book Club up to and beyond the banning of the novel by the Australian government in May 1930, and the release of the film of the novel in 1931.²⁶

For some Book Club members, however, the main goal of reading was not personal consolation or pleasurable recreation or national self-affirmation, but the sheer acquisition of knowledge. For them, the club was a golden opportunity to improve their minds, and they were especially critical of the tendency to see reading as 'the passing of a pleasant hour or two, just something to kill time'. Speaking on behalf of the other self-improvers in the club, 'J.J.H.' advised that

Many of us cannot really afford the time to read fiction just for the pleasure of doing so; hence our reading must have an object, and this is where our selection of the most useful works is essential. I have found it an excellent plan, in order to widen my knowledge, to read on a sort of system. Select a particular country and period, first read a short history of it, and follow this up by some well-written historical stories.²⁷

He then went on to demonstrate the method as he had himself applied it to the subject of Mexico.

For others, reading had more to do with what educationists would now call 'critical thinking'. Here is 'Ariadne' in November 1929:

No doubt the Book Club column is a fine thing, and contains a vast amount of valuable information, but there is an air of smugness about the literary tastes of some of its contributors. This struck more forcibly after reading some of the criticism which appeared recently of the *Coonardoo* novel. None objected, because it lagged a bit in the middle. Oh no! It was its 'moral atmosphere' that was in fault. That attitude is mere piffle. Then there are such authors as Bernard Shaw, Theodore Dreiser, Martha Ostenso, Richmal Crompton and our own Australian Henry Handel Richardson who, to my knowledge, have never been mentioned. Some refer to a certain novel as "sweet." Now, we don't want sweetness in our literary fare. At least I don't, and no doubt a great many others don't either. A book to be worth reading should contain something with a bite in it, something that makes us ponder, and leaves us more intelligent than when we commenced it. A novel that is a mess of pansies and cream as the major portion of the books mentioned certainly are, is not worth even scanning. Anybody with me?²⁸

As it happens, nobody took up 'Ariadne's' challenge at that time, but she need not have felt ignored, because several readers responded with vigour to an equally provocative attack on the quality of women's overheard conversations that she sent to 'Eve's Domain' in the same week. ('All right, Ariadne, I'll have a go at you,

as you're so keen to pick a row.')²⁹ What is interesting about her Book Club par — apart from the slightly surprising list of authors and the demand for aesthetic rather than moral critique — is its cheerful combativeness. It is a tone (an 'attitude' in the modern colloquial sense) that is made viable, I think, by the ethos already well established in both 'Bush Philosophy' and 'Eve's Domain', and one sign of its viability is that readers who preferred pleasurable escapism to intellectual pondering continued unabashed to do no more than recommend and summarise the books that worked for them.

Despite an eye-catching new logo, the atmosphere of the Book Club during the first month after the birth of the Herald and the demise of 'Bush Philosophy' seems to have lost both its attitude and its diversity of content and authorship. The club is temporarily sustained by 'G.B.C.': her 500-word synopsis and appreciation of Sorrell and Son by Warwick Deeping comprises the whole of the first week's copy, and in the following weeks her rather formal academic essays — on Ruskin, Maeterlinck, George Eliot and 'Sapper' — dominate the column. Though unidentified, 'G.B.C.' was also a frequent contributor of pars to 'Eve's Domain' and 'Nature Students', of recipes to 'Kitchen Craft', and of poems and short fiction to the creative pages of the Cap and the Herald. Her photograph (see Fig. 1), published with those of several other Bush Philosophers in the Gift Number of 29 November 1928, shows that she was a middle-aged woman, and her writing shows she was an intelligent and well-read rural or suburban housewife with a good literary education — perhaps a former teacher. The following par shows that, like several of the regular female contributors, she could also do laconic practicality as well as any drover:

A hint — possibly worth passing on — that should a snake be discovered in the house, or some other awkward position where shooting would mark the walls, etc., substituting rice for shot in the cartridge will overcome this trouble, and prove equally effective.³⁰

