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Abstract

In September 1893 a small, elegantly-designed book of fewer than 40,000 words was issued by the London publisher T. Fisher Unwin as no. 3 in a new series called the Autonym Library. Titled *By Reef and Palm*, it contained fourteen stories by the novice Australian writer, Louis Becke. The volume also contained an introduction by the Earl of Pembroke who had made a sailing voyage through the South Seas and published in 1872 a book about his travels. Becke had requested the Earl, whom he had never met, to write an introduction for his collection of stories and supplied him with copious biographical information, some of which was substantially true.

CHRIS TIFFIN

Louis Becke, the *Bulletin* and *By Reef and Palm*

In September 1893 a small, elegantly-designed book of fewer than 40,000 words was issued by the London publisher T. Fisher Unwin as no. 3 in a new series called the Autonym Library. Titled *By Reef and Palm*, it contained fourteen stories by the novice Australian writer, Louis Becke. The volume also contained an introduction by the Earl of Pembroke who had made a sailing voyage through the South Seas and published in 1872 a book about his travels. Becke had requested the Earl, whom he had never met, to write an introduction for his collection of stories and supplied him with copious biographical information, some of which was substantially true. Pembroke obliged, lauding the book for the authenticity of the experience portrayed and attempting to forestall criticism of the rather narrow focus of the tales, although in doing so he may have simply called attention to it. Of the fourteen stories in the volume all but one have a white man and a native wife or lover either centrally or peripherally in the situation. In fact an earlier title of the book had been ‘Some White Men and Brown Women’ (Albinski 10).

Becke’s sketches and stories which had appeared in newspapers from the end of 1892 exploited a 20-year career of trading and adventuring in the Pacific which, at age 37, was abruptly curtailed by ill health. This article explores the rapid success Becke enjoyed in remaking himself as a writer, first in a colonial newspaper and then in the metropolitan book market, and the responses he made to the different expectations of these publishing environments.

By Reef and Palm was well received, reviews concentrating on the palpable authenticity of its sometimes painful events. The *Saturday Review* found the book a ‘delightful volume’ and ‘curiously impressive’, with its ‘conjunction of [a] romantic quality with [an] absolute “truth to nature”’ (*Saturday Review* 545). The *Bookman* found the stories ‘all vigorous and many admirably written’ (*Bookman* 196). Comparisons with R.L. Stevenson recurred; he had been living in and writing about the Pacific for five years, although he was to die in Samoa a few months after Becke’s book appeared. Reviewers generally agreed that while Stevenson’s portrayals of the South Seas were much richer in both atmosphere and characterisation and therefore more artistic, Becke knew a lot more about the actual life there. George Cotterel’s review in the *Academy* was unusual not only in being signed, but also in clearly laying out the paradox that Becke’s tales were appealing despite the often horrific subject matter.

There is hardly one of Mr Becke's tales in which lewd passion, heartless betrayal, or brutal abandonment is not the central point... Yet in Mr Becke's style there is charm and verisimilitude. You breathe the air and eat the fruits of the fair isles of the Pacific. The glorious sea is round you, and the gentle simple people; but in all there is a taint, a rotten horror, and according to Mr Becke, that is human nature. (Cotterel 530)

Becke may well have had this review in mind when he offered an enigmatic biblical defence of his choice and treatment of subject matter in the preface to an 1898 reprint of this volume with the 1895 novelette, *His Native Wife*:

As for my own opinion of these stories, I can only plead, when my friends say that there is too much of the weaknesses of the brown woman and the wickednesses of the uncultivated white man portrayed therein, that poor Eve in the Garden of Eden had but two friends — Adam and the Devil. (Becke 1898 iii)

Reviews also commented on the get-up of the book which was quite unusual. Unwin had in 1890 experimented with a novelette-length fiction series bound in tall narrow books approximately 17.5 cm by 9.5 cm which he was able to publish for 2 shillings in cloth and 1/6d in paper. With generous margins and the liberal use of decorative blocks, ornaments and elaborate initials he created a striking, luxurious *livre de poche*. This 'Pseudonym Library' series was limited to short books published under noms-de-plume. Frederick Nesta has pointed out that concocting a new series was one of Unwin's favourite marketing ploys, to the extent that the firm had 'twenty-eight series in its lists' by 1917 (Nesta 171). He suggests that publishing a series of pseudonymous novels heightened mystery about the authors and made the series genuinely more attractive, but this is an overly generous assessment. When the 'Pseudonym Library' was joined in 1894 by the 'Autonym Library' — books written under the authors' own names — it became clear that such groupings of authors were a meaningless gimmick.

