

**James Cook University**

**Louise Henry**

**A perspective from the periphery: Re-imagining regional North Queensland women's stories using historical fiction**

Abstract:

In popular published accounts from settlement and into the early part of the twentieth century the North Queensland region was often portrayed as 'wild'. This is a perception ripe for re-examination, particularly from the perspective of women of lower socio-economic standing, and something I am exploring through my own creative work. Writing historical fiction about my grandmother's life in North Queensland in the first half of the twentieth century requires me to consider strategies to ethically re-imagine a peripheral history that is specific to regional geography, class, and gender. Such a task is complicated by the limited source material available about the lived experiences of poorer women living in North Queensland. The most fruitful sources are often first-hand accounts such as life writing, personal recollections, memoirs, letters, or journals. Along with oral histories, these artefacts make up the bulk of the primary archival material that forms the background and contextual groundwork for my historical fiction. These sources are highly individual accounts specific to the time, place and era in which they were written. Historical fiction relies on an 'authenticity effect' (Padmore 2017) to effectively build a past world, and this article explores some of the ways these primary sources can be utilised and integrated in historical fiction to effectively and ethically represent women living in the margins.

Biographical note:

Louise Henry is a PhD candidate at James Cook University. Her research interests include historical fiction, ethics, women, and regions.

Keywords:

Historical fiction – Regional writing – Women – North Queensland

Both women and the North Queensland region have historically been located on the periphery of Australian cultural consciousness. Women of low socio-economic status are particularly absent from the historical record outside of local, regional histories and limited representations in fictional renderings of the region. My current writing project, part of a practice-led research degree, seeks to bring life to the experiences of regional women from this area through a fictional reimagining of the past, inspired by family stories. The decision to write historical fiction within the context of a specific regional area, and to draw on family stories to guide the narrative, raised a number of dilemmas that I need to consider as my project develops. How do I tell marginalised women's stories from the regions given the limitations this presents in finding appropriate sources? How might the use and representation of family stories be done in an ethical way? How might these restrictions impact the selection of literary strategies that will best serve the narrative, and that will present the past in a believable way? Ava Chamberlain (2014) claims that most women from the past were not writers and therefore first-person writings are rare, suggesting that the voices that survive in print represent only a minority of female experiences. My interest in telling the stories of regional women was inspired by the early life of my grandmother, one of those women who left behind no writing of her own. My grandmother could be described as a member of the white, poor working-class in the first half of the twentieth century, stigmatised by poverty and her status as a ward of the state. Her silence about her past, and the little known of her early life, speak of a time, a place, and a perspective that fascinates with its elusiveness. By approaching this writing project from the perspective of a woman on the periphery, I am hoping to enter into the lived experience of some of North Queensland's forgotten inhabitants. Gail Reekie (1994) suggests that women's lives and their capacity to change them are shaped by where they live. 'Women's sense of place, of region, is powerfully constructed by their marginality to History' (Reekie 1994: 8). The peripheral position that poorer women from the regions inhabited is a difficult site from which to uncover stories and to write women into the fabric of our collective memory. This task requires an imaginative use of what archival material is available, limited as it is.

Women were often overlooked in early colonial settler accounts of North Queensland. The region was depicted as a wild and untamed place, the province of hard-working and hard-living men who were opening up the land to new industries of agriculture and mining. This view, popularised by the predominantly male journalists from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, served to help forge both an emerging collective regional identity, and to entertain southern readers living a more 'civilised' life (Taylor 2001). The mythologising of the 'wild north' worked to distinguish the region from others in the new federation of Australia, but it also excluded other points of view, such as the poor lower-class women who are the focus of my creative work. These women, living and working in North Queensland, were on the periphery of this mythologising, and yet they were also an integral part of this regional story. It was only much later, in the mid-twentieth century that published accounts of pioneering women finally gave voice to early female experiences in the

region, long after the public development of a sense of collective regional identity had already been formed.

