



An Ungraded Bush Track

IN MID-2006, FRYER LIBRARY RECEIVED A MAJOR NEW ADDITION TO ITS HERB WHARTON COLLECTION. TO CELEBRATE THE ACQUISITION, FRYER LIBRARY COMMISSIONED SUE ABBEY TO INTERVIEW HERB WHARTON ABOUT HIS LIFE AND WRITING.

Herb Wharton was born in Cunnamulla and before he started writing, he worked as a stockman, a drover and a labourer. He began writing poetry around the age of 50, and his writing career took off after the publication of his first novel, *Unbranded* (1992), based on his experiences as a stockman in the Australian outback. Now a full-time poet and fiction writer, and the author of half-a-dozen books, Herb Wharton is also a lecturer in Australian Indigenous literature, and he has travelled extensively throughout Australia and abroad.

Q. Let's talk about your books and how they came into being, perhaps, and a bit about the writing process. The first question is: Where did the idea of writing first begin? When did you begin to think that you would write?

A: Well, that first scribble – I still have my first scribbles. I probably thought about it for fifty years, but it took me forty odd years to write my first notes down. [Referring to the Fryer

boxes containing his papers] I could show you the first bit of notes. I wrote a letter, the fifth letter I wrote in my life was something that later was in –

Q. Was that the poem that later became the reply to Stan Coster?

A: I wrote a letter to him, and I never posted it. Six months later I re-read it and I fashioned this poem and sent that to him.

Q. Why was it to Stan? Was it because he was the only other writer that you had any association with?

A: I knew him. He was a song writer and that, and he asked me about the past and the present. This was when some of the Aboriginals were being written out of history, and he asked me about the past, and the glorious past, too. So I had to write about the Dreamtime past and all that sort of thing.

Q. Because you thought that perhaps he'd romanticised it?

A: Yes, so much was romanticised about the bush and things like that, and I had to write about it from the

Murries' point of view.

Q. Did he write about Murries?

A: Sometimes. He got on pretty good with the Murries and that.

Q. And he was a drover, was he?

A: No, he more or less worked on stations. He did building and stone works on that big construction, you know, when they built all the roads out west, like Thiess Brothers. I worked with him on building the road from Mt Isa to Dajarra. We worked on stations, mustering. We'd run into one another every now and then. He wrote most of Slim Dusty's greatest hits.

We'd be sitting around the fire or something, and even then, before he became well known as a recording artist and that, he'd just strum this old guitar and sing something he'd just made up or something. It was fantastic, how he used to put them together.

Q. Where did he get his ideas from?

A: Observing. He'd be working all day stone-fetching, which was, you know, putting the margins on the roads and things, and you'd see him and he'd scribble out something he'd

seen or something someone said. He'd write it down, scribble it out with an old pencil he had.

Coster read *Unbranded*, and he told me two or three times, 'I've got to get at least three songs about the characters in *Unbranded*,' but he passed away not so long after that.

Q. That poem, 'A Wasted Life', appeared in *Where You Bin, Mate?* but it first appeared in your earliest collection. Can you tell us a bit about that?

A: It was the first poem I ever wrote, and when I wrote it I thought it would answer all the questions that Coster asked, but it raised more questions than it answered, about the land and about the stories that had to be told from an Aboriginal point of view. So I said, well, I'd write five poems, scribbled them out on old pieces of paper that I picked up along with old pencils and things, and they were never going to be published. They were just for my own mob, you know, about debating the issues of the past and things like that — how history was written. So after I wrote five poems, I couldn't stop writing, and I ended up with about twenty or thirty poems, scribbled.

When I first started writing, scribbling, I was living in Cunnamulla on the edge of a sandhill, and I could see anyone coming across the flat. I'd be sitting there with my little table, an old sewing machine base with a bit of wood on it — my writing desk. Anyone come and I'd grab all my pieces of paper, and chuck them under the bed and in boxes, because it was a real shame job. You can't show words to people.

Then I got the courage one day to show them to people, and they liked them and things like that, so I began to write. People I'd show them to would even type them out in their offices for me.

I decided I'd put a collection together

Right:

Herb Wharton reading out of doors. Herb Wharton Manuscript collection, UQFL212.