In Becke's volume the verso of the title-page is given over to a prominent if slightly stilted acknowledgment: 'NOTE: The Publisher desires herewith to acknowledge the fact that most of the following stories appeared for the first time in the *Sydney Bulletin*'. This was inserted at Becke's insistence in a letter of 29th January, 1894 when accepting Unwin's offer of publication, and for the rest of his life Becke gave credit to the *Bulletin* and its editor, J.F. Archibald, for 'making' him as a writer. After publishing almost forty books over a hectic twenty-year writing career he still looked back to his apprenticeship: 'I wish to add that whatever literary success I may have achieved is due entirely to the training I received from the editor of *The Bulletin*, who taught me the secrets of condensation and simplicity of language' (Becke 1913). This 'training' was probably more than the regular exhortation given by Archibald — 'boil it down'. Sylvia Lawson writes eloquently of the openness of the paper in general and of Archibald in particular towards writers who had not exhausted the 'one good book' that Archibald believed every man was capable of writing (qtd in Lawson 154). Becke clearly received encouragement and a level of editorial guidance, but

Archibald also wrote on his behalf to an English friend, Harry Massingham, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, to help launch Becke in London. During the subsequent negotiations, Becke used the *Bulletin* office as his address, so he probably had a much closer rapport with the firm than many other writers.

A. Grove Day has identified Becke's earliest work as having appeared in the *Bulletin* in December 1892 (Day 1966). This was an untitled and unattributed account of the taking of the trading vessel *Inga* and the murder of her crew at Ocean Island in 1852. No doubt Becke was paid for the article, but it is significant that it is presented as though it were a piece of office gossip with the authorial credit going to the *Bulletin* office as a sort of lively yarns and news exchange. Far from being a crafted piece written by someone who had been back in Sydney for almost a year, the introduction suggests an oral account by an unlettered sailor who had virtually come straight from the docks.

A very old stager, just returned from the North-West Pacific, called in at the BULLETIN office a few days ago and gave us the particulars of a tragedy which, although it happened way back in the 'Fifties' is full of interest in connection with the escape of convicts from America and Norfolk Island, and which, so far as we know, has not been alluded to by any writer' (*Bulletin* 24 December 1892, 24)

Louis Becke would have an extraordinary ascent from this rather ignominious (but no doubt still very welcome) start to his writing career. By the end of 1893 he would have published four non-fiction pieces in the *Bulletin* and seventeen stories. Not only would his contributions be signed progressively more fully,¹ but in the Christmas issue of 16 December he would have a flight of three stories with their own decorative sub-heading and two good-sized illustrations. The *Bulletin* could hardly have done more to flag him as the writer of the moment.

Although the *Bulletin* was the most generous purchaser of periodical fiction in Australia, it was not Becke's only publishing outlet and by mid-1893 he was entertaining ideas of book publication.² He was also attracting attention from publishers. Cassell and Co. approached him in mid-September, by which time he claimed to have already rejected a publication offer from Remington, a firm that he thought insufficiently 'well-known' (Becke 1893). He was, however, also pursuing a different course assisted by his *Bulletin* contacts.

In those pre-photocopying, pre-word-processing days the production and transmission of an author's copy (especially transmission between the colonies and London) were lengthy and laborious processes. Rather than arrange for the stories to be typed, Becke assembled cuttings from back issues of the *Bulletin* in which the stories had been published.³ He sent 'a complete set' of such cuttings to Harry Massingham in October 1893 to coincide with Archibald's letter of recommendation.⁴ Massingham sent them on to Fisher Unwin who wrote to Becke on 14 December 1893 with an offer to publish which Becke received on 15 January. He took a fortnight to respond, no doubt consulting his *Bulletin* mentors, then wrote a conditional acceptance of £30 for the sale of the copyright

but rejecting the clause that allowed Unwin the right to buy two further books for the same price. He also sent copies of other stories that had been published subsequently in the *Bulletin* and other journals. Although Unwin said later that ‘beside the stories you originally sent’ he was taking ‘the other three or four to include in my volume’ (qtd in Day 40) Becke must have sent more than that because five of the stories in *By Reef and Palm* were not published till December 1893, and a sixth was not published in the *Bulletin*. When the volume was finally about to go to press, Unwin apparently had a choice of at least seventeen stories. He included six that were not in the original batch and dropped three from it, raising the number to be published from eleven to fourteen, and increasing the sum he paid Becke for the copyright accordingly. When Fisher Unwin made his first approach to Becke he envisaged a spring (April-May 1894) publication with Harry Massingham checking the proofs in London. However, a second set of proofs were to be sent to Becke for noting any errors to be corrected for later editions. When the publication was delayed till September, there was time for the corrections which Becke had made and returned on June 25th to be incorporated. Consequently, Becke had a reasonable degree of control over the stories up to publication.