The Herald's 'Book Club' regained much of its vigour and variety over the first six months of 1930, with several of the old hands continuing to contribute. The boisterous *esprit de corps* lent to the old Book Club by 'Bush Philosophy' never quite returned, though, and the scrappers and tall tale-tellers migrated to a new 'Nature Students' column, where they resumed their combative exchanges in a less constrained context. A more 'cultivated' quality asserts its presence in the new Book Club, and this is obliquely reflected in the popularity of a 'Literary Gems' section on the same page, introduced in the last months of 1929 to cater for poetry-lovers.³¹ Within the club itself, the shift towards a more literary slant is hinted at in a fascinating vignette contributed by 'O. Grace' (a two-year veteran of the Cap columns) in January. She tells of receiving a dutiful visit from a woman she hardly knows, 'pale, angular and pince-nez'd' with 'lopped-off hair almost matching the hue of a henna jumper' and 'a nondescript hat'. The topic of books having arisen, the visitor announces her love of reading and insists on seeing O.G.'s 'little library', but is singularly unimpressed:

A handsome and recently acquired edition of my beloved Waverley Novels left her cold. The last addition to my set of Kipling failed to interest — she couldn't be bothered with Kipling's books, they are so rough! *Alice* and the effervescent *Bab Ballads* she denounced as childish. 'I never waste time with children's books,'

she mentioned with a superior smile. Needless to say, she had not read *The Houseboat on the Styx*, but she opined that it looked silly, so we turned our attention to modern novelists.

Locke, Chambers and Bennett were unsuccessful, so I produced Harold Bell Wright, Gene Stratton Porter and P.C. Wren. ‘I have read one or two, they’re not bad,’ she admitted lukewarmly, her eyes roving over the well-filled shelves. ‘Are these all your books?’ ‘Oh no,’ I replied airily, ‘I have *The Green Hat*, *Black Beauty* and *The Shorter Catechism* if you would care to see them.’

‘Is that all?’ was the sober response. ‘Haven’t you any of Ethel Dell’s or Olive Wadsley’s work? You really ought to read them. They’re such wonderful authors! As she departed, she reiterated, ‘Yes, I adore books. I’ll show you mine some day. They are all worth reading, such splendid human stories. I just put myself in the heroine’s place each time.’³²

This is a revealing, if mean-spirited, little anecdote. Clearly ‘O.G.’ regards her visitor as a person of no literary taste or education (or dress sense — a subject on which ‘O.G.’ had already aired her views in ‘Eve’s Domain’). Her own educated reading taste is demonstrated by her affection for Scott and Kipling (then widely considered a modern classic rather than, as later, a jingoist), and by her appreciation of children’s classics like the ‘Alice’ books, W.S. Gilbert’s equally whimsical but now largely forgotten *Bab Ballads* and Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*. A particular taste for playful adult fantasy is evident in her reference to *The Houseboat on the Styx*, but her interest in modern fiction includes serious social novelists like W.J. Locke and Arnold Bennett, the supernaturally inflected historical fiction of Robert W. Chambers and Michael Arlen’s bestselling English society romance, *The Green Hat*. Her eclecticism can even ‘descend’, if necessary, to the popular adventure fiction of Wren and the American bestsellers Wright and Porter. But for some reason the popular romance fiction of Ethel Dell and Olive Wadsley is beyond the pale for her, and these are the only authors her visitor reads. The implied critique is perhaps partly to do with the formulaic quality of these two writers’ works, but seems to be more focused on the visitor’s limited reading horizons: her incurious and imaginatively un-adventurous mindset, and her unvarying response of self-identification with the romantic heroine — and, of course, her lack of self-awareness.

All this seems to suggest that the new Book Club was starting to envisage its role in more educational terms than before, not just as a forum for robust arguments but as an instrument for guiding and forming the literary tastes of its audience. But in bringing this about, the club (i.e. the Editor and a handful of regular ‘scribes’) were clearly determined to retain as much of the vitality and popularity of the old club as possible, and in this it largely succeeded: the club continued to attract contributions from a solid core of two dozen or so members for the next three years. But the new direction is evident in various ways: more mini-essays on general literary topics (e.g. parody, humour, plagiarism, piracy, inspiration, slang); more ‘appreciations’ of classic English authors; more reviews that read like reviews (of contemporary books); and a more courteous and formal tone to agreements and disagreements between ‘Clubites’.

