

Central Queensland University

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Where did you say you come from?: A case study of geographical margins in life writing

Abstract:

The dictionary definition of ‘mainstream’ that appears on the conference flyer is ‘the prevailing current of thought, influence or activity.’ Those in the mainstream are up to date in their thinking, what they do and their influence on others. A ‘margin’ is defined as an edge, a blank space, a limit, a degree of difference. It is easy to conclude that those on the margins are not as civilized, not as cultured, not as well-informed and do not contribute as much to society. For writers, the term ‘mainstream’ might well elicit a different response, a perjorative one. Mainstream writers are not real writers like we are. Real writers are marginalized by society: undervalued, un(der)paid. The writerly margins are where the prevailing wisdom is challenged; the writing edge is the ‘cutting edge’ We are proud to be on the margins. But what if we are also on the geographical margins?

In this paper, I describe the cultural cringe I have experienced living all my life in Brisbane in the “deep north” of Australia and explore how easy it is for those on the geographical margins to not only internalize a sense of being second-rate but also to marginalize others in turn. I describe how surprised I was to find that an older woman, Dr Janet Irwin who impressed me with her iconoclasm, courage and political nous (such that I was motivated to write her biography) grew up on the geographical margins in Rawene, a small town in the Hokianga, in far north New Zealand. And that she considered Rawene not a liability but a formative influence.

Biographical note:

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by the Queensland Supreme Court Library, is the co-author of a legal studies textbook, and has published numerous legal articles, poems and short stories.

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[Camus] threw into question what was central, what the margins, and saw how the two circle around one another like fascinated strangers, each haunted by the Other. (Iyer:2005,7)

Janet Irwin was such a tall, elegant, patrician-looking woman, that when I first met her at a Brisbane luncheon in the early nineties, I wouldn't have been surprised if she was Lady Someone. I dreaded the thought of making polite chit chat. As it transpired, she was not Lady Anybody and would have dreaded the thought of making polite chit chat as much as I did. Indeed, serendipitously, we had both been appointed to the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, she as a medical member, me as a legal member. When she propounded her view that aged pensioners should be able to grow marijuana for sale to the government to supplement their pensions, I was fascinated. She was twenty-four years older than me. Most women her age did not work outside the home let alone advocate such radical politics. Most women *my* age did not work outside the home. My politics were considered radical. But the ante had just been upped. Considerably. Who was she, I wondered. Was she the black sheep from some establishment family? She couldn't possibly be from Brisbane.

David Malouf captures the cultural cringe of those who grew up in Brisbane in the 1950s in his 1975 novel, *Johnno*. (Malouf:1983,51-52)

As for Brisbane, the city I have been born in – well, what can anyone say about *that*? I have been reading Dante. His love for *his* city is immense, it fills his whole life, its streets, its gardens, its people; it is a force that has shaped his whole being. Have I been shaped in any way – fearful prospect! – by Brisbane?[...] Brisbane is so sleepy, so slatternly, so sprawlingly unlovely! I have taken to wandering about after school looking for one simple object in it that might be romantic or appalling even, but there is nothing. [...] Queensland, of course, is a joke.

I was right about Janet. She had not come to Brisbane till 1974, when she had been recruited as Director of Student Health Services at the University of Queensland. But at this stage I did not ask her where she had come from. I assumed it was Sydney or Melbourne. Later I was to find out more about her from other sources. At the University of Queensland, she had founded a University Women's Association, been an active member of the Senate and was later appointed their first Sexual Harassment Conciliator. Her proudest achievement however was inciting the UQ Academic Board to condemn the University Senate's decision to award an Honorary Doctorate of Laws to former Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

Reflecting the diversity of her concerns, Janet had been appointed to various government bodies including the Immigration Review Panel, Commonwealth Better Health Commission, the National Women's Advisory Council and the Queensland Criminal Justice Commission. She represented Australia at numerous international women's conferences; became particularly active in Children By Choice and the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties and set up the Brisbane Women's Network. In her free time,

she co-wrote a book on parenting girls.(Irwin et al:1998) ‘If you haven’t been driven by the passion and action of the times, you haven’t lived,’ was her motto.

