‘A VERY SMALL ACORN’

TRACING THE ORIGINS OF THE FRYER LIBRARY

Mark Cryle

The Fryer Library at The University of Queensland was one of the first libraries in Australia specifically dedicated to collecting Australiana. Its genesis in the 1920s coincides with attempts to include the study of Australian literature into the curriculum at UQ for the first time. This paper examines the birth of Fryer Library and in the process redresses some of the misconceptions which have prevailed about its origins. The Library’s namesake John Denis Fryer was a popular Arts student at UQ who resumed his studies in 1920, after service in the First World War. Fryer died from tuberculosis in 1923. Despite the fact that his direct cause of death may not have been war-related, Fryer came to epitomise the ‘fallen digger’ in the consciousness and memory of his fellow students and teachers. Fryer symbolised the tragedy of a generation lost on the battlefield. The paper produces evidence that some students and staff at UQ at the time were developing a greater sense of the importance of their own national culture in the wake of the war experience. The emotional connection with the Digger myth was used to attract student benefactions to resource and promote the study of Australian literature at UQ.

At a meeting of the Student Benefactions Fund Committee of The University of Queensland Union on 17 November 1926, the chairman informed the committee that the ‘Dramatic Society had donated a gift of money to be utilized in founding a J. D. Fryer Memorial Library of Australian Literature.’1 This event, as much as any other, marks the official birthday of the Fryer Library.

The Library’s conception, however, dates from early February 1923, when the then head of the Department of Modern Languages and Literature, Professor J. J. Stable, met with a newly recruited lecturer, F. W. Robinson (‘Doc Robbie’), and advised him of an intention to include Australian literature in the first-year course at UQ.2 On the day before their meeting, a former student of Stable’s, John Denis Fryer, died at his parents’ home in Springsure in Central Queensland. Robinson never met Fryer, but their lives and careers, the latter’s tragically cut short by tuberculosis at the age of twenty-seven, and the coincidence of these two events are interwoven in the story of the genesis of the library which would bear Fryer’s name and whose long-time custodian, Robinson, is acknowledged in the name of its reading room.


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Born 11 September 1895 in Springsure, Fryer had enrolled in an Arts degree at the university in 1915 after winning a scholarship from Rockhampton Grammar School. By the end of his first term, the First World War had overtaken his scholastic career. He wrote to his sister in May 1915 of the depletion of student numbers as a result of military service: ‘They are drizzling out even now by twos and threes and I don’t want to be one of the last.’

Fryer enlisted in the AIF a month later, embarked from Australia in October and, after an interlude in Egypt and officer training in Britain, was thrown into the conflict in France and Belgium in February 1917. In the summer of 1918, the Fifty-First Battalion was in the line near Amiens. Its diary tells us that at three o’clock in the morning of 4 August 1918 ‘the enemy attacked four of our posts and succeeded in driving them back to the village of Hourges.’ Among the casualties was Lieutenant Fryer who suffered wounds to the arm, leg and thighs.

In one sense, Fryer’s war was over. After being hospitalised in Britain, he returned to Australia and to civilian life in July 1919. After a sojourn back at Springsure, Fryer re-entered UQ as an enthusiastic Arts student in March 1920. He involved himself in extra-curricular activities, editing magazines; winning sporting accolades in rugby and cricket and acting as Vice-President of the Dramatic Society. One of his contemporaries at St. John’s College also recalled that, ‘He was intensely interested in his academic work—mainly English and French—and in the opportunities thus afforded for wide reading, thinking and above all talking.’ The same informant also noted that Fryer was ‘public-spirited almost to a fault in university and College affairs’ and was ‘a willing horse, allowing himself to take on more than a fair share.’

In 1920 Fryer contributed to the recently-founded St. John’s College magazine Argo a light-hearted war story entitled ‘Paddy at Pozieres.’ He signed it ‘Chut,’ a nickname he had acquired whose origins are uncertain, but which may be a shortening of ‘chutney’ and which may have derived from his propensity for telling ‘saucy’ stories. By May 1921 Fryer was editing the recently-revived university student magazine, Galmahra, with the mercurial P. R. ‘Inky’ Stephensen. He occasionally contributed humorous verse under the name ‘Chut.’ Galmahra also published a rather less sanguine, darker poem of Fryer’s, ‘Corruption,’ under the pen name ‘Gheluvelt.’ The poem described a scene Fryer had probably witnessed at Bulgar Wood during the battle of Ypres:

