

Archive Noir: The Charters Towers Papers

By Patrick White¹

Hurling toward the hinterland town once nicknamed “The World” to save critically endangered historical evidence was not on my agenda last week. Suddenly it had become my only priority and the turbodiesel engine roared underfoot as I surged towards a blinding sunset in Australia’s deep north. I was chasing a hunch, a tip-off from a government informant that several age-stained and insect-ridden boxes of documents had been wedged away in a dark corner of a council storage shed. The person in charge of the boxes was unable to describe the contents and was scarcely aware of their potential impact on Australian history. But I had been pursuing these stories for months and the inscriptions on the rough exterior of the boxes were strong clues that they were the missing files that I was searching for. This could be the discovery that would transform my research. An urgent mission to save the evidence from obscurity or possible destruction, either from the elements or a local government shredder, pitted me against the Flinders Highway on a darkening summer evening when the risk of a horrific accident was at its greatest.

The danger of a fatal collision—whether it be



with a marsupial, a wild boar, or a road train—could have been reduced by delaying my journey. It wasn’t necessary to be out here alone on the road where, amid the stifling drought, desperate animals were raiding the edges of the highway to secure a shred of grass or a lick of radiator coolant. I could have waited until the searing morning sunshine had forced the beasts back into the cover of the endless bush. But, bound in mouldering cardboard for nearly seventy years

¹ This is a work of creative non-fiction. To find out more about this story, follow Patrick White’s PhD research and his future publications.

and baked by decades of haphazard storage in government sheds and trucks, the campaign records had already defied the odds of survival. Gripping the wheel and accelerating towards the boxes, it felt like the documents and photographs they contained were disintegrating in my hands. I had to get there before there was nothing left. If I didn't rescue and liberate the history within, the stories of a generation would fade into the recesses of public memory.

The sudden race to save the records was unexpected. They had escaped an extensive search. Slipping the attention of the region's university archive and numerous amateur historical societies, the papers had begun to assume a fabled quality in my imagination. I had feared that uncaring hands had dispatched them to unrecoverable anonymity. Their verified absence from the national and state archives bolstered the likelihood of this unsettling prospect. The gap left by their absence presented a problem for my research, but it sharpened my desire to discover the secrets they contained and my search had remained energised for months. When I finally caught wind that my quarry was waiting for me in that iron shed in Charters Towers, everything began to make sense.

An iron enclave slowly oxidising in the hot and stormy climate of Charters Towers was the perfect setting for the conclusion of this mystery. The city was awash with historical significance. Geography and gold had primed the city's colonial development. The town had sprung up

150 kilometres from the coast during the brutally violent expansion of European and Asian settlers across Queensland's remote and dangerous frontier. It became a thriving centre of economic and political power in Northern Australia and linked Queensland's dry tropical coastline with the sweltering interior to the west. While its relevance as the region's premier burgh had long been eclipsed by its coastal rivals, the significance of Charters Towers in the northern story meant it remained a promising destination for historical discovery. Tomorrow, it would deliver on this promise.

Before me lay another seventy kilometres, a rewarding beer and a cheap motel. In almost total darkness I drifted toward the highway's shoulder to allow room for yet another enormous road train. As it thundered past me hauling cattle to the slaughter yards in Townsville, the excrement of a terrified bovine burst from the sides of the cage, showering the highway below. Clean black asphalt stretched out ahead of me as I pressed on undistracted. The big Land Cruiser's spotlights illuminated a tricky bend in the road. I was forced to apply heavy pressure to the disc brakes as I Shaped the vehicle around the unforgiving curve. Coming out of the corner, flashing lights and emergency vehicles set the scene of a disturbing crash. A crumpled vehicle lay silent by the side of the road. I later heard that a litter of wild piglets had scurried onto the roadway and caused the severe collision. The people had survived; the pigs had not. Slightly shaken, I slowed the pace

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of my push west, eventually rolling into town around eight o'clock.

Checking into the motel went smoothly enough. I gathered the keys and headed to my room. Fat, pale geckos lurked in artificial twilight, picking off the insects and moths that gathered to die in the glow of the fluorescent tubes outside the door. Inside, the faded floral curtains made a futile attempt to lift the profile of the tropical bed spread. Tracks on the carpet and linoleum floors gave away the paths and meeting points of previous guests. Satisfied with the affordable lodgings, I tossed my small backpack and laptop inside and made my way to the dimly-lit timber pub nearby.

It was warm, around thirty degrees. Tens of thousands of bats filled the skies above me, on their way to steal fruit from the trees that littered the surrounding plain. Once inside the pub, I ordered a massive steak sandwich and sipped an ice-cold beer. The dust encumbered ceiling fans turned ineffectually, unable to disturb the thick, stifling air. My first beer disappeared before I could settle on a cover story to placate the locals who enquired about my visit. After another two beers my dinner arrived and for a few moments I slipped into a haze of relaxed contentment.

Signs of aggression pierced the relative peace of the bistro. The adjacent public bar was occupied by a glut of forceful men in luminous yellow and orange work shirts. A clamour of voices and physical activity suggested conflict had brewed among them. The waitress rolled her eyes and headed for the door. The bellowed insults and shattered glass suggested that the heat and heavy drinking had collided with fragile egos and bad attitudes. I drained my glass and peered down the hallway to catch a glimpse of the first blow. With fists flying next door, it was time to head for an exit. Arriving back in my room I reflected on the old pub and all the humanity it had been host to. Jubilance, comradery, prejudice, division, sadness, conflict, hatred and now an outsider seeking answers. Somewhere between the ghosts of the past and deep waves of anxiety about the answers to be found there, I managed a few moments of sleep.

I awoke to find daylight streaming into my room and headed outside seeking coffee. Bright, early morning sunshine scorched the concrete and bitumen and sporadic blasts of hot air whipped through the town. I finished the last of my coffee and began the brief walk to the archive. An intense, cancerous light taunted the

unprotected skin around my face, neck and lower arms and I cursed the decision to leave the car and walk this final leg of my journey. My spirits rose when I was greeted kindly by my informant, who was surprised that I had arrived so early after the tip off. We set out for the iron shed and the secrets it contained.

We passed by rows of garages and corrugated iron structures. I could only speculate about the truths they concealed. Eventually we stopped. My informant produced a set of keys and unlocked the doors to a nondescript shed at the farthest end of the rows. We intruded on the darkness within and were confronted by the smell of mould escaping from unknown years of isolation. Twin rows of filing boxes containing just one portion of the region's documentary past stood before us. I had chased these boxes across the region and thousands of kilometres to the south and back again. Now they were close enough to touch. They were brought before me and placed on a trolley. It was only then that I noticed the giant steel rubbish skip parked just beyond the line of the buildings. It was half full of just the kind of material that I had come here to salvage. I queried the skip's purpose and learned that the process of "clearing out" was already underway. I shuddered at the proximity of the skip, so close to the answers I had sought for so long.

My fear gave way to relief when I was assigned a considerably-sized official boardroom to examine the contents of the boxes. I readily agreed

to the terms of access; remove nothing, apply discretion and treat the items with care. Suddenly I was alone with my quarry. I moved as if the items were 700 and not seventy years old. This was it. I had finally located the evidence of a thirty-year campaign driven by people from north Queensland, which had transformed the reconstruction of the region after the Second World War and left an indelible mark on the politics of northern development in Australia. This was the break I had hoped for. Now I had to tell the story.