We became friends. When I found out that Janet had grown up on the margins of New Zealand society, in the town of Rawene in the Hokianga, a place unknown even to most New Zealanders I was intrigued. Where had her courage and her confidence come from? This question motivated me to write her biography. It also prompted me to examine my own assumptions about place, about geographical margins and mainstreams. I came to believe that, while Janet’s genetic inheritance and her upbringing were clearly significant factors in her becoming the person she was, so too was living on the geographical margins and not in a negative way but a positive one.

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For writers, the term ‘mainstream’ might well elicit a different response, a perjorative one. Mainstream writers are not real writers like we are. Real writers are marginalized by society: undervalued, un(der)paid. The writerly margins are where the prevailing wisdom is challenged; the writing edge is the ‘cutting edge’ We are proud to be on the margins. But what if we are also on the geographic margins?

We Antipodeans, of course, know all about geographical marginality. Until we become states of the union, we will remain invisible to many Americans. For any number of UK residents, we are still the colonies. And the rest of the world knows as little about us as we know about them. Who is in the centre and who is on the margins is however a moveable feast. The positioning of China within the modern world is a good example of this. Invisibility is not the only penalty to be paid for being on the margins. Not only is living on the periphery different to living in the centre, there seems to be an assumption that those on the geographical margins are different to those in the mainstream. And that imputation is not one favourable to those on the outskirts. In response, those marginalized in this way are likely to position themselves at the centre of a smaller world and marginalize others.

In Australia, anyone living outside Sydney or Melbourne is likely to be the object of derision or pity and Queenslanders are particularly scorned. I wrote about this marginalization some years ago in an unpublished essay entitled *From Brisbane* which begins:

‘Where do you live, Susan?’ I feel immediately uncomfortable.

‘Brisbane.’

Silence. Puzzlement.

'Brisbane, Queensland?' As if there were Brisbanes dotted all over Australia.

'Mm.' I give a small, dry-mouthed nod.

'So how do you know Mary then?'

'We went to school together.'

'Oh...Where was that?'

'In Brisbane.' This must be what it is like to be interrogated by the police. If I have to say Brisbane one more time, I am going to be sick.

'Mary grew up in Brisbane? My interrogator looks closely at me as if to make sure I am not lying. More than Mary's character is now on the line. Could she really have come from Brisbane and them not pick it up? They have, after all, known her for some years now. She seemed just like a normal Sydneysider.

That we Queenslanders are still considered "the deep north" notwithstanding that the current Prime Minister comes from Queensland and that in 2009, more people are moving to Brisbane than to any other capital city, is confirmed by this recent comment in a column in *The Australian* newspaper:

Although Queensland is often talked about by outsiders and locals alike as if it is a separate country, it's possible the mindset is taking root at a more official level going by a press release from Steven Smith yesterday headlined " Foreign Minister visits Brisbane."(Jeffrey:2009,11)

Particularly inclined to scoff are those who grew up in Queensland themselves and had the nous to escape. For those of us who stayed, it is hard to escape internalizing a sense of being second-rate.

It was no use telling Sydneysiders that you didn't vote for Bjelke Petersen, that none of your friends did either, that you had risked imprisonment or being king-hit by police marching in demonstrations against his government. To them, if you remained in Brisbane, you deserved what was meted out to you.

I knew that staying forever in Brisbane was inconceivable. I wanted to live where learning was valued. Where difference was not immoral or illegal. A place where you could not declare a state of emergency over a football match; where traditional African dancers did not have to put on bras to perform; where an actor would not be arrested on stage for saying the word 'fucking'; where the musical Hair would not be banned. The problem was that in those places, I would be an outsider. I had lingered too long in Brisbane.

You would think that feeling like this, I would never marginalize other people. But it is not true. I marginalize within Queensland. I look down my nose at the Gold Coast as our own bastard child of Las Vegas and Florida. I have a friend with a pucker British accent whom I can't wait to tell people grew up in Rockhampton in central Queensland. I am not on very safe ground here as I am studying at Central Queensland University. I take pains

to tell anyone who asks me where I am studying, that I followed my supervisor there because she is such a good supervisor and she is not from central Queensland either. Implication: I would not be seen dead in Rockhampton otherwise.