Nonetheless, the framework of the virtual Book Club remained in place for some time, and it continued to engage readers with one another much in the old way — though perhaps with a growing suspicion in the minds of some that all was not

quite as it seemed, and that the ethos of anonymous, egalitarian conviviality was becoming a mask for a project of cultural edification from above. It is instructive to notice in the following contribution from 'Rex' in mid-1932 his dawning realisation that the pen-names may no longer represent the same individuals they once did, and that the people behind the names may be less 'ordinary' than they wished to seem.

We all rejoice in the knowledge that our long-suffering Editor also guards well our secrets, for if we had to sign our names I am afraid there would not be many scribes to our pages. It is good to exchange ideas and enter into a friendly argument. It helps to broaden our ideas a little and cheers others. We try to get a mental picture of one another by their [sic] expressed thoughts, but are we right? ... What has become of 'Beery Billy' who gave us his ideas straight from the shoulder, and really did convey the idea that he was a real he-man? But was he? He might have plunged into the sea of oblivion and come up, perhaps, as 'Uncle Josh' or 'Gumsucker'. And 'Rollo Bunting', of many years standing, where is he? Still busy with his stamp[s]? Or has he evolved into 'Billabong Jim'? When 'Dave Cowball' came along he tried to lie low, and pretend he was as humble as name suggested; but lo and behold, we find him challenging 'Junius' in the articles on the fixed stars and emerging as an authority on astronomy.³³

By the end of that year, the energies of the club had begun to fail.³⁴ More and more it consisted of little more than a handful of pedestrian plot summaries of new fiction, eked out with a professional review and an occasional piece of academic literary history, even as the rest of the paper was flourishing. So in a final rebirth, under the motto 'The incurable itch of writing possesses many',³⁵ the Book Club became 'Our Free Lance Page', rationalised as follows:

The page may become a kind of literary *pot-pourri* with verse, anecdotes, short stories, and sundries jumbled in more or less happy promiscuity. It has absorbed the Book Club, but will not affect any of the other feature pages. A repository for much matter that could find no place elsewhere in the *Herald*, this page will help maintain the character — more or less — of the Poets' Corner, the Domain, Nature Students, or Farm and Field. Politics and associated subjects are barred as endangering any promise which might develop from the experiment, and also because space is always available elsewhere for subjects which are liable to turn a quiet literary backwater into a bear garden. So that's that. — Ed. C.Q.H.³⁶

It was an idea with a long gestation — the Rockhampton poet L.A. Sigsworth and a few other Book Club members had been agitating for something like it for six months — and despite its slightly unpromising characterisation as a refuse dump for other pages, when it came into being it seems to have worked well, perhaps restoring the sense of a community instead of a classroom. In any case, it appears to have revived the flagging book discussions, which continued under its banner until the week before the outbreak of World War II.

The Book Club in the *Capricornian* and its successor the *Central Qld Herald* came into being as the product of an unusually self-managed kind of process: as the 'Naturalists Club' gave birth to 'Bush Philosophy' in 1927, so 'Bush Philosophy' gave birth to the 'Book Club'. The self-effacing Editor had a role, certainly, but it seems to have been genuinely facilitative rather than directive: the collective impulse of dozens of reader-contributors to reframe and modify their activities was palpable

in the weeks or months preceding each new birth, and ‘Ed. Cap.’ (followed in his turn by Ed.C.Q.H. — probably the same person) merely provided advice, support and obstetric care. If, as I have argued, this grass-roots narrative modulated in the early 1930s towards a more educational and edifying vision for the club, it seems to have reverted finally to a stable (explicitly non-political) forum that welcomed literary performance as well as literary discussion, abandoned any ‘improving’ goals and lasted for another six years.