In attempting to fictionally recreate historical North Queensland as a distinct region, I hope to uncover how a region's distinctiveness impacts upon its inhabitants' representation. My desire to contribute to the regional writing of North Queensland led me to examine how this region has already been perceived and written about. Vivienne Muller reminds us that 'it is important to note terms like "regional" are constructed ones, ideologically and mythologically underwritten by questions of perspective, race, gender, class and place' (2001: 72). At a mythological level, Reekie (1994) states that Queensland is often perceived as being different to other states due to its tropical climate, rural setting, and isolation. However, she identifies five concrete areas of difference from other states: 'the extent of racial and ethnic diversity; the masculine rural economy; the impact of frontier life on women; the state's demographic profile, in particular the masculinity ratio; and women's access to legal protection' (1994: 12). Reekie argues that North Queensland has produced a culture that is viewed as insular, conservative, and politically authoritarian, and although many of her listed elements are likely to be reflected in my own work, it will also enable these conceptions to be contested or revised. By devising a new space within which to engage with women's experiences of the past in this region, other perspectives within this discourse can evolve. The impossibility of conclusively knowing the past allows for fictional representations to flourish and offer alternative views. Where do women like my grandmother fit within the prevailing narrative? Have their voices been heard and recorded? Has their contribution to the region's development been identified or celebrated? How might telling my grandmother's story influence the way the region is perceived, discussed or understood? In addressing these questions through historical fiction, some of the gaps and tensions that exist in the prevailing narrative of North Queensland can be productively exposed and explored.

Gillian Whitlock (1994) suggests that the regional privileges a particular set of concerns: the organic community, tradition, and the natural world. Whitlock believes that the discourse around these concerns celebrate the domestic and feminine; however, she argues that this does not mean that regions are consistently or universally feminised. Kay Ferres builds on this idea when she writes of locating a space in which fictional regional writing happens, specifically from a female perspective, which she has identified as a 'felicitous space' (1994: 134), a term she ascribes to Gaston Bachelard. She sees this space as a place where a reconceptualisation of home, identity, and community can take place which incorporates the differences of sex, class, ethnicity, and race. More specifically, Ferres considers how female subjectivity is constructed in relation to intersecting spaces of personal, social, and political life. By taking my regional perspective from the periphery, in terms of class and from a female subjectivity, it is this 'felicitous space' that most closely aligns with how I see my historical fiction developing, and from which my choice of literary strategies for recovering the past and its stories emerges.

To help frame my writing project I identified events within my grandmother's early life and used these to focus my task of uncovering regional women's lived experience. My grandmother was born into a small mining community in North Queensland in 1913 and was made a ward of the state at around five years of age, spending time at the Townsville Orphanage as well as various foster homes during the 1920s. She went out to work in a factory in Brisbane aged around thirteen, and later served as a domestic on a station west of Mackay. She worked in cafes waitressing, and in stores, and in hotels as a chambermaid for many years. It was in one such hotel that she met my grandfather and became a cane-farmer's wife in 1939, spending the war years having her first children. Her life may not seem exceptional, yet it is women like her who have helped to build the community that has shaped the region, and have in turn been shaped by it. However, very little is known about these women and their daily lives.

Writing about family members throws up ethical challenges around representation and the use of family stories that are not directly my own. In her master's thesis 'Forgive me, forgive me: Ethical anxieties in fictional writing', Charlotte Wood canvassed professional writers on how they address ethical issues in their own writing and came to the conclusion that the process of fiction writing is 'contradictory, multi-layered and variable' (Wood 2009: 326). She also suggested that 'the ethics of one instance may be useless in another' (Wood 2009: 326). Ultimately, she found that writers develop their own measure of what constitutes ethical or unethical use of other people's lives, and what is acceptable to one writer is unacceptable to another. Authors such as Margaret Atwood and Hilary Mantel have also discussed project-specific guidelines that they developed to address ethical concerns in relation to their own works of historical fiction. When discussing her novel *Alias Grace*, Atwood said:

I felt that, to be fair, I had to represent all points of view. I devised the following set of guidelines for myself: when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it .... Also, every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times, however dubious such writing might be; but in the parts left unexplained – the gaps left unfilled – I was free to invent. (1998: 1515)

Mantel, when discussing writing historical fiction in her 2017 Reith Lecture Series, argues that a good novelist will have her characters operate in the ethical framework of the day (the time period the story is set) and, when writing the stories of 'victims', will ask whether she is perpetuating their status. She suggests that it is important to respect the past and not apply your own value judgements to past worlds; in other words, don't give agency out of context to people who historically had none (Mantel 2017). By formulating their own ethical framework, writers seek to have an authentic relationship with the materials of the past, which will in turn become evident in the final creative work.