Of course, New Zealanders have had to endure centuries of sheep jokes from Australians to say nothing of our tendency to abrogate stars like John Clarke, Sam Neill and Russell Crowe as our own. I'm not sure about the respective status of Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin within New Zealand. I do know that, notwithstanding her patrician appearance, Janet Irwin as a North Islander, never felt at home in Christchurch. My own daughter-in-law was born in Christchurch but she could not wait to escape to the Gold Coast. I thought this an aberration on her part until I heard New Zealand writer Lloyd Jones interviewed on the Book Show on ABC Radio National (15 September 2009) about his new collection of short stories called *The Man in the Shed*. Interviewer and show host Ramona Koval was clearly bemused by the fact that in three of the short stories 'blokes go off to Queensland'. Indeed, in the story *Swimming to Australia* a whole family washes up on the Gold Coast. Jones' justification was that in suburban places like Lower Hutt where he lives, Queensland is seen as a working man's paradise, a land of opportunity, everything New Zealand is not. Jones himself has no wish to escape (which I can only suggest is very fortunate for New Zealanders as his book *Mr Pip* is probably the finest book I have ever read). But he can understand that quest for the far horizons given that New Zealanders never live far from the coastline.

Surprisingly, then, Janet Irwin never had a sense of growing up on the margins even though Rawene was so far off the radar for mainstream New Zealanders. I suspect this is partly because the Hokianga has a strong sense of its own history and of attracting or producing legendary characters. The name Hokianga is itself attributed to the great Polynesian explorer, Kupe. According to legend, he was the first explorer to discover New Zealand, navigating its shores around AD950. 'This is the spring of the world of light' he declared and indeed Hokianga became the cradle of Maori settlement in New Zealand.

In another of the foundation legends, the pakeha, Fred Maning mysteriously left Tasmania in 1833 at the age of 22 to come to this isolated spot. Just before his departure, seven Irish patriots had been smuggled out of a Hobart prison for safety in America. Maning was known to have saved another man from the gallows and to have been protected by Tasmanian bushrangers. He married a Maori woman, became very popular in the Maori community, and even advised its chiefs not to sign the Treaty of Waitangi. He was to become a Judge of the Native Land Courts. (Manson:1956, 31-35) Judge Maning's house was beautifully crafted by another legend, 'Cannibal' Jack Marmon, thought to be a runaway convict. The ship in which he was sailing was wrecked off the Hokianga Heads. There were three survivors, two of whom were allegedly eaten by Maoris. Jack was supposed to have been saved because a bandage on his head was mistaken for a sign of chiefdom. He went on to marry a Maori princess and it was rumoured that when he died the earth refused to take him until he was buried headfirst. (Kemble Welch:1965,68-73)

The Hokianga was also home to the extraordinary Maori leader, Dame Whina Cooper who lived until the age of 98. In his biography, historian and writer, Michael King depicts her as another larger than life character: charismatic, dynamic, a born leader, capable at a wide range of skills, knowledgeable, forceful, resourceful.(King:1983) She was a very similar personality to her contemporary, George McCall Smith, known as GM, Janet Irwin's father. Janet clearly inherited her rather daunting appearance from her father. Indeed, Rex Fairburn, the poet who was a close friend described him as 'a cross between an Arab chieftain and an Archbishop.'(Trussell:1984,134) Another friend and fellow doctor, Douglas Robb draws this portrait:

Picture the young G.M. as a native Scot, a medical student in Edinburgh. Of striking physical size and appearance, enormous vitality, and great natural intelligence and charm, he soon emerged with distinction among his fellows. He had been used to the good things of life, to authority, and to the respect of those around him. It would seem that no prize or position was beyond his grasp... His mind was strong and original, often iconoclastic, not content to absorb uncritically what his teachers put before him. (Kemble Welch:1965:15-16)

Such a man was likely to end up a Professor at the same university. Yet it was not to be. (It was in fact his well-known grandson, Alexander McCall Smith of *No 1. Ladies Detective Agency* fame who achieved that distinction). GM left behind a family of four children to come to work in what he called "the backblocks" of New Zealand in 1914. He brought with him Lucy Scott, formerly his patient, who was to be his second wife and Janet's mother. Lucy came from a wealthy landowning family but any notions she may have had of refined country life were no doubt soon dispelled. The Hokianga was a poor, widely dispersed, and multi-cultural community and it was yet to be made accessible by road. Never one to be fazed by a challenge or stand on ceremony, GM co-opted Lucy as his anaesthetist, and if the patient could not come to them, they went to the patient, on horseback or by boat. Indeed, under GM's leadership, the Hokianga acquired a free and co-operative health service which even today serves as an international model for similar communities. This was achieved by fair means or foul with GM thinking nothing of setting up an illegal casino or rigging a fundraising lottery.