One other aspect of the print context that was important was its highly porous interface with various other features in the newspaper. Indeed, as I suggested at the beginning, it was precisely the cross-fertilisation of book talk with several other varieties of talk that sustained its vitality so effectively over a number of years. The various ‘Nature’ columns, ‘Bush Philosophy’, ‘Eve’s Domain’ and ‘Literary Gems’ have all been mentioned, and to those should be added ‘Poet’s Corner’, where the creative writing impulse that had always been part of the Book Club had its dedicated home, and the ‘Casualty Column’, where editorial rejections were explained and justified. All these outlets developed particular skills and sensitivities in their contributors, and instilled certain kinds of attentiveness, reflectiveness, self-confidence and group solidarity,³⁷ which made their way into the Book Club. They did so not by any mysterious process of textual osmosis, but by virtue of the fact that most of the regular Book Club contributors were also regular contributors to some or all of the other pages.

This same ‘porosity’ also militated against the maintenance of literary hierarchies, and even against the separation of reading from the rest of life. It meant, for example, that while some individual contributors argued passionately (sometimes against equally stout opposition) for the privileged status of ‘great literature’, the Book Club, by its very nature, disallowed any *systematic* separation of canonical literature from popular fiction.³⁸ Similarly, by leaving the door open to contributions that had nothing directly to do with reading — a snippet of bush lore or an anecdote, for example — it implied that reading was one pleasurable activity among many that life had to offer, and that it was as freely available to one person as another, irrespective of class, gender or education.

Finally, I suggest that the *virtuality* of this Book Club — the fact that it was not a ‘real’ book club but a print simulacrum of a book club — was less a deficiency than a source of strength and vitality. The printed forms and contexts in which it appeared made possible a number of distinctive qualities not usually found in real book clubs, where the modes of discussion and interaction are characterised by orality, simultaneity and physical presence. Some of these distinctive qualities — the resolution into parallel continuing threads, for example, and the anonymity of the participants — prefigure modes of online virtual interaction in the contemporary world. The separate ‘threads’ also enable the characteristic decentring of each week’s discussions, especially in the earlier phases of its existence, and the co-presence of very different levels of sophistication and different interests on the one page. Other properties, like the slow rhythm of question and response — usually a fortnight between them at least — are quite unlike both traditional book clubs and digital discussion groups, yet even this may have contributed to the long-term stability of the group by imposing a ‘cooling-off’ protocol on disagreements, some of which — like the one that simmered for nearly a year around *All Quiet*

on the *Western Front* — aroused strong passions and had the potential for serious conflict.

Rockhampton's virtual book club may not have been a unique formation in Australia during the interwar period, but it is the only one of its type that I have been able to identify from the secondary literature, a sample of undigitised newspapers of the period and assiduous keyword searching of the NLA Trove database. As more material is digitised and Australian newspaper research continues to gather momentum, similar formations may well come to light; the massive scale and unprecedented accessibility of the digital archive has only recently begun to register fully with traditional scholarship, and to modify research expectations and methods of investigation. What is clear already, I think, is that it was, at the very least, an unusual and noteworthy cultural project in both Australian and Queensland terms: its wide range of subject matter, the number and social diversity of its regular contributors, their different forms of personal and intellectual engagement, their high levels of collective interactivity, and their strong group ethos sustained over nearly ten years — all these suggest that it was a significant moment in the history of Australia's interwar reading culture.