Previous page:

Herb Wharton among the sand hills in Cunnamulla where he played as a boy. Herb Wharton Manuscript collection, UQFL212.

in a book, and of course I didn't have a typewriter. At that time I was on the Board of the Aboriginal Housing Co-op in Cunnamulla, and they didn't have any money to pay a cleaner to do the office. A big office it was, too. They had a computer there, and I said, 'Well, I'll do the cleaning if you'll let me use one of your computers of a weekend.'

I remember it was the middle of summer, and I'd walk up to the Co-op. I'd get in, I had a key, and I'd take my lunch with me, and I'd be there sometimes for twelve or fourteen hours. I'd lay down on the floor because my back would be aching and everything.

Sometimes I'd have to ring up one of my nieces or someone to come down because I couldn't get this bloody thing to work altogether, and they'd just press one button and it would be right again. This was on Saturdays and Sundays when the office wasn't open.

Q. So you had a writer's studio to yourself?

A: Yes, and a computer I knew nothing about. So I put these, about twenty or thirty poems on the computer, and I didn't bother about doing any editing or correct spelling or anything. It was just important that I got them down in print.

Q. The first draft?

A: Yes, and then I got the manager to put them on a floppy disk.

Q. The days of the floppy disk — that must have been about the mid-1980s or late 1980s?

A: Yes, end of 1980s. I had them on the disk, but I couldn't look at them. I went to Brisbane and I ran into a mate of mine from Cunnamulla, John Stubbs, who worked as a journalist. I went to school with him in Cunnamulla, and he used to tell me about writing and things like that. He was real interested in my writing, as well as a lot of other people. Brian Sweeney, who was actually one of



the first Australia Council chairmen had a printing office in Brisbane at that time, and he said, 'Well, I've just moved my little printing office from one place to another, and we've upgraded to all the latest machinery. They want to try out these presses, my officeworkers, so give us that and I'll get two or three copies of this printed off.' He printed three books, and I've still got one of the original ones here [referring to the Fryer collection].

He told me about the Unaipon Award for unpublished Aboriginal authors. That must have been about 1990, I think. He said, 'Why don't you put something into that?' Of course, this is probably why I did it, because you couldn't have it scribbled out. You had to have it typed or something. I didn't have an entry form, so I wrote notes inside the cover of the book Brian printed about why I was sending it in, and everything that was wrong with it. I didn't expect to win it, but you never know.

Q. And so you entered, and what happened with the entry?

A: Well, I remember it was you who rang the Cunnamulla pub one day, the Trappers' Inn, where all the Murries used to drink, and that's where I used to go. I wasn't drinking then, because I gave away drinking before this, but I used to go there to yarn with my mates.

Q. So that was the contact number that was on the entry form?

A: Yes, I didn't have a phone. And you told me that I actually didn't win, but I was highly commended. I didn't know what that meant of course.

Then I came down [to Brisbane] one day. Someone wanted to see me, out at the UQP, and I remember going in and thinking, 'Gee, they're going to publish my poems.'

Q. I believe that was Craig Munro, the Publishing Manager.

A: Yes, I think so. Anyhow, they didn't want to publish my poems. They said they wanted to give me a contract to write a novel.

Q. Because you had been discussing a novel – is that where the idea came from?

A: No, I'd never –

Q. The novel just came up when you signed the contract, then, to



Above:
Herb Wharton discusses his work with a group of Brisbane schoolchildren.
Herb Wharton Manuscript collection, UQFL212.

write a novel?

A: No, actually, there were no discussions with the UQP about whether they were going to publish my poems or anything. When I went to see them, that's what I thought they were going to do, they were going to publish my poems. But instead, out of the blue they said, 'We'll give you a contract to write a novel,' which is unheard of, I suppose.

Q. So you sat down to write the novel. Did you work on it in Cunnamulla?

A: Yes. When I got home to Cunnamulla, naturally I bought an electric typewriter out of the advance they gave me. Then reality set in, and I thought, 'How the bloody hell do you write a novel, when you've never had a writing lesson in your life?'

I knew what I was going to write about: three men, their life story. I had to make this story last, say, forty years in the lives of the men, so I actually wrote the start and the finish in about the first hour, the first two or three pages and the last six or seven pages. I never had to change it, but I had to write forty years — I began to write chapters of incidents. I'd say, well, this might have been five years after the story began, and that one might have been ten years after. Then when I got all that done, got up to a couple of hundred pages, I had to link them all up, all these separate stories. That's how I did it.