Becke always played down his level of formal schooling, painting himself as nautical and outdoorsy, a man living a life of freedom and adventure. His occupations were not all pursued at the edge of empire, however, since at least for brief periods he had been a messenger in a bookstore, bank clerk, proof-reader for a newspaper, journalist, bookkeeper in a trade store, draughtsman in the NSW Lands Office, and secretary to a learned society. Similarly, he liked to claim that he had no literary style but simply strove for truth and simplicity. Some insight into how conscious his craft was might be gleaned from comparing the stories in *By Reef and Palm* with the versions that preceded them in the *Bulletin*. What changes were made, and what does that suggest about Becke’s self-consciousness as a writer?

While the changes are not extensive, they are revealing. At the lowest level, there are changes that can be attributed simply to the house style of each publication. The *Bulletin* did not italicise the names of ships, whereas Unwin did. The *Bulletin* printed numbers in figures whereas Unwin tended to spell them out in words. Unwin used more commas than the *Bulletin* and hyphenated compound words such as ‘breadfruit’ and ‘boatbuilder’. Reflecting a different publishing environment and audience, there is a much greater willingness in the book version to supply explanatory notes. None of the *Bulletin* versions has any footnotes, although many Polynesian words both for island objects mentioned in the narrative and expressions in dialogue had been glossed in the text in parentheses. The additional glossing must have been supplied by Becke, possibly at the request of the publisher, although Becke may well have thought about the needs of the British audience independently. He had certainly considered R.L. Stevenson’s depiction of Polynesian ways, and may have formed his strategy from that.⁵ *By Reef and Palm* directs the reader in other ways. Pronouns are replaced by names;

details of persons are added. In the *Bulletin* version of 'A Basket of Breadfruit' the bereaved grandmother whose grandsons have been killed in battle begs the heads 'from those who had taken them'. In the Unwin version this is expanded to 'from those Malietoa's troops who had taken them'. In 'The Revenge of Macy O'Shea' the local word for a type of building block is introduced for the Unwin edition. Thus 'great blocks made of coral and lime and sand mixed together;' becomes 'great blocks made of *panisina* — coral and lime and sand mixed together'. The addition adds nothing to the communication of meaning since the meaning for British readers comes from the gloss. However, the use of the local term assists the implied claim to verisimilitude and authorial knowledge. Such implied truth claims can affect titles, either by addition (The *Bulletin*'s 'The Methodical Mr. Burr' becomes 'The Methodical Mr. Burr of Majuru'); or by substitution ('Pallou's Missus: A South Sea Sketch' becomes 'Pallou's Taloi': A Memory of the Paumotus', Taloi being the wife's name).

A few of the changes are genuine corrections. 'Enderby's Courtship' opens rather gothicly with three people who are dying of thirst in an open boat. One calls (or rather croaks) out to another when he sees land. A few sentences later the text reads: 'The man whom he called Enderby sank his head again'. Only he had not called him anything and so the name had to be inserted in the previous speech. This problem may have arisen as a result of pruning the original MS in the *Bulletin* office. This story starts in *media res* and it may be that an original narrative frame which introduced Enderby was removed. In the same story, when rain comes Enderby is 'hurrying for'ard to the bows' to lay out a mat to catch water. However, Enderby is supposed to be three parts dead of thirst, so his progress up the boat is throttled back and made less nautical: 'staggering forward to the bows' (87). Becke also gave one of his characters excessively grand designs. In the *Bulletin* version of 'A Truly Great Man' a chief declares he will build 'a house that shall be in length ten fathoms and five in width'. But at 18.3 metres by 9.15 metres this must have been implausible for the building materials available 'on the low atolls of the Ellice Islands' (118) for in *By Reef and Palm* the dimensions had moderated to 'in length six fathoms, and four in width' (or 11 metres by 7.3). Towards the end of 'A Basket of Breadfruit' in the *Bulletin* the dawn is announced by the 'first boom of the crested pigeon'. Pacific pigeons are largish birds, but even for them 'boom' must have seemed to Becke on second thoughts a little ambitious. Moreover, the Pacific pigeon that is culturally important in Samoa and occurs in popular expressions is not crested, so Becke was right to change the phrase to 'first note of the great grey pigeon'.