Endnotes

- 1 Robin Wagner, "A blood-stained corpse in the butler's pantry": The Queensland Bush Book Club', *Queensland Review* 18(1) (2011), 1–25.
- 2 Quoted in 'Reading circles', *Western Argus* (Kalgoorlie, WA), 10 December 1929, 2.
- 3 Not universal, however. For some recent examples of professed book-lovers with no interest in book talk with others, see Patrick Buckridge, Pamela Murray and Jock Macleod, *Reading Professional identities: The boomers and their books* (Brisbane: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, Griffith University, 1995), p. 9.
- 4 It is important to acknowledge at least one important exception to this not especially bold generalisation, and that is the epistolary circle of Australian women writers so memorably identified and given voice by Carole Ferrier (ed.) in *As good as a yarn with you: Letters between Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw and Eleanor Dark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). This group is surely the exception that proves the rule!
- 5 See Kylie Mirmohamadi, 'The "Federation of Literary Sympathy": The Australasian Home Reading Union', in Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon (eds), *Republics of letters: Literary communities in Australia* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), pp. 17–26.
- 6 John Keith Ewers. *Long enough for a joke: An autobiography* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983), pp. 126–8.
- 7 For a discussion of these Western Australian initiatives, see my article, 'Rescuing reading: Strategies for arresting the decline of reading in West Australian newspapers between the wars', in a forthcoming issue of *Australian Literary Studies*.
- 8 Lorna McDonald, *Rockhampton: A history of city and district* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1981), pp. 465–6.
- 9 'Our Naturalists' Club', *Capricornian*, 13 November 1926, 51.
- 10 'Our Naturalists' Club', *Capricornian*, 13 November 1926, 51.
- 11 'Naturalist Club' reports can also be found during the 1920s in the *Brisbane Courier*, the *Queenslander* and the *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*.

- 12 Hugh Anderson, 'Vennard, Alexander Vindex (1884–1947)', *Australian dictionary of biography* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/vennard-alexander-vindex-8912/text15657>.
- 13 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 3 March 1927, 11.
- 14 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 3 March 1927, 11.
- 15 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 3 March 1927, 11.
- 16 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 19 May 1927, 10.
- 17 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 19 May 1927, 10.
- 18 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 1 November 1928, 9; 3 January 1929, 9. The 'bena cut' has been described as follows: 'The operation is extremely simple. The tail of a scorpion is cut off, and the arm scratched with the thong-like sting at the end of the tail, until a little blood is drawn; then the tail is bent, and the grey marrow (which is separate from the bag of poison at the base of the sting) is rubbed on. This causes a very slight swelling, but no pain.' Gwen Richardson, *On the diamond trail* (1925), quoted in Jane Robinson (ed.), *Unsuitable for ladies: An anthology of women travellers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 427.
- 19 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 13 June 1929, 12.
- 20 McDonald, *Rockhampton*, pp. 479, 484.
- 21 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 16 May 1929.
- 22 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 29 November 1928, 31.
- 23 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 4 April 1929, 12.
- 24 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 9 May 1929, 10.
- 25 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 27 June 1929, 11.
- 26 'All quiet on Western Front', *Central Queensland Herald*, 15 May 1930, 12; 'Book Club', *Central Queensland Herald*, 27 March 1930, 13; 24 April 1930, 12; 1 May 1930, 12; 6 November 1930, 11; 18 December 1930, 11; 20 November 1930, 11.
- 27 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 11 April 1929, 11.
- 28 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian* 14 November 1929, 11.
- 29 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian* 21 November 1929, 7.
- 30 'Bush Philosophy', *Capricornian*, 27 September 1928, 11.
- 31 'Literary Gems' sections were a relatively common feature of Australian book pages between the wars. This one ran from the end of October 1929 to May 1930, and reveals a strong preference for Longfellow, followed by Shakespeare and Omar Khayyam. (Several 'gems' are sent in with 'author unknown', which is supplied by the Editor.)
- 32 'Book Club', *Central Queensland Herald*, 23 January 1930, 10.
- 33 'Book Club' *Central Queensland Herald*, 30 June 1932, 11.
- 34 The last 'Book Club' appeared on Thursday, 10 November 1932. The following week, 'Our Free Lance Page' appeared in its place.
- 35 Juvenal, 'Tenet insanabile multos scribendi cacoethes'.
- 36 'Our Free Lance Page', *Central Queensland Herald*, 8 December 1932, 12.
- 37 'Book Club', *Central Queensland Herald*, 18 December 1930, 11.
- 38 See, for example, 'Book Club', *Central Queensland Herald*, 4 December 1930, 11; 3 July 1930, 11; 4 June 1931, 12.