Q. So it's a story about three men, Sandy, Mulga and Bindy, and it begins with the idea that they find a colt, a horse that has racing ancestry, and it's an unbranded colt. Where did

that idea come from?

A: Well, that's one of the episodes in the story, about that horse they called Comet. It could be a true story, it could be burrun burrin, as they say, an Aboriginal word, which means it could be true or not false.

Q. With the story of the three men, you are often asked do you identify your own life with either of those men, or were their experiences your own?

A: Well, I'm a bit like Coster. I wasn't interested in what I was doing. It was the people around me that were interesting, and what they were doing. I would notice all these sorts of things, and sometimes someone would tell a story, and you knew it wasn't the right story. They'd be talking about what might have happened, and things like that.

Q. When you finished, was it, again, one floppy disk that had the entire novel on it? Were you still working when you handed in the first draft to the publisher?

A: No, I handed the first draft in. I don't think I had a floppy disk then. I had an old electric typewriter, so I think the first draft would have been typed.

Q. So that's in manuscript form?

A: Yes, I remember giving them a big heap of paper. [This MS is in the Collection.]

Q. And did it grow? Was it developed from there? I remember Barbara Ker



Wilson was the editor who worked on that, and supervising that was Clare Forster, who was an in-house editor at University of Queensland Press at the time.

A: Mudrooroo [one of the Unaipon judges] read it, and he thought it was a great thing. I read Barbara Ker Wilson's report. This was the first time I'd had anything to do with editors. And she said – I was always taken with the words – it was a great bit of work, but it was like an ungraded bush track. I thought that summed it up.

Q. So you knew that you were on the right track, whether or not it was an ungraded track. At least you were starting out. You often tell the story of looking at it in its several forms of manuscript and edited manuscript against galley proofs. Was it a surprise or a shock to you?

A: Well, I remember coming into UQP. They said, 'We'll give you an office and you can do your reading, you know, your pages and proofs and everything here.' They put down this big pile of papers and said, 'These are the galley proofs. These are the page proofs. These are the edit proofs.' I remember staring at them for ages. Why did I want to become a bloody writer?

Q. Not very glamorous!

A: Anyway, I sat down, and I began reading page one, the galley proofs against the other proofs and whatever, and finally got it done. That incident found its way into a story that I wrote titled *Where You Bin, Mate?* It could

be fiction, but it's probably more true than anything else. It was published in *Manoa* (University of Hawaii). The idea of it came from the visit, editing my work at the University of Queensland Press.

So that was the first published short story that I did, and that came out of little incidents, just like while I was riding and branding. Another important thing that came out of that was I discovered I could write a short story. I'd been writing these chapters, you know, five years or ten years of incidents, and then I was going to write about opal miners and these old people out in the bush, who knew where the richest opal mine was, yet always had the arse out of their strides. They had no money, but they were always fossicking in the bush, and the publicans in the lonely outback pubs would stake them for a bit of food and things like that. I wrote it as a chapter to go into *Unbranded*, but when I finished, I sat there in this little shack and re-read it, and I thought, 'Gee, I've written a bloody short story.' I was jumping around, and saying, 'I'm not going to put this in *Unbranded*. Instead, I said, 'I'm going to chuck this into a box. I'll make another box, a special box here, and I'm going to write a book of short stories one day.'

Q. Filed it away, eh. Where was that little box kept?

A: Just with everything else.

Q. Shoved under the bed?

A: Yes, because in those days I had

no filing cabinet or anything. Actually, by this time I had hundreds and hundreds of sheets of paper. I had things written on old envelopes that I'd pick up or people would give me, send me paper and pencils.

HERB WHARTON is the author of half a dozen books including *Unbranded*, *Where Ya' Been, Mate?* and *Kings With Empty Pockets*.

SUE ABBEY is a former fiction editor at University of Queensland Press.

This interview was recorded on 8 August 2006.

Above left:

Herb Wharton in Paris in May of 1998, in front of the Australian Embassy, with the aboriginal flag and the Eiffel Tower in the background. Herb Wharton Manuscript collection, UQFL212.

Above right:

Herb Wharton in a bullock ride at Windorah. He notes that this was '15 years after I gave it away. Came 2nd.' Herb Wharton Manuscript collection, UQFL212.