To guide me in an ethical retelling of family stories with consideration to region and women, I have chosen to employ an ethical methodology developed from 'the golden rule consistency approach':

When you form your moral beliefs, try to be informed on the facts, [*sic*] imagine yourself in the place of the various parties involved, be consistent, and treat others only as you are willing to be treated yourself in the same situation. (Gensler 2004: 10)

This approach places an emphasis on four elements: information, imagination, consistency, and the golden rule. All must be in place to attain the most ‘rational’ thinking and outcome. I have been applying this method as a form of reflective ethics. Although I am still in the process of writing the novel, by applying this method I am determining ways to represent region and lower socio-economic women specific to this project. Wherever possible, I rely on archival sources produced in the North Queensland region by people living as close as possible to the time period I am seeking to represent. Each fictional episode derives from places and experiences drawn from my grandmother’s life, but can be supplemented by information from contemporary historical sources. Newspapers, local histories, and official reports are used to incorporate relevant national, international and local events; and oral histories, letters, memoirs, and recollections help inform my understanding of female experience. For example, when I was seeking to recreate rural Euramo/Tully and this region’s experience of the Second World War, historical records gave me knowledge about the public actions of war (deployments of troops, battles fought, motions passed in local council), and the personal recollections of two of my Great Aunts contextualised the lived, female experience of war (living on rations, interactions with the military forces, concerns of local families).

Reflective ethics has also assisted me in determining what genre would best serve this regional family story. Initially, I considered autobiographical fiction, which is defined by Robert McGill as ‘narrative prose labelled as fiction but identified as drawing significantly on its author’s life’ (2013: 2). Using this genre would allow me the freedom to tell my grandmother’s story from my perspective. However, this form of writing is reliant on its transgressive qualities, which goes against the ethical retelling I was interested in engaging with, as explicitly combining fiction with the autobiographical often encourages a ‘crossing from the public into the private sphere and from the polite to the unseemly, breeding a taste for the confession and glimpses of intimate life’ (McGill 2013: 21). Presenting my grandmother’s story in an ‘unseemly’ or confessional fashion might devalue her experiences in an exploitative way rather than the respectful recreation I have in mind.

Writing a micro-history was appealing, because the form relies on the assumption that ‘however singular a person’s life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole’ (Lepore 2001: 133). This provision for the examination of a broader culture through the lens of an individual would allow for exploring regional and women’s experiences through the focal point of my grandmother’s life. However, this mode of writing relies on tracking a person through external sources, and my grandmother’s life remains largely absent from historical archival records.

Biography was considered as well, but this form of writing ‘requires access to the interiority of the biographical subject’s experience’ (Chamberlain 2014: 34) and therefore draws significantly on autobiographical material, preferably written by the subject themselves. Aside from the lack of biographical material, I did not consider this an appropriate medium for my grandmother’s story as I did not feel it was my place to appropriate her life to the extent that I could postulate her thoughts and feelings. Biographical fiction, or biofiction, similarly relies on biographical material as a starting point from which to develop ‘a narrative based on the life of an historical person, weaving biographical fact into what must otherwise be considered a novel’ (Novak 2017: 9). The lack of specific information about my grandmother seemed to preclude this genre from fulfilling the function I was looking for; however, its fictionality would allow for the imaginative reconstructing I felt was necessary to fill in the huge gaps and silences within my grandmother’s story. In her work, Julia Novak (2016) discusses ‘notable women’ biofictions, and their capacity to redress the imbalance or absence of significant historical female figures by “reclaiming”...lost or marginalised women’s lives’ (2016: 84) This idea of using historical women’s stories to redress the imbalance interested me; however, I wanted to apply it to the story of an ‘ordinary’ woman. Although my grandmother cannot be considered notable, as evidenced by her absence from historical archives, she remains representative of a group of women who I would argue are significant.