Both GM and Whina Cooper considered the Hokinga their fiefdom. They were both committed to addressing Maori health issues in the Pangaru area, and no doubt there were clashes about how that should be achieved. Janet grew up aware of Whina's achievements and oblivious to the argument that a woman's role should be restricted to the home. Her father referred to Whina as 'that old devil Josephine' and told her about the time she wanted to bury a nephew who had committed suicide in consecrated ground at the Panguru cemetery. The parish priest refused so Whina buried the nephew outside the cemetery, in a plot with pre-Christian Maori remains. Then she lifted the fence to bring both urupa inside the boundary. This story was confirmed by Michael King in his obituary to Whina. (King:2001,135)

The Smiths were intellectually inclined. They subscribed to over thirty overseas newspapers and literary and political journals. Lucy Scott avidly read the works of Virginia Woolf and other iconoclastic writers. GM was a strong believer that it was bad enough to be sick without having to pay for treatment and he spoke out publicly on social justice issues. Notwithstanding the difficulties of reaching it, their house was regularly visited by politicians, writers and artists. This was a case of the mainstream coming to the margins. Indeed, GM had an interesting take on the issue of margins and mainstreams. Often referred to as eccentric, he claimed it should be spelled ex-centric and expressed the view that 'the only way to see what is happening at the centre is to be ex-centric.' (Trussell:1984,134) Camus would no doubt have agreed with him. Janet recalled having an argument with a government Minister about policy at the ripe age of about twelve. Sadly, Janet's older brother, Jock, died when he was ten, and she became the sole beneficiary of her father's ambitions and hopes.

Whilst this was no doubt a powerful formative influence, Janet believed that Rawene and the Hokianga were a strong influence in their own right. She loved the place. It was always home to her no matter where she lived. She kept in touch with her childhood friends throughout her life and would return frequently. When I visited the Hokianga with her in 2004, it felt like a pilgrimage. Janet always knew what was going on there and was fiercely protective. When an article appeared in the New Zealand paper *North/South* in 1992 headed *Hopeless Hokianga*, she was furious and wrote an article in response from Brisbane. 'Hokianga people are rich in the things that matter most,' she claimed. 'Hokianga, to me, and I believe to its people, is the most beautiful place on earth.' (Irwin:1992,34-36) Sadly, Janet died this year. In accordance with her wishes, her family will gather in Rawene early next year to scatter her ashes.

Meanwhile, the Rawene spirit lives on. In late November, 2005, I attended the AAWP conference in Perth. There were two women from New Zealand present. To my utter amazement, I read in the program that one of them, Janine McVeagh, was from Rawene. That could not be possible. How big would Rawene be today? 200 people? I found Janine, and told her of the biography I was writing. Janine did not know Janet but she did know about her father. In fact, Janine lives in the street opposite the hospital that GM established. It was spooky. When Janine told me that she too was writing a biography, of the social reformer Priscilla Wakefield, it felt as though our paths had been meant to cross. I stayed near her side for the rest of the conference. I think I was concerned that if I let her go, she might evaporate into a figment of my imagination.

Janine, like Janet, is actively involved in community affairs, an outspoken advocate on social justice and environmental issues. And she is one of many in her community. Rawene continues to foster strong, independent characters. Is it just its history? Could it have something to do with the landscape? Is it the strength of its Maori heritage? Could it be that what I have observed happening in Rawene happens in marginal communities everywhere? I doubt it but you never know.

As for Brisbane, well, it's changing. And I'm changing my attitude to it. I've even taken to getting a little fierce when people criticize us.

OK, Central Queensland. I know. My game is up. No more Rockhampton jokes. I fear the joke is on me.

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