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Extended stark in mute array
Upon that sombre, sodden field
Those foul, exhumed bodies lay;
Grim in the dawning’s half-light gray.
Green blotches on the dark brown clay
Corruption all revealed!
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‘Universally regarded as the best of fellows,’ as the Warden of St. John’s College later wrote, Fryer clearly cut a popular figure on the campus in the early 1920s. There seems little evidence to suggest that Fryer was embittered or hardened by his war experience. On the contrary, many contemporaries

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3. "J. D. Fryer to Lizzie Fryer, 13 May 1915," John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder 1a).
5. R. L. Hall, “J. D. Fryer at the University of Queensland,” John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder II, 4).
6. Ibid., 7.
7. Ibid., 5.
9. Hall, “J. D. Fryer at the University of Queensland”; Cecil Hadgraft, “Handwritten note,” John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder II).
11. “Corruption,” Galmahra (October 1921): 35. ‘Gheluvelt’ is the name of a First World War battle-field in Flanders.
12. Extract from W. H. Stevenson, “A letter about J. D. Fryer,” John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder II).
particularly noted what one called ‘the tolerance of a capacious heart.’ Fryer showed a passion for poetry, jokes and story-telling. ‘Chut the Merry Jester,’ this ‘ardent lover and discriminating critic of verse,’ entertained fellow students in the common room and in the vestibule of the main university building before and after classes. Robert Hall recalled that ‘he was never a bore: a born teller of stories and especially of his own experience.’ E. N. Dimmock remembered his ‘phenomenal memory for stories, mostly wartime and rude.’

In August 1922, Fryer, the ‘friend of all the world,’ wrote to his mother of his hectic student life: ‘it took up a terrible lot of time and wore me down.’ While he remained upbeat in his correspondence home, Fryer’s health began to decline quickly. In September he was hospitalised for tuberculosis, firstly at Rosemount Hospital and then at an army sanatorium, Ardoyne, on the Brisbane River at Corinda. Ever positive, he wrote to his mother in early October, ‘There is really nothing so very serious if I look after myself and carry out medical instructions.’ In December Fryer’s mother travelled to Brisbane and in early January brought her ailing son back to the family home at Springsure where he died on the morning of 7 February.

In October 1922 Galmahra noted Fryer’s absence from the university, giving a different cause for the health problems: ‘J. D. Fryer is to leave us for hospital; mustard gas is the trouble, none the less virulent for its delayed action.’ This claim was repeated in P. R. Stephensen’s obituary of Fryer published in Galmahra the following May: ‘Chut’s death is one other of the tragic after-effects of the War. Of all the hideous weapons of modern scientific warfare, none is so detestably cruel and wicked as the use of poisonous chemical gas, which works silently and insidiously in the systems of its victims.’ In an account of his life, written many years later, Fryer’s sister Elizabeth Gilmour also mentions the ‘gassing’ but states that they have no specific date for the incident.

There is, however, no compelling evidence that he was gassed. Fryer’s army record gives quite specific details of his appointments, leaves and medical care. He was never treated for gas poisoning. Nor does his battalion diary, which also gives specific details of casualties, leaves, etc., make any mention of such an incident. In his letters home both from the front and from hospitals in Brisbane, Fryer never claims that being gassed was the cause of his illness. We know that mustard gas was being used in the areas in which he saw action and it is possible that Fryer did have some exposure to it which he considered sufficiently inconsequential at the time not to mention. Yet he does furnish details of his consultations with his doctors when writing to his mother from Ardoyne in October and November 1922 and makes no mention of ‘gassing’ as being even a contributory cause. Rather he assigns his failing health simply to his undertaking too much at university: ‘I tried to do too many things and I knocked myself up.’

Fryer’s cause of death according to his death certificate was pulmonary tuberculosis. He notes in a letter to his mother, ‘The tubercular germs are just beginning to get active after being quiet for so long.’ There was a high prevalence of the disease in northern France during the war. Poor sanitation, hygiene and food deficiencies were all contributing factors. There can be no doubt that numbers of

15. Hall, “J. D. Fryer at the University of Queensland,” 8.
16. “E. N. Dimmock to E. Harrington, 20 October 1963,” John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder 8).
17. Ibid.
18. “J. D. Fryer to R. Fryer, 2 August 1922,” John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder 1b).
19. Ibid.
22. E. Gilmour, “An Account of the Early Life of John Denis Fryer” John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder 11, 14).
23. Australian War Memorial 4, War Diaries, (Fifty-Second Infantry Battalion, August 1917).
24. “J. D. Fryer to R. Fryer, 5 September 1922,” John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder 1b).
25. Ibid.
returning Australian soldiers had contracted the disease in the years immediately after the war—there was even a Tubercular Soldiers and Sailors’ Association formed to provide for their welfare—so it is not unreasonable to suggest that Fryer may have become infected while on service in Europe even though it lay dormant for some time. It is equally possible that the infection was acquired well after his return from Europe. Fryer was playing competition rugby as late as July 1922, so his respiratory system was seemingly robust three years after his arrival back in Australia. Moreover, the onset of the disease in 1922 may have had other contributing factors: we know, for example, that Fryer was a heavy smoker. How much, if at all, his war service contributed to his terminal disease cannot ever be confidently determined.