Historical fiction, I believe, offers me the best medium through which to tell the story I wished to tell. It can function as a mode of recovery for lost stories (Polack 2016; Hagar 2017; Heilmann & Llewellyn 2004), and I see my grandmother’s story as a lived pathway into the past that will speak to the experiences of many women like her. This family story opens the door to reveal some of the gaps and silences within this past social history of the region. Her experiences reveal something of the social forces influencing women’s lives, and the kinds of roles and opportunities that were available to them. Equally, historical fiction provides an opportunity to recreate these stories, and the places in which they happened, in an ethical way through the considered use of certain literary strategies to achieve this end. Leigh Wilson (2017) points out that by asserting fictionality, the novelist can bring together the real and the fictional in an ethical way. The strategy I’ve chosen of using fictional historical artefacts to tell the stories of women from North Queensland is one I hope reflects an ethical approach. The use of archival text types to present a version of historical events imbues the fictional voices from the past with an ‘authenticity effect’ (Padmore 2017). Their subjective nature positions them as being an interpretation of events. Using multiple fictional names for the characters, who represent ‘possible’ versions of my grandmother in these artefacts, helps ensure the reader cannot definitively pinpoint what is factual in the account and what is fictional.

This determining of narrative strategies through the use of an ethical methodology has been most evident in my decision not to represent my grandmother’s story from her point of view. Several considerations led me to utilising reflective ethics as a framework through which I could tell family stories respectfully; my grandmother is not alive to ask permission, I did not wish to appropriate her story in an exploitative

way, and I knew that I would never know enough to tell an ‘accurate’ story in the biographical sense. By creating fictional, first-person, subjective artefacts that explore experiences from my grandmother’s life from an outside perspective, the text creates windows into her past, but not definitive interpretations of her experiences. By keeping my grandmother’s life at a remove, I can ethically tell a version of her life experiences, that doesn’t exploit her story by assuming ownership or knowledge that I don’t have.

### **Literary precedents in early North Queensland writing**

Determining how early writers conceived of North Queensland helps to better understand the parameters of my own project around representing regional women’s lives using historical fiction. Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins argue that ‘the idea of North Queensland as a distinctive region has existed powerfully almost from the first settlement’ (2007: 213). By the 1900s, travel writing and autobiography had supplanted the narratives of exploration that were the first writings about the region. Up to the end of World War Two, the short prose writing and journalism found in magazines, journals, and newspapers was dominated by male perspectives. These stories were influenced by ideas of colonisation and European chauvinism, and were often written from the perspectives of explorers, pioneers, miners, and police. This writing was unreflective, and at times defensive, in its belief in ‘the rightness or inevitability of colonisation’ (Taylor & Perkins 2007). Taylor argues this was because of deeply rooted social and linguistic factors that enabled the persistence of bush and pioneer mythology in North Queensland. Such stories can be explained by a need to authenticate and make visible lives lived in isolation and physical hardship: ‘Like the newspapers in which they appeared, the columns of bush yarns and outback stories connected readers with each other and with relevant traditions’ (Taylor 2001: 46-47). Few of these stories were told from a female perspective.

Mid-twentieth century publication of stories by early female pioneers expanded the conception of this era by including a more domestic perspective, and these accounts also reflected the isolation and challenges of living in the ‘wild north’. Belinda McKay (2001) notes that a high proportion of Queensland women writers from this early-settler era, and into the 1920s, were born or spent time in rural areas where anxieties about identity were strongly felt. This suggests that women were aware of the difference living in Queensland presented and the nature of the inherent challenges and circumstances. These women writers, such as Rachel Henning and Lucy and Eva Gray, were from an earlier time, and also from a more educated class, than the group of women I am interested in writing about. Their writing focused on the experiences of women living on outback stations, as manager’s and station owner’s wives, where women were extremely isolated. However, their writing does reflect the region, its concerns and activities, and their interest in it. They are, like many sources I encountered, a partial but valuable view into the past.

My focus on the stories of women living at the margins of society meant there was difficulty locating them in recognised historical narratives about the era. The lack of a

lasting written account of their experiences leads to a knowledge gap regarding these women's experiences and their contribution to the development of North Queensland society. The 1930s and '40s saw the arrival of two of the most well-known female authors who wrote about the region: Jean Devanny and Sarah Campion. Both writers employed a social-realist mode that was informed by the left-wing political ideas transforming Australian writing at that time (Taylor & Perkins 2007). The *Burdekin Trilogy* (1942-44) by Campion and *Sugar heaven* (1936) by Devanny, set in the mining and sugar-cane country of North Queensland, offered a radical new understanding of the region, and challenged the entrenched regional orthodoxies that had developed. As noted by Taylor (2001) and Muller (2001), these female writers were developing their own themes and tropes separate to the trends of bush yarns and pioneer stories that were prevalent at the time. A central theme within these texts, Taylor writes, was that some women writers found release in the natural environment and experienced a degree of liberation from social restrictions, which were more closely monitored in the more 'civilised' south. In *Sugar heaven*, Devanny writes about the cane workers' strikes in the mid-1930s, agitating for action on the threat of Weils disease. Here we have a depiction of the working-man's wife that also illustrates the liberating effect moving to the tropical north had on the mind and body of the main female protagonist, limited though it might seem by modern standards.