And then there are the mysteries and subtle adjustments of tone. It may have been quite adventitious that Becke decided to change a principal (unsympathetic) German planter's name from Kuhne to Oppermann for the book version of "'Tis in the Blood'", but changing Vaega's 'indelicate songs' to 'rowdy songs' seems like self-censorship. In 'The Rangers of the Tia Kau', Becke seems to

be retreating from his normal suspicion of missionary activity. In the *Bulletin* version, king Atupa declines to adopt Christianity because he is 'wise in his generation' which seems to imply endorsement of his position. In *By Reef and Palm*, he declines 'dreading a disturbing element in his kingdom' (57) which is far more defensive and less cunning. Again on Christianity, the change from 'In those days the fat-faced native missionary was an unknown quantity' to 'In those days the sleek native missionary was an unknown quantity' (118) hints at a more complex reservation about missionary activity.

Becke was no modernist, but the evidence of his revisions does suggest that he engaged with language in a serious way, and if he was most concerned to tell a vivid narrative and get his Pacific facts right, he needed a good deal of linguistic skill to control his tone and maintain the texture of custom and ceremony that stands in such contrast to the barbarity of the stories' events. I cannot see, as Peter Pierce claims, that 'Becke's romance has an underlying satirical undertone' (159). His position as narrator seems too fluid and unstable to tie himself to principles coherent enough to enable a satirical position. Bruce Bennet's vision of him as essentially a trader, dealing with the instant, the incident at hand, accurately recording but largely detached, and ever ready to move on to the next port or island seems to capture better the genesis of his powerful and haunting fiction.

NOTES

- ¹ After the unsigned non-fiction pieces early in the year, Becke used the pseudonym 'Malie', a Samoan word with a number of meanings ranging from the name of a village, to 'sharks', to 'agreement', to 'amusing'. Becke probably had the last in mind in adopting it. He then signed himself 'Louis B.' for several contributions, and then 'Louis Becke' (albeit with occasional lapses back to 'Louis B.') consistently from July 1893.
- ² Becke was so prolific that there may never be a complete bibliography of his writings, but even for his early years when he was at his best, the coverage is very inadequate. The usually reliable *AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource* is very deficient on Becke.
- ³ This is the same process used by Henry Lawson when he was preparing the stories in *While the Billy Boils* in 1895–96. Lawson pasted the columns of fiction onto paper and used the surrounds to note corrections and emendations. See Eggert 2013, especially chapter 4.
- ⁴ The 'complete set' of stories to the end of October 1893 would have comprised: "'Tis in the Blood'" (6 May 1893, p. 19); 'Mrs Liardet: A South Sea Trading Episode' (13 May 1893, p. 23); 'Jack Keyes' Wife: A Tale of Equatorial Polynesia' (27 May 1893, p. 18); 'Pallou's Missus: A South Sea Sketch' (17 June 1893 p. 19); 'When the Tide Runs Out' (24 June 1893, p. 22); 'The Revenge of Macy O'Shea: A Story of the Marquesas' (8 July 1893, p. 2); 'Challis The Doubter. The White Lady and the Brown Woman' (2 September 1893, p. 19); 'Rangers of the Tia Kau' (16 September 1893, p. 20); 'Long Charley's Good Little Wife' (30 September 1893 p. 20); 'A Basket of Breadfruit' (21 October 1893, p. 5); 'Enderby's Courtship' (28 October 1893, p. 24). Most of these were included in *By Reef and Palm*, but 'Mrs Liardet' and 'When the Tide Runs Out' (renamed to become the title story) were retained for Becke's second book, *The Ebbing of the Tide* (1895), while 'Jack Keyes's Wife' did not reappear until *Rodman the Boatsteerer and Other Stories* (1898) in which it was titled 'The Trader's Wife'.

- ⁵ Becke admired Stevenson's work, but thought his Pacific knowledge very deficient. 'I have noticed in all of Stevenson's books some very absurd mistakes especially in native nomenclature etc. Of course this is natural enough in his case, and his great name covers all such errors, but in my case as I know what I am writing about I ought to have my writings letter perfect as there will be plenty of critics in the colonies eager to detect a mistake and jump upon anyone who dares to write a Polynesian story while Mr Stevenson is in the field' (Letter to T. Fisher Unwin 16 June 1894, Unwin Papers).

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