Notwithstanding the actual facts of his illness, Fryer’s place in the consciousness and memory of his fellow students and teachers was universally that of a ‘fallen digger.’ There prevails in the telling of this particular Anzac story that reverence divorced from understanding which Martin Crotty has noted elsewhere. When the University War Memorial was unveiled in May 1925, Fryer’s name was included and he is specifically mentioned in the Governor’s address which accompanied the unveiling as ‘the lingering victim to enemy poison gas.’

The coincidence of Fryer’s death and Robinson’s meeting with his Head of Department, Stable, on the following day in February 1923 is conspicuous. It is less surprising that Stable’s thoughts should have been focussed on the teaching of Australian literature. In an Arts Faculty Board meeting a few months earlier, his colleague A. C. V. Melbourne had been advocating the inclusion of the Australian history into the curriculum. Australian born, though largely educated in Europe, in the early 1920s Stable was actively promoting the study of Australian literature. In 1924 he published A Book of Queensland Verse and in the same year another anthology The Bond of Poetry: a Book of Verse for Australasian Schools in which the verse nearest to the pupil in place and time came first, beginning with Henry Lawson and ending with Shakespeare. In the preface to that text Stable wrote:

In Australia … where a distinct national development is now evident, contemporary local poetry should be studied. … We must admit frankly that there is a gulf, one gradually widening, between English life to-day and Australian life, and therefore between English and Australian sentiment. … Australian literature, Australian poetry especially, if we know how to use it, will give us insight into the underlying motive of our national aspirations.

Stable advocated strongly for the inclusion of Australian literature, especially poetry, in the curriculum at school and university level. In May 1922 Stable also wrote to the editors of Galmahra, Fryer among them, about the recently inaugurated Queensland Authors and Artists’ Association. This organisation, of which Stable was the founding President, was formed for the purpose of fostering and encouraging our national literature and art. He nonetheless remained equivocal, not to say sceptical about its intrinsic ‘artistic merit.’ As Leigh Dale has pointed out, Stable asserted the pre-eminence of English poetry over the provincial. The “bond of poetry” was an imperial one linking the dominions to their

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31. University of Queensland, Minutes of the Board of the Faculty of Arts, 6 June 1922, Series 55 (University of Queensland Archives), 1.
34. Galmahra (May 1922): 49.
colonial parent. ‘In this country a literature worthy of the progress achieved and of the future indicated has not yet arisen,’ Stable wrote.36

Many years later, one of his university contemporaries recalled: ‘To my knowledge Fryer had no special interest in Australian literature. I know no one who was so interested then.’37 Yet there are ways in which Fryer was inevitably connected with Australian literature even if he did not study it formally. Fryer’s sister remembered their father teaching the children to recite the poetry of A. B. Paterson and A. L. Gordon from an early age.38 In 1921 Fryer was on a committee to select Queensland verse to contribute to Australian University Verse: an Undergraduate Anthology.39 None of his own poems appeared there but his friend and fellow student Jack Lindsay had four contributions selected for publication. Fryer too, it seems, along with P. R. Stephensen, hatched the plan to rename the university student magazine Galmahra,40 a local Aboriginal word for ‘poet, seer, teacher’ suggested to them by Archibald Meston—‘an offensively Australian retort to the university of Sydney’s Hermes magazine’ as Craig Munro points out.41 Galmahra was an outlet for local student poetry and short stories and extolled the virtues of an Australian flavour in literature.42

In the wake of that ‘profound act of national creation,’43 the Gallipoli/Anzac experience, there is evidence that Australians were developing a greater sense of the significance of their own national culture. Men who went to the war to fight as ‘Britons’ returned with a revised identity. They had experienced and performed their ‘difference’ in battle and on leave. The virtues of their national characteristics had been trumpeted by war correspondents such as Keith Murdoch and Charles Bean. Many, like Fryer, returned with less than complimentary accounts of the behaviour of British officers and of Britain itself. The trauma and suffering of the diggers seemed to demand what has been called a ‘new and vast national obligation.’44 These Australian nuances and inflections, discernible among students and faculty at UQ in the early 1920s, are consistent with this dynamic. In September 1922 the editorial in Argo noted: ‘We would echo, in this small community of ours, a little of the growing spirit of Australian nationalism, for the spirit of our returned Diggers has infected us, and we have gained to some extent an appreciation of the Digger outlook.’45