For these women writers, North Queensland was a place of transition, for evolving new formations of the self and society (Taylor 2009). Tropical North Queensland, in particular, was a site which was attributed as a more feminine space. Taylor writes that, 'the authors set aside the dusty outback Australia of the masculine *Bulletin* and pioneering traditions and reverted to underlying Romantic perspectives on nature as dynamically beautiful, spiritual and creative' (2009: 136). Vivienne Muller, too, draws attention to female Queensland writers who conceive of the wilderness as a transformative place. She suggests their novels also reflect an 'alertness to the inequalities and injustices of the social organisation of class, race and gender differences springing from the colonising moment and often expressed in terms of space and place' (Muller 2001: 76). Through their different perspectives, these writers succeeded in drawing attention to the narratives of local places and to some of the concerns of the people who lived there. They also expanded the prevailing conception of North Queensland of the time and the lives of the women who lived there.

Although many of these writers may include women of different classes in their texts, who are engaged in a more diverse range of experiences, often this was to serve an ideological purpose – like the communist ideals espoused in *Sugar heaven* – and to push for change in how a woman's role was perceived in this period. Without such overtly political imperatives, historical fiction can enable us to revisit and reimagine this period from a less ideological female perspective, and highlight narratives and perspectives that were almost non-existent in the writing of the time. The subjectivity and motivation behind the creation of fictional works inevitably influences and distorts the representation of region and the people who inhabit it, and this applies equally to my own work of fiction. Therefore, looking to fiction for the 'reality' of the lived experiences of poor women is a problematic proposition if I am drawing on



them as sources for my own fictional recreation of the past. This is why I have chosen first person accounts as my primary source material. I acknowledge that these sources will also have their own biases and subjectivities, however, they are accounts of life in the region as it was experienced. Not being a contemporary of the time, as many of the writers discussed were, first person accounts of the era are as close as I am able to get to the past I'm seeking to recreate.

Jessica Gildersleeve (2012) argues that, historically, Queensland has often been perceived as sitting between an imagined wilderness and a paradise. By identifying Queensland as a site of competing states of mind, Gildersleeve highlights how writers use representations of Queensland for their own purposes, not necessarily to reflect the region as it is experienced. Fiction writing provides a window into possible conceptions of North Queensland, and can influence the shaping of the region's identity and provide a discourse for how these ideas of place intersect. Acknowledging and accepting the multiple conceptions of North Queensland allows a space to be mapped imaginatively and culturally and is something against which my own fictional creation may one day be measured.

### **Experimenting with literary techniques in response to unreliable and incomplete accounts of the north**

In my novel, I have no real way to achieve true accuracy – I acknowledge that this in itself is a problematic concept – given my distance from the social and cultural circumstances of the time. Therefore, I will rely upon the literary techniques I have at my disposal to develop an effect of authenticity. One of these techniques is the use of fictional artefacts related to my grandmother's story, discussed briefly earlier, that I intend to incorporate into the narrative. These include letters, diary snippets and transcriptions of oral histories that I have fictionally created around events in my grandmother's life. Recreating a variety of perspectives through a collection of fictional letters and other first-person mediums – alongside some genuine historical documents – is a literary strategy I am experimenting with to develop an 'authenticity effect' (Padmore 2017) and to address the ethical aims already expressed.

As Catherine Padmore outlines, historical fiction is often judged by how effectively the writer can create a sense of authenticity of the imagined world (2017). This is important in order to develop a sense of trust with the reader and to encourage an acceptance of the world you are imagining for them. The central component of a narrative is the narrative voice:

A voice that is perceived to be authentic is one way to establish a reader's belief in the character and events portrayed. If the readers do not believe in these, then it is unlikely that they will make the empathetic leap. (Padmore 2017)

Through fictional first-person 'primary sources', I can build up a sense of place and a voice that evokes that time and place for the reader, and will enable me to recreate in written form the kind of history that gets passed along orally and in family traditions. Presenting multiple subjective voices all sharing snippets of their own 'stories' helps

me recover a past world in a believable way, and one that I hope readers can enter into easily and empathise with. It also highlights the fact that one can only access the past in an oblique way. Like the real first-person accounts, my fictional ones aren't always reliable, nor are they necessarily accurate, and they are most certainly incomplete.