In August 1925, Robinson wrote a lengthy article for Galmahra advocating a plan for student benefactions, comparing the paucity of community financial support for the university here with the relative largesse of southern and American universities. Stocking the library was his first priority for any funds gleaned through the initiative.46 In subsequent issues he reported on the progress of the scheme.47 He also wrote to the Brisbane Courier promoting and reporting on his plans.48

From 1921 at least, and probably earlier, the university’s Dramatic Society had donated some of the profits from its productions to worthy causes on an annual basis.49 In 1922, £40 was given to the University War Memorial Committee.50 In 1924 money was donated to the Women’s College Campaign

44. Ibid., 114.
45. Argo (September 1922): 7.
50. Ibid. (October 1922): 45.
Fund, and in 1925 money was donated to buy books for the society’s own library. The following May Robinson announced, in what had become his regular column on student benefactions in *Galmahra*, that a donation of five guineas each had been received in memory of two former AIF servicemen, K. M. Brydon, killed in action in 1917, and J. D. Fryer. Robinson stated, ‘The opinions expressed when these gifts were handed over showed clearly that the use of the names of the AIF men was no mere fiction to make giving possible, but that it covered a real sense of ever present debt to the dead.’ It is uncertain whether this was the same donation from the Dramatic Society, now re-valued at £10, that is minuted in the committee meeting noted above.

Fryer left the university in 1922. Most of the students in the Dramatic Society in 1926, enrolled in three- or four-year degrees, would not have know him personally. But Robinson had strong associations with the Society, and J. J. Stable was its President at the time of the benefaction and had been in 1922 when Fryer was its Vice-President. Stable thus provided the link with Fryer’s time at university. Robinson was actively pursuing benefactions. Both men were preoccupied with promoting the study of Australian literature and both were on record as being highly critical of library resources at the university and elsewhere. These imperatives probably combined to produce the gift that was minuted on 17 November 1926 and announced in *Galmahra* the following February.

In his student benefactions column in *Galmahra* in April 1927, Robinson gave a brief account of the transaction under the heading ‘Fryer Memorial Library.’ In August of that year he gave an update on progress: ‘the university has purchased a book case big enough for the needs of some time to come. The book case is well-made, of well seasoned Queensland cedar and has an individuality in keeping with its purpose.’

Robinson has been cast as the principal midwife at the Fryer Library’s birth and as the nurturing influence in the early growth in the study and teaching of Australian literature at UQ. There can be little doubt that he was the major care-giver in the Library’s formative years and that it grew under his stewardship. As we have seen however, Stable’s role in the creation of the Library was equally vital.

There were significant numbers of war dead from the university who might have been honoured by such a dedication. Why Fryer? Many years later Robinson noted that it was Fryer’s ‘strong qualities of character which inspired affection as well as respect among his fellow students.’ Fryer’s popularity was widely attested to by his contemporaries, virtually none of whom were actually at university in 1926 when the donation was made. *Argo* recorded in 1922 that the word ‘Anzac’ had ‘become sacred to Australian patriotism, honour valour, and death.’ There can be little doubt that Robinson used the emotional connection with the Digger myth to attract benefactions to the university. While Fryer’s direct relationship with the students of 1926 was somewhat tenuous, it was nonetheless stronger and the memory fresher than those university men who had gone to the war in 1915 and never returned. In a manuscript note, possibly written in preparation for a talk, Robinson commented:

Reading the recollections of ‘Chut’ Fryer written by C. Bingham one feels that Bingham is describing the ‘Australian or the ‘Digger’ at his best with his cheerfulness, sense of human values, fellowship, sacrifice and the rest. Add his individual zest for learning, for literature, drama, as well as sport and the name of Fryer for a Library of Australian Literature acquires new significance.

51. Ibid. (August 1924): 51.
52. Ibid. (August 1925): 51.
54. Ibid. (May 1925): 52.
61. F. W. Robinson, “John Denis Fryer BA Qld,” John Denis Fryer papers (UQFL23, Box 1, Folder 11).
Fryer’s contemporary Robert Hall later reflected that his friend ‘Chut’ was ‘to hand, so to speak, as a past officer who was available to be commemorated.’ Fryer represented the tragedy of a generation and a nation traumatised by the war experience. He represented too a new national spirit seemingly forged in the fires of First World War battlefields. It was J. D. Fryer as symbol which influenced the decision to name the library after him and which inspired the £10 donation that Hall noted many years later was such ‘a very small acorn for what has become so solid an oak.’

63. Ibid., 5.