Memoirs, personal recollections, letters, journals, and oral histories became my primary sources in pursuit of uncovering the lived experiences of these women. It soon became clear that such sources were limited not only by my focus on a poorer class of women, but also by what was available. I needed to make allowances for what might qualify as a source because so few women of this class were in a position to keep a written account of their lives because of the effects of poverty, lack of time and opportunity, or due to their level of literacy. Often, sources from more educated women and girls, living in the same era, needed to be searched for any clues about the living conditions and social attitudes of the period, and how these might be translated and applied to women of a different class and station.

While researching in the Special Collections at James Cook University's Eddie Koiko Mabo Library in Townsville, I encountered a series of letters written by two girls from 1912 to 1917 to the children's pages of the *Otago Witness* (letters written to *Otago Witness*), describing life on a farm in North Queensland. These girls' accounts revealed much about North Queensland social attitudes, how they spent their time, their encounters with wildlife, and their understandings of the Indigenous people they came in contact with. Such insights all add to a store of knowledge upon which I can draw when recreating the era. Similarly, the letters of Melbourne artist Marion Ellis Rowan (1992), written to her husband recounting her travels through North Queensland (particularly sections dealing with small mining communities) and first published in book form in 1898, were full of detail and interest. Although they were written almost two decades prior to the period I'm recreating, these letters offer a valuable insight into the hardships of life in the mining communities of North Queensland from a female perspective, as well as providing a model for the critical eye of an outsider that I can use in creating fictional artefacts. Through such methods, I can recreate something of my grandmother's story, while also reflecting the place and society in which she lived. This technique is demonstrated in this excerpt from my novel of a female artist writing to her husband in 1917:

The lady of the house, Mrs Kenny, has in her employ a laundress, a young woman still in the flush of youth but already saddled with three little waifs of her own to care for. The oldest, a boy, is a strapping lad of five or six, blond and robust. The two girls in age going down are dark-haired and diminutive. They are a rambunctious little lot and the mother appears to have little effect on their behaviour, just laughs at their antics seemingly bewildered that they belong to her at all. Mrs Kenny refuses to let her children out to play with them, with murmurings about it being alright to provide a civic duty to help out these families with paid work, but it is another thing to fraternise with them. (Henry 2019)

The narrator gives a subjective account of my grandmother's family while simultaneously revealing the social attitudes prevalent at the time through both her actions and in recording Mrs Kenny's attitude towards her and her family.

Memoirs have been another source of information that I found useful in helping build the world my grandmother might have inhabited. When looking for information on the small mining towns of North Queensland, particularly from a perspective closer to one that may have aligned with her own, the richest sources were collected memoirs. *Barefoot through the bindies: Growing up in North Queensland in the early 1900s* (Houldsworth 2002) provides many short, recorded accounts of men and women growing up in small mining communities around the same time and place. These recollections also yielded experiences that were common to many, such as not seeing a priest for three years at a time and women conducting baptismal ceremonies for their own children. Or the appearance of an Indigenous man at a miner's tent with a dead goanna slung over his shoulder looking for a campfire to cook it on. Other snippets of information embedded within these accounts spoke to my other areas of interest. There were several references to the 'orphanage kids': what they wore to school, how they were marched down from the orphanage in lines, marched home for dinner, and then back to school again in the afternoon. Given the only other account, apart from brief mentions in the newspapers, that I've unearthed so far regarding the Townsville Orphanage is a medical report on the treatment of hookworm (Cilento 1923), these snatches of memories are the only direct source of information I have to draw on.

Oral histories have been a valuable source of information and, like other sources of first person accounts from the past, their survival is subject to serendipity. The forward-thinking 'North Queensland Oral History Project', located in James Cook University's Special Collections, makes available recordings taken in the late 1970s of elderly people recounting their experiences and opinions. In the recordings, a speaker's tone, emphasis, and the pauses between words all enrich the meaning of what is being said and provide an insight into the past that feels almost tangible. They help to build a picture of a region at a time and place that has now passed, but which still informs our present culture.

Many of these oral histories were provided by people who grew up among the poorer classes, and these works, alongside the written memoirs, provide me with the strongest insight I can find into what life for my grandmother may have been like, and what forces shaped her world. The oral interview was also a useful textual model for when it was necessary to address an event or experience unlikely to have been recorded at the time. Creating an interview provided a way to access an otherwise unrecorded past. For example, perhaps because my grandmother lived in a depressed area of Mackay (Cremorne) in the early 1930s, I could find nothing other than an aerial map of the suburb from the 1950s, a few photographs and some short mentions in local histories. The house my family believes she lived in was one remnant I could refer to, but, of course, it doesn't speak. Below is another excerpt from my creative

work of a fictional interview conducted in 1968 with a past inhabitant of Cremorne, recalling her time living there in the 1930s.

I: Oh yes, and what did they do?

CO: Do? A bit of everything I expect. Cleaning, stacking, shelving, operating the register. All that. She was a little thing but worked like a trooper. Can't have been more than seventeen at the time, I think. She lived next door, like I said, with her younger sister and her mother

...

I: No husband? They were three women on their own?

CO: Not that I was aware of. I think the girls' uncle owned the house. It was no big deal, just a little place, three rooms or something .... There were also a couple of brothers as well, who used to come and visit them. They were all very close considering. (Henry, 2019)

Later, the interviewee speaks about a visit from a state inspector seeking money owed to the state for maintenance from when the girls were in the orphanage. I can't prove that this actually happened, but it was the practice at the time for parents whose children were placed in orphanages to contribute to the cost of keeping them if the parents were in employment. Unpaid money was often sought even after the children had left the institution. Through the fictional interview, I am able to conjure a place, something of its social history, and the experience of life at this time for a particular group of people, as well as imagining an event that could illuminate something of my grandmother's life. The struggles and concerns of marginalised women were often not recorded or even related due to the shame attached to the consequences of poverty and abandonment. This might account for the silence that has continued to surround the lives of lower socio-economic women, and underscores the value of recovering these stories fictionally.

Archival letters, oral histories, memoirs, and recollections bring the past alive in a way that more formal writing and accounts of the time cannot. Through these sources, one can identify the expectations of the culture and society that are specific to the region. They provide a subjective insight into the variety of experiences within the local culture, what kind of elasticity there was around social mobility, and how this influenced the everyday functioning of their lives. Through the fictional recovery of lived experiences, informed by oral histories, personal recollections and memories, letters, and journals, I hope to represent some of the people living behind the idea of the 'wild north'. My interaction with these sources has directly informed my thinking around how to ethically recreate the past and the placement of family stories in my novel. I aim to recover this earlier period in a way that best makes use of the 'authenticity effect' and that allows the reader to inhabit my fictional world with empathy. In my ongoing practice-led research, I have found that writing about a region like North Queensland requires the writer to examine closely a place in time and to look for what makes that place unique. It has allowed me to question assumptions and interrogate preconceptions of North Queensland's past as one

dominated by masculine activity, and to uncover and represent the marginal women who lived in this region.

## Works cited

- Atwood, Margaret 1997 *Alias Grace*, London: Virago Press
- Atwood, Margaret 1998 'In search of *Alias Grace*: On writing Canadian historical fiction', *The American Historical Review* 103 (5), 1503-1516 doi:10.2037/2649966
- Campion, Sarah 1941 *Mo Burdekin*, London: P. Davies
- Campion, Sarah 1942 *Bonanza*, London: P. Davies
- Campion, Sarah 1944 *The pommy cow*, London: P. Davies
- Chamberlain, Ava 2014 'Stories of inarticulate women', *Legacy: A Journal of Women Writers*, 31 (1), 33-37 doi:10.5250/legacy.31.1.0033
- Cilento, Raphael and Australian Hookworm Campaign 1923 *The investigation and control of hookworm disease at the State Orphanage, Townsville, North Queensland: January 5 to May 19, 1923* / R.W. Cilento
- Devanny, Jean 2002 Nicole Moore (ed), *Sugar heaven*, Carlton: Victoria: Vulgar Press
- Ferres, Kay 1994 'Felicitous space: Refiguring the relations of identity, home and community in regional writing', in G Reekie (ed) *On the edge: Women's experiences of Queensland* St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 131-144
- Gensler, Harry 2004 'Moral philosophy', in H Gensler, E Spurgin and J Swindal, *Ethics: Contemporary readings* Hoboken: Taylor and Francis
- Gildersleeve, Jessica 2012 'Trauma, memory and landscape in Queensland: Women writing a new alphabet of moss and water', *Queensland Review*, 19 (2), 205-216 doi:10.1017/qre.2012.23
- Henry, Louise 2019 Creative Draft: Grandma M's artefacts (Unpublished)
- Hagar, Tamar 2017 'Confronting methodological deficiency: A feminist quest for knowledge', in S Gair and A Van Luyn (eds) *Sharing qualitative research: Showing lived experience and community narratives*, Oxon, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, 253-270
- Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn 2004 'Hystorical fictions: Women (re)writing and (re)reading history', *Women: A Cultural Review* 15 (2), 137-152
- Houldsworth, Marion (ed) 2002 *Barefoot through the Bindies: Growing Up in Far North Queensland in the 1900s*, Brisbane, Australia: Boolarong Press
- Lepore, Jill 2001 'Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography', *The Journal of American History*, 88(1), 129-144 doi:10.2307/2674921
- Letters written to *Otago Witness* by Catherine Winifred Wardle and Ellen Rose Wardle 1912-1917 McRobbie/Wardle Collection. MW/5 Library Archives Collection, James Cook University Special Collections, Townsville
- Mantel, Hilary 2017 June 13, 'The day is for the living' (5<sup>th</sup> Lecture), J Frank (producer), Reith Lecture Series [Audio podcast] at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4> (accessed 11/07/2018)
- McGill, Robert 2013 *Intimacy, ethics, and autobiographical fiction*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press
- McKay, Belinda 2001 "'The one jarring note": Race and gender in Queensland women's writing to 1939', *Queensland Review*, 8 (1), 31-54. doi:10.1017/S132181660000235X

- Muller, Vivienne 2001 “‘I have my own history’: Queensland women writers from 1939 to the present’, *Queensland Review*, 8 (2), 69-89
- North Queensland Oral History Project, Library Archives Collection, Townsville: James Cook University Special Collections
- Novak, Julia 2016 ‘The notable woman in fiction: The afterlives of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’, *a/b: Auto/biography Studies* 31 (1), 83-107. Doi:10.1080/08989575.2016.1092789
- Novak, Julia 2017 ‘Experiments in life-writing: Introduction’, in L Bolrini and J Novak (eds) *Experiments in life-writing: Intersections of auto/biography and fiction*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 1-36
- Padmore, Catherine 2017 ‘The paradox of writing the dead: Voice, empathy and authenticity in historical biofictions’, *The Journal of Creative Writing Research*, 3.
- Polack, Gillian 2016 *History and fiction*, Bern 9: Peter Lang
- Reekie, Gail 1994 ‘Women, region and the ‘Queensland difference’, in G Reekie (ed) *On the edge: Women’s experiences of Queensland*, St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press: 8-24
- Rowan, Marion Ellis 1992 [1898] *The flower hunter: The adventures, in northern Australia and New Zealand, of flower painter Ellis Rowan*, North Ryde, N.S.W: Collins Angus & Robertson
- Taylor, Cheryl 2001 ‘Shaping a regional identity: literary non-fiction and short fiction in North Queensland’, *Queensland Review*, 8 (2), 41-52
- Taylor, Cheryl 2009 ‘Tropical Flowers: Romancing North Queensland in Early Female Fiction and Poetry’, *LiNQ Vol 36*, 135-160
- Taylor, Cheryl and Elizabeth Perkins 2007 ‘PART 4: North Queensland’, in P Buckridge and B McKay (eds) *By the book: A literary history of Queensland*, St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press: 213-255
- Whitlock, Gillian 1994 ‘Speaking from the warm zone’, in G Reekie (ed.) *On the edge: Women’s experiences of Queensland*, St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press: 168-180
- Wilson, Leigh 2017 ‘Historical representations: Reality effects: The historical novel and the crisis of fictionality in the first decade of the twenty-first century’, in N Bentley, N Hubble and L Wilson (eds), *The 2000s: A decade of contemporary British fiction*, London, UK; New York, US: Bloomsbury Academic, 145-171
- Wood, Charlotte 2009 *The Children: A novel, and Forgive me, forgive me: ethical anxieties in fiction writing* (Unpublished master’s thesis), Sydney, Australia